

Regional Director's Message on World Health Day 2010

Urbanization and Health



For the first time in history, more than half of the world's population resides in urban areas. It is estimated that by 2030, 6 out of every 10 people will be living in cities. This rapid urbanization is more pronounced in the low- to middle-income countries of Asia and Africa.

World Health Day 2010 — "Urbanization and Health: Urban Health Matters" is a call to action. The World Health Organization regards urbanization as an urgent public health concern. The urban setting influences health outcomes, both positively and negatively. In terms of health, urbanization presents challenges as well as opportunities.

Rapid urbanization is due to natural growth in populations, and migration as a result of people searching for better opportunities in cities. In general, urban areas offer better education, jobs, social mobility, and services. However, many people who move to cities are trapped in marginal situations as a significant proportion of them are poor, have large families and are not well educated. The health of the urban poor suffers the most both because of the living conditions and the high, sometimes prohibitive cost of health services. The urban poor face illnesses and premature death from preventable diseases due to lack of safe drinking water, sanitation, health facilities, safety, security, and health information. The World Bank estimates that more than one billion people — one third of the global urban population — live in slums.

Urbanization is happening and will continue; countries are faced with a choice between planned and unplanned urbanization. Planned urbanization requires a holistic and multidisciplinary approach by all sectors of the government, industry and community. It is imperative that national governments invest in pro-poor policies and strategies in order to reduce the urban equity gap. For example, extending resources and coverage of services to all urban populations improves health outcomes and reduces the social costs of inequity. WHO estimates that every one dollar spent on sanitation gives a return of US\$ 9.1 in terms of prevention and treatment of illnesses. Improved transportation, infrastructure and greener technologies enhance urban quality of life, including fewer respiratory ailments and accidents and better health for all. Building-in increased capacity in all systems and infrastructure and service delivery in view of inevitable urban growth reduces the risk of future damage to health and widening equity gaps.

The goal of governments and municipalities in addressing urbanization and health should be to invest in health-promoting cities and take actions that encourage social connectedness among city dwellers irrespective of social status. An understanding of the negative effects of urbanization and the shared responsibility for balancing and conserving resources and services needs to be fostered among all urban dwellers.

Urbanization is one of the major threats to health in the twenty-first century. Closing the urban equity gap and promoting healthy cities requires urgent actions including the efforts of both rich and poor urban dwellers. To reap the potential benefits from urbanization, we must act collectively.

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KEY FACTS FOR WORLD HEALTH DAY 2010

Over 3 billion people live in cities. In 2007, the world's population living in cities surpassed 50% for the first time in history, and this proportion is growing. By 2030, six out of every 10 people will be city dwellers, rising to seven out of every 10 people by 2050. Urbanization is here to stay. It is an irreversible trend that is now part of the world in which we live.

The theme of "urbanization and health" was selected for World Health Day in recognition of the effect urbanization has on our collective health globally and for us all individually. Urbanization is associated with many health challenges related to water, environment, violence and injury, noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and their risk factors like tobacco use, unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, harmful use of alcohol as well as the risks associated with disease outbreaks.

We are at a clear turning point in which we are moving towards an increasingly urbanized world and with it, the need to embrace the consequences this can have for health – both the benefits and the challenges. Rather than look back fifty years from now at what could have been done, we can take action now to ensure that growing cities are healthy cities.

World Health Day objectives

World Health Day is meant to draw worldwide attention to the theme of urbanization and health.

KEY MESSAGES

- **Virtually all population growth over the next 30 years will be in urban areas.**

The rapid increase of people living in cities will be among the most important global health issues of the 21st century. Over half the world's population now live in cities. By 2030, six out of every 10 people will be city dwellers, rising to seven out of every 10 people by 2050.

- **The urban poor suffer disproportionately from a wide range of diseases and other health problems.**

Health data is usually aggregated to provide an average of all urban residents - blurring differences between the rich and the poor. It thus masks the health conditions of the urban poor. More than one billion people – one third of the urban population – live in urban slums.

- **The major drivers of health in urban settings are beyond the health sector.**

Communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes, mental disorders, and deaths due to violence and road traffic injuries are all driven by these underlying social determinants.



- **Actions and solutions exist to tackle the root causes of urban health challenges.**

Designing areas to promote physical activity and passing regulatory controls on tobacco and food safety. Improving urban living conditions in the areas of housing, water and sanitation will go a long way to mitigating health risks. Building inclusive cities that are accessible and age-friendly will benefit all urban residents.

- **Build partnerships with multiple sectors of society to make cities healthier.**

By bringing multiple sectors of society together to actively engage in developing policies, more sustainable health outcomes will be achieved.

Actions to build a flourishing urban environment

If urbanization continues in its current path, it will present social, health and environmental challenges on an unprecedented scale in human history. There is an urgent need for a new approach to urbanization and a new paradigm of public health. Four key areas for action are:

- Urban planning promoting healthy behaviours and safety.
- Improve urban living conditions.
- Participatory urban governance
- Inclusive cities are accessible and age-friendly.

To ensure sustained action throughout 2010, a series of milestones will demonstrate the importance of urbanization and its impact on health as well as provide policy-makers with guidance.

1000 cities 1000 lives – this campaign encourages cities and individuals to work across multiple agencies with a wide range of partners to have the most lasting impact on health. The global goal is for 1000 cities to participate in the World Health Day campaign. ■ ■ ■