The future is urban: integrated planning policies can enable healthy and sustainable cities

The world’s urban population has increased drastically during the last century. At the turn of the 20th century, approximately 10% of people lived in cities. By 1950, the world’s urban population had grown to 29%. Today, more than half of the world’s population resides in cities. By 2050, it is expected that at least two-thirds of the world’s population, or nearly 7 of 10 people, will live in cities. The largest share of this tremendous urban growth will occur in low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs), in cities already carrying a disproportionate share of the global disease burden. This accelerating pace of urbanisation has exposed the fragile ecological future of our cities.

Cities are engines of innovation and economic growth, but many fail to make progress on economic, environmental, societal, and health targets. Urban policies actively shape how people live and move around in cities. Policies determine the form and function of our neighbourhoods and thus the exposures and lifestyles of urban dwellers. Current planning policies exacerbate urban inequities, creating cities that are spatially fragmented, socially divisive, and detrimental to health. Traffic exposure, noise and air pollution, social isolation, low physical activity, and sedentary behaviours are fuelling global epidemics of injuries and chronic diseases.

City planning is known to influence physical activity and other health determinants. Designing compact, high-density, pedestrian-friendly and cycling-friendly cities with accessible green spaces that enable sustainable mobility and active lifestyles is crucial for public health and the environment. These priorities are wholly consistent with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and targets set by WHO and UN-Habitat.

However, many city governments do not have sufficient data to implement policies and monitor their progress towards achieving these targets. This problem is most acute in LMICs in which policy makers have low access to tools to consider health and sustainability when formulating urban policies. Governments in LMICs generally do not have the requisite financial resources to generate locally relevant data, conduct statistical analyses, develop and implement policies, track performance, facilitate stakeholder engagement, and build capacity to strengthen management and governance. In many LMICs, planning policies have ignored the large numbers of people living in informal settlements. Rampant, poorly managed, ad-hoc urban growth, population displacement, poor public health infrastructure, and land-grabbing have fuelled inequities in urban areas.

The Lancet Global Health Series on urban design, transport, and health goes beyond describing why societies need to transition to healthier, more sustainable cities and focuses on the critical questions of how and what can be done to enable this process. It offers a roadmap for city leaders to act quickly, plan for future urban growth, and provide equitable infrastructure, services, and amenities. Integrated planning policies are essential for LMICs that have informal settlements, poor planning, weak infrastructure, and a paucity of basic services. The Series presents a rigorous, cross-sectoral, and scalable global framework with standardised methods for benchmarking and monitoring integrated city planning policies. The methods described convert spatial data into usable formats by making the maps and results available to policy makers, practitioners, and the community for real-world implementation.

This Series provides a proof of concept for the real-world application of integrated city planning policies to harness economic, environmental, social, and health benefits for all. The authors address the data challenges of creating comparable global indicators and the importance of facilitating research translation. Using the proposed framework, city leaders and stakeholders can champion specific policies and development commitments at the local, national, and international scales to ensure an urban future that is healthy, sustainable, and equitable. An example is the global network of Bicycle Mayors promoted by the Amsterdam-based global non-governmental organisation, BYCS. BYCS is guided by the belief that bicycles transform cities and cities transform the world. Bicycle Mayors act as a social bridge to establish relationships between citizens, stakeholders, and political leaders. They help to
make cycling accessible to the average person and bring it into the urban policy agenda.

To provide equal opportunity to their citizens, elected officials and policymakers need to align better city planning policies with societal goals, public health, and environmental sustainability. Integrated cross-sectoral policies are essential to creating economic, environmental, and social benefits for all. We encourage government leaders and the wide range of relevant civil society groups to incorporate the tools developed for this Series into their daily work and plans for the future. Specifically, we call on global leaders and stakeholders to take collective action by implementing integrated planning policies to promote healthy and sustainable cities.

We declare no competing interests.

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