

Introduction

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WHERE PEOPLE LIVE AFFECTS THEIR HEALTH AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEADING LIVES TO THEIR FULL POTENTIAL

The year 2007 saw, for the first time, the majority of human beings living in urban areas. This trend will continue with 6 in 10 people living in towns and cities by 2030. In recent times, the growth of urban areas in low-income countries has been four times faster than the growth in high-income countries. This trend too, is expected to continue in coming years.

Urban areas provide great opportunities for individuals and families to prosper and can provide a healthy living environment through enhanced access to services, culture and recreation. However, city dwellers continue to face health hazards and new health challenges have emerged.

While the characteristics of each city vary by local context, common urban health and social challenges include: overcrowding; air pollution; rising levels of risk factors like tobacco use, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and the harmful use of alcohol; road traffic injuries; inadequate infrastructure, transport facilities and solid waste management systems and insufficient access to health facilities in slum areas.

World Health Day in 2010 offers an opportunity to take a closer look at the conditions that determine health outcomes for the majority of the world's population, the issues that need to be addressed, and the actions that can be taken. By understanding these issues, limited resources can be allocated to more targeted interventions, and achieve better health outcomes.

The focus on urbanization and health as a theme for World Health Day 2010 is timely and highly relevant for the following reasons.

First, with the majority of the world's population now living in urban areas and this proportion expected to grow, urban health should become a major focus of global public health policy. Whilst urbanization and the growth of cities may be associated with increasing prosperity and good health, at an aggregate level, urban populations demonstrate the world's most obvious health disparities – in both low – and high-income countries. Rapid migration from rural areas, as well as natural population growth are putting further pressure on limited resources in cities especially in low-income countries.

Second, much of the natural and migration growth in urban population is among the poor. More than one billion people – one third of the urban population – live in overcrowded and life-threatening conditions in urban slums and informal settlements. If cities fail to deliver on the perceived promise of economic opportunities for the poor, large concentrations of unemployed young people may threaten social stability, security and the health of communities as a consequence. In low-income countries, in particular, disparities will increase, as the combination of in-migration, natural growth and scarcity of resources results in cities being unable to provide the services needed by those who come to live in them.

Third, there is evidence that rapid, unplanned urbanization can have negative consequences for the health and safety of people.

We are at a clear turning point at which we are moving towards an increasingly urbanized world. We need to appreciate the positive and negative impact on health due to urbanization and take appropriate actions to address them. There is a pressing need for action now to ensure that growing cities are healthy cities.

On World Health Day 2010, WHO recommends the following five calls to actions to build a health and safe urban environment:

- Promote urban planning for healthy behaviors and safety
- Improve urban living conditions
- Ensure participatory urban governance
- Build inclusive cities that are accessible and aged-friendly
- Make urban areas resilient to emergencies and disasters