

You are kindly invited to the public defense to obtain the degree of

**DOCTOR OF ADULT EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES  
& DOCTOR OF HEALTH SCIENCES**

of Ms. Suzannah D'Hooghe

which will take place on Thursday 7 November, 16:00  
Promotiezaal ([Building D](#), room D.2.01) – [VUB Main Campus Brussels](#)  
Pleinlaan 2 – 1050 Brussel

**PERCEPTION MATTERS:**

**THE ROLE OF THE PERCEIVED PERI-URBAN ENVIRONMENT IN  
PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND EATING BEHAVIOR AMONG ADULTS  
IN SOCIOECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED SITUATIONS**

**JURY**

**INTERN:**

**Prof. Dr. Koen Lombaerts (Chair)**  
(Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

**Prof. Dr. Dorien Brosens**  
(Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

**Prof. Dr. Wendy Van Lippevelde**  
(Universiteit Gent)

**EXTERN:**

**Prof. Dr. Frank van Lenthe**  
(Erasmus University Rotterdam)

**Prof. Dr. Kristel Driessens**  
(Universiteit Antwerpen)

**Prof. Dr. Jelle Van Cauwenberg**  
(Université Libre de Bruxelles)

**PROMOTOR(S)**

**Prof. Dr. Sarah Dury**  
(Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

**Prof. Dr. Benedicte Deforche**  
(Universiteit Gent)

**Dr. Karin De Ridder**  
(Sciensano)

You are also invited to the reception afterwards.

**Please confirm your attendance [here](#) before Thursday 31 October 2024.**

Coming by car? Please [register your licence plate](#) in advance to have access to the campus.

## SUMMARY

This doctoral dissertation examines the role of the perceived peri-urban environment in shaping physical activity and eating behaviors among adults in socioeconomically disadvantaged situations. A multi-method qualitative approach was employed, utilizing walk-along interviews, photovoice, and participatory group model building to achieve this objective. The findings highlight the complex interactions between the physical, sociocultural, political, economic, and information environment at multiple levels, which collectively contribute to shaping health behaviors in peri-urban areas.

Socioeconomic disadvantage tends to foster negative perceptions of the local environment, which is perceived to negatively impact physical activity and healthy eating, perpetuating poorer health outcomes and reinforcing a cycle of disadvantage. Key findings show that: 1) financial constraints extend beyond the direct costs of physical activity and healthy food, 2) the social environment can both facilitate and obstruct physical activity and healthy eating, 3) public spaces for promoting physical activity and healthy eating are inadequate and non-inclusive, and 4) a gap exists between the availability of resources and awareness of how to access or utilize them, a problem worsened by the growing challenges of the digital information environment. Moreover, specific barriers in peri-urban areas further hinder efforts to improve physical activity and healthy eating.

The dissertation underscores the need for systemic, cross-sector collaboration and political action to create supportive environments that promote health equity. It advocates for community engagement to tailor policies and interventions, and calls for future research to assess the impact of these policies across different socioeconomic groups.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Suzannah obtained her Master of Science in Rehabilitation Sciences and Physiotherapy from Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in 2017, and a Master in Conflict and Development Studies from Ghent University in 2018. After working for a year as a Clinical Research Associate at The Clinical Company, she started her PhD in 2020 at Sciensano, Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Ghent University. Suzannah is affiliated with the Health Information Service at Sciensano, the Society and Ageing Research Lab (SARLab) at Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the Health Promotion research group at Ghent University.

During her PhD trajectory, Suzannah published in several academic journals (*Archives of Public Health*, *SSM Population Health*, *Appetite*) and presented her work at several conferences in and outside Europe (ISBNPA 2022 in Phoenix, ISBNPA 2023 in Uppsala, EPH 2022 in Berlin, HEPA 2024 in Leuven). She is a member of the Belgian Association of Public Health and a member of the Steering Committee of the European Public Health Association (Health Promotion Section).