



HEALTHY CITIES

EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO
A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This resource was developed for the World Health Organization by Agis Tsouros with contributions from Faten Ben Abdelaziz, Scarlett Storr, Gerry Eijkemans, Monika Kosinska, Samar Elfeky, Tushara Fernando, Suvajee Good, Riitaa Hamalainen, Ruediger Krech and Tim France.

Healthy cities effective approach to a rapidly changing world

ISBN 978-92-4-000482-5 (electronic version)

ISBN 978-92-4-000483-2 (print version)

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Suggested citation. Healthy cities effective approach to a rapidly changing world. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

Cataloguing-in-Publication (CIP) data. CIP data are available at <http://apps.who.int/iris>.

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Introduction

Healthy Cities is a thriving and dynamic movement around the world with a rich 30-year history. Its evolution and implementation during that time have been deeply innovative and diverse. It is more relevant today than ever in addressing the established and emerging public health challenges of the 21st century.

The Healthy Cities initiative was conceived with the goal of placing health high on the social and political agenda of cities by promoting health, equity and sustainable development through innovation and multisectoral change (1). Its creation was based on recognition of the importance of action at the local, urban level and of the key role of local governments. It thrives at the cutting edge of public health, and this is one of the factors that contributed to its success. Healthy Cities and local governments have gained new attention and significant prominence in the context of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and health promotion agendas, as well as during development of the World Health Organization (WHO) *Thirteenth general programme of work 2019–2023* (GPW13). Healthy Cities is a strategic vehicle for health development and well-being in urban settings, and actions taken at the city level have a cross-cutting relevance to the majority of technical areas of WHO's work.

The need for a consistent WHO approach to the Healthy Cities movement was introduced and discussed during a health promotion technical focal points meeting that took place in Geneva on 25–26 February 2019. A two-part rapid survey was undertaken to inform that discussion:

Part 1 focused on three issues related to the positioning of Healthy Cities in each WHO region, namely: its location in the organization; its connection with relevant regional political statements, strategies and plans; and the main operational features, themes and priorities of these programmes.

Part 2 addressed the question of the main features and themes of Healthy Cities, and the role of WHO headquarters in supporting the global movement.

The results highlighted similarities – and significant variations – between the regions as well as issues and perspectives of priority and contextual relevance to each region.





Healthy Cities: Core attributes, values and principles

Healthy Cities is a values- and partnership-based political project and multi-level movement. It provides a platform and mechanism for engaging and working with local/municipal governments and communities on issues impacting health and well-being. It is widely regarded as one of the key health promotion, settings-based approaches, along with other initiatives such as healthy workplaces, health-promoting schools, universities and hospitals, as well as healthy markets. More importantly, however, Healthy Cities is considered as being well-positioned and recognized as an effective strategic vehicle for reaching out to local and municipal governments and local leaders and community stakeholders across multiple sectors. The active involvement of mayors, and other local political and community leaders, in all aspects of Healthy Cities is crucial.

Various definitions have been proposed as to what constitutes a healthy city. Experience has shown that descriptive definitions are generally easier to explain and communicate to the diverse audiences and stakeholders the initiative works with. The following definition offers such an example:

A healthy city is one that puts health, social well-being, equity and sustainable development at the centre of local policies, strategies and programmes based on core values of the right to health and well-being, peace, social justice, gender equality, solidarity, social inclusion and sustainable development and guided by the principles of health for all, universal health coverage, intersectoral governance for health, health-in-all-policies, community participation, social cohesion and innovation.

The dynamic concept of Healthy Cities continuously evolves: integrating state-of-the-art scientific evidence; addressing emerging public health challenges; aligning with global and regional strategies for health and sustainable development; integrating knowledge from experience; and grounding itself on local priorities and concerns.

One important example demonstrates the indisputable requirement for the dynamic Healthy Cities concept: the response to emerged health crisis such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and COVID-19. The high population density, informal settlement settings, casual employment, presence of low-income migrants and refugees, as well as inadequate access to sanitation, all magnify cities' vulnerability. This underlines the need for Healthy Cities to initiate long-term urban resilience to health risks and crises.

Accordingly, GPW13 provides an opportunity to revitalize Healthy Cities, and explicitly recognizes the important role of municipal governments in promoting the health-in-all-policies approach.

Political legitimacy to address challenging issues – such as equity, vulnerability, the determinants of health and sustainability – comprise a key part of the initiative's uniqueness. One of the main strengths of the global Healthy Cities movement is the diversity of political, social and organizational contexts within which it is being implemented within and across different regions.

Links to key global and regional strategies and plans

The legitimacy, potential impact and long-term sustainability of Healthy Cities depends on how well and how explicitly it is aligned with political and strategic agendas at the global, regional and country levels. These include: The United Nations (UN) Agenda 2030; global or regional resolutions, strategies or action plans in the areas of health promotion, urban health and governance for health; health-in-all-policies; social determinants of health (SDH) etc. In the WHO European Region, for example, Healthy Cities was launched as a vehicle to strengthen implementation of WHO strategies 'Health for All' and 'Health 2020', at the local level.

Countries increasingly include Healthy Cities approaches in national legislation, health policies and plans. Political statements, charters and declarations have been adopted by mayors and other local political leaders, expressing commitment to achieve the Healthy Cities values, principles and goals. Such statements represent an essential aspect of the Healthy Cities approach. For example, the 2016 *Shanghai Mayors Consensus* has been instrumental in renewing and legitimizing interest in Healthy Cities across the WHO and in countries. Since 2016, several regions launched political statements and declarations drawing on the *Shanghai Mayors Consensus* in order to reinforce Healthy Cities developments in their respective areas.^a

It is imperative that political leaders emphasize health as a core value in city vision statements, policies and strategies, as well as acknowledging that they are well-placed to influence the conditions that determine – or undermine – the health and well-being of citizens. They should also acknowledge the link between health and sustainable development, and the role of local governments in the implementation of Agenda 2030.

