

Urban planning essential for public health

7 APRIL 2010 | GENEVA -- Urban settings have a direct impact on the health of the people who live there. On World Health Day WHO is launching a campaign to highlight urban planning as a crucial link to building a healthy 21st century. In particular, the Organization calls upon municipal authorities, concerned residents, advocates for healthy living and others to take a close look at health inequities in cities and take action.

Rapid urbanization

The world is rapidly urbanizing with significant changes in our living standards, lifestyles, social behaviour and health. Thirty years ago, four out of every 10 people were living in cities, but by 2050 this number will grow to seven out of 10.

Challenges to urban health

"In general, urban populations are better off than their rural counterparts. They tend to have greater access to social and health services and their life expectancy is longer. But cities can also concentrate threats to health such as inadequate sanitation and refuse collection, pollution, road traffic accidents, outbreaks of infectious diseases and also unhealthy lifestyles," says Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General.

Many cities face a triple threat: infectious diseases which thrive when people are crowded together; chronic, noncommunicable diseases including diabetes, cancers and heart disease which are on the rise with unhealthy lifestyles including tobacco use, unhealthy diets, physical inactivity and harmful use of alcohol and urban health is often further burdened by road traffic accidents, injuries, violence and crime.

Actions to create better urban living

Despite these challenges, cities also bring opportunities. Five actions will significantly increase the chance people will be able to enjoy better urban living conditions:

- promote urban planning for healthy behaviours and safety;
- improve urban living conditions;
- ensure participatory governance;
- build inclusive cities that are accessible and age-friendly;
- make cities resilient to disasters and emergencies.

"The wide range of health issues in cities and its determinants require coordinated policies and actions across multiple disciplines including environment, transport, education, parks and recreation, and urban planning," says Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Assistant Director-General for Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health. "We are at a critical turning point in history where we can make a difference."

Coordinated policies and actions are also needed to address the underlying conditions of major health issues in cities today. For instance, outdoor urban air pollution kills some 1.2 million people worldwide.

Road traffic injuries among children are of significant concern in urban areas. Globally, road traffic injuries are the leading cause of death among youth aged 15–24 years, and the second leading cause of death for those in the 10–14 years old.

In many cases, rapid population growth outpaces the municipal capacity to build essential infrastructure that make life in cities safe and healthy, leading to the proliferation of informal settlements. Urbanization, both in the developed and particularly in the developing world, is accompanied by a concentration of poverty. Today, an estimated one in three urban dwellers, amounting to nearly one billion people, live in urban slums and informal settings, signalling the call for urgent action to address their needs.

As part of the World Health Day 2010, more than 1300 cities worldwide have launched events focusing on health. WHO will continue to highlight the theme of urban health throughout the year, culminating in a Global Forum on urbanization and health to take place in Kobe, Japan in November this year where municipal and national leaders will forge a declaration of action to address health in cities. Later in the year, WHO and UN-HABITAT will be launching a comprehensive report on urban health inequities and how to address them.

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