Key concepts, approaches and methods

Healthy Cities is continuously enriched with the best available concepts and methodologies to address current and emerging public health challenges in urban settings. Their holistic use is essential for implementing the Healthy Cities agenda and for creating the preconditions for maximum impact and innovation. It is not only important *what* priorities a city wishes to address, but *how* it plans to address them. Traditional approaches to public health can have limited effect and scope in the context of cities. Established public health interventions are typically 'downstream' (focusing on proximal causes) rather than addressing the root causes of ill-health and unhealthy behaviours.

Key issues, concepts and methods that should be addressed and employed by Healthy Cities are:

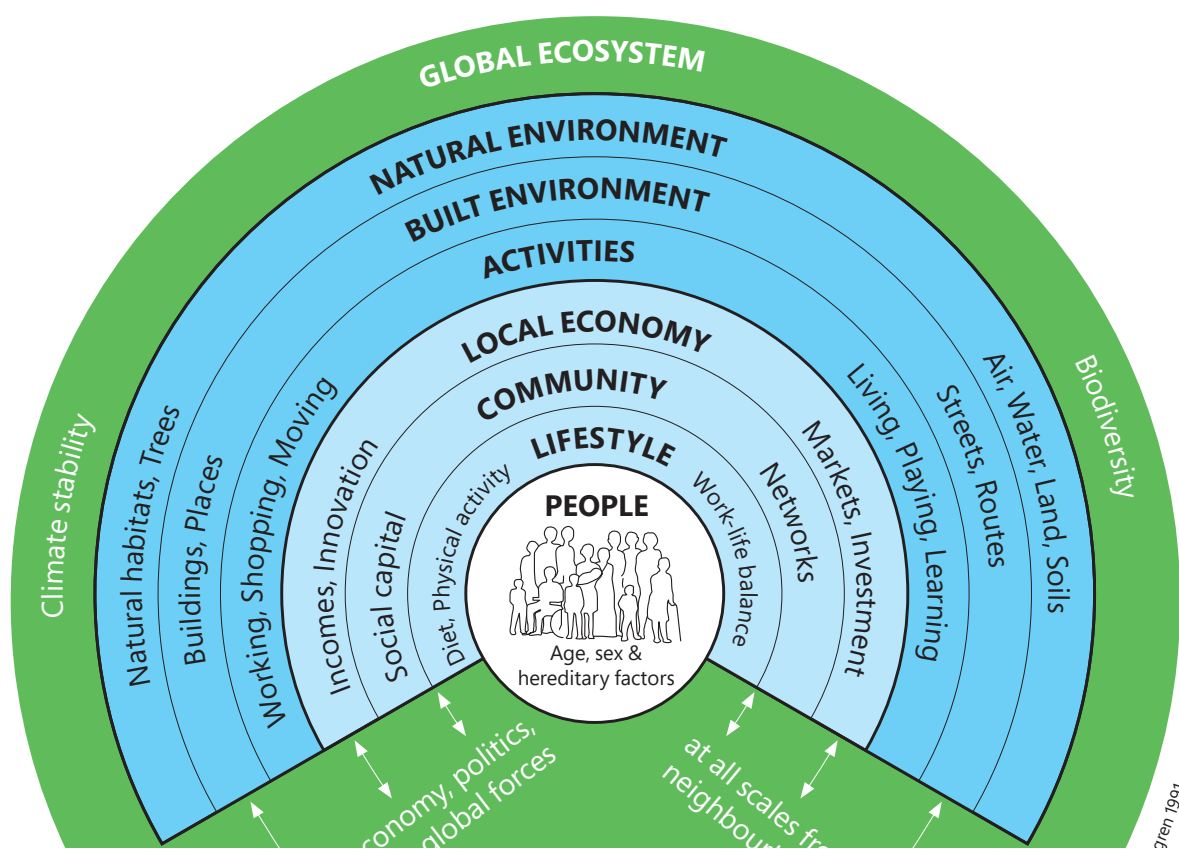
1. Explicit focus on both **health and well-being**.
2. Emphasis on the **right to health** for all and **universal health coverage (UHC)**.
3. The **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** and Healthy Cities (4, 5) go hand-in-hand, and they are mutually reinforcing.

The SDGs offer a global framework of political responsibility and accountability, providing powerful political support nationally and locally to those who argue for more inclusive and sustainable economic, social and environmental policies. Addressing the SDGs at the local level is a valuable exercise of scrutinizing and re-thinking and adapting local policies and strategies about all aspects of development.

^a For example, the *Copenhagen Consensus of Mayors*, WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2018 and *Santiago de Cuba Statement*, WHO Regional Office for the Americas, 2018

4. Addressing the **social determinants of health** (SDH) and health inequalities. Under the SDH umbrella term several determinants have gained special attention in recent years including commercial, political, ecological and cultural determinants of health.
5. An explicit grounding in **health promotion** and in particular the **Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion** and its principles, including *Creating supportive environments for health for all; Investing in creating healthy places; and Making the healthy choices the easy choices.*
6. Understanding the specificity of the **urban and built environment** and its positive and negative impacts on health and well-being. Figure 1 illustrates the determinants of health in the urban context.

Figure 1. The determinants of health and well-being in the urban context (6)



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