

# Making the link: **urban planning** and health equity

The World Health Organization's **Commission on the Social Determinants of Health** (CSDH) has identified principles and recommendations to tackle health inequities: the factors responsible for avoidable health inequalities, which persist globally and in the European Union. This series of summaries, updated and expanded online at [www.equitychannel.net](http://www.equitychannel.net), introduces how those and other recommendations, as part of evidence based health promoting approaches, could be applied to a range of European Union legislations, policies and programmes. The aim is to improve international, national and local policies and practices within and beyond health systems, in order to promote better health and well-being for all.

## Why making the link matters

The communities and social environments in which we are born, grow, live, work and age have an impact not only on our physical health but our overall well-being. The WHO global Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (CSDH), and subsequent national reviews that have arisen from it, have reported that the extent of people's participation in their communities has the potential to contribute to their psychosocial well-being and other health outcomes.<sup>i</sup>

It is increasingly recognised that recreational places and urban spaces have an impact on human health and well-being; therefore, urban planning can play a critical role in improving the quality of life and well-being for people who live in cities, but also for those who work, study, play and travel in them.<sup>ii</sup> For example, a study included in the Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England reported that income-related inequality in health is affected by exposure to green space, and that circulatory diseases were lower in populations living in the greenest areas.<sup>i</sup>

Providing more green spaces alone is not enough to improve the living conditions and well-being of people in urban areas. It requires an approach focusing upon both new developments and existing infrastructure. Redesigning older towns and poorer environments, as well as applying healthy urban planning principles to new developments and infrastructures can contribute to optimal health outcomes.<sup>ii</sup>

The focus of healthy urban planning does not only involve controlling land-use but also other social determinants of health such as air pollution, traffic, noise, housing, safety, design, congestion, and quality of services. All these determinants must be taken into consideration in urban planning initiatives together with policies that endorse social, environmental and economic objectives.<sup>iii</sup>





## The Situation

There are direct and indirect impacts of the built environment and the urban design on health. Direct impacts include those traditionally associated with planning and environmental health, such as air quality, climate, water quality, noise. Indirect impacts show how the design of the built environment influences determinants of health, particularly social connections and physical activity, which are also associated with physical and mental health and well-being.

Most urban planning systems in Europe have not yet effectively addressed sustainability, health, environmental and equity issues. Instead, planning policy has often promoted changes that increase car and land-use segregation, exacerbating environmental and social problems.<sup>iii</sup> The high incidence of pollution and stress related illnesses in cities is due to industrial and transport planning, poor housing quality, under-employment and poverty.<sup>ii</sup> Moreover, research shows that poor area conditions and poor health go hand-in-hand with poor diet, lack of physical activity, poor education and a sense of insecurity.<sup>iv</sup> The English National Review found that dense vegetation, unmaintained areas, graffiti and vandalism all contribute to a perceived lack of safety which reduces the use of green spaces.<sup>i</sup>

The interdependence of urban planning and public health is evident. For example, to facilitate an increase in physical activity in communities, people need safe and accessible areas as well as established programs that encourage them to use improved community environments. Without the interaction of urban planning and public health policies, the odds of substantial improvements in social capital and physical activities decrease considerably.<sup>iv</sup> Evidence indicates that integrating health and quality of life considerations into planning practices implies a cultural shift in how people understand and deal with space and human needs. Change in basic social, economic and environmental conditions as well as in the personal behaviour of people is required in order to create healthy sustainable urban areas.<sup>ii</sup>



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## Setting an example

The links between health and urban planning have been explored by the WHO through the **Healthy Cities** programme, a longstanding process which aims to develop healthy sustainable cities and integrate health considerations into urban planning processes at the local levels. Additionally, it focuses on possible ways to reduce urban stress and to achieve sustainable cities through healthy urban planning practises.<sup>ii</sup> The overarching goal of the current phase of Healthy Cities initiative is to incorporate health and health equity in all local policies. The main focus is on three core themes:

- Caring and supportive environments;
- Healthy living;
- Healthy urban design.<sup>v</sup>

The **'Vision 2040'** initiative in the city of Amsterdam is part of the URBAN MATRIX project, a EURO CITIES supported project funded by the EU Sixth Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development. The city of Amsterdam and its surrounding municipalities have taken an innovative approach to regional governance by jointly adopting the Development Scenario 2040. The 2040 vision will focus on several aspects of urban redevelopment that will increase Amsterdam's sustainability. This perspective for the year 2040 focuses on the following aspects:

- Adaptation to climate change;
- Compact city strategy;
- Public transport network;
- Development of metropolitan landscapes.<sup>vi</sup>

## Pathways to progress

Local urban authorities are best placed to define and implement urban policies which are adapted for local circumstances. However the EU's strategic role is important in relation to many policy areas which impact upon urban planning.

Ten years after the first EU strategy on sustainable transport, the European Commission is preparing to produce an updated strategy in 2010. The initial consultation paper, A Sustainable Future for Transport (2009) identified the increasing urbanisation of European societies, which will continue over the next 40 years. Whilst competence on urban transport is limited, there is a large role for the EU to play in setting social and environmental benchmarks and standards, and in supporting local authorities in developing the right transport mix.

A large amount of European funding is spent on sustainable urban development as part of its cohesion policy, encompassing both transport infrastructure projects as well as funding for economic renewal of urban areas (see also the Equity Channel policy précis on Cohesive Communities). The preparations for the next financial perspective (2014-2020) will include important decisions on how cohesion funds are to be allocated, as well as how the Eighth Framework Programme (2014-2020) will be used to support research into urban communities.

The urban environment is also one of the thematic priorities within the Sixth Environment Action Programme whilst the link between environment and health is one of the four priority areas of the Programme. The Programme comes to an end in 2012, and discussions over its replacement will be crucial.

There is a great potential to align policies with the principles of health equity in relation to energy efficient buildings (considered in more detail within our précis on Energy Efficiency). A recast Energy Performance of Buildings Directive is likely to be adopted in the coming months, and its implementation within the urban environment has the potential to greatly improve the energy efficiency of urban homes, with a consequent positive impact upon health equity.

## Additional Information

- **Closing the gap in a generation. Report of the World Health Organization Commission on the Social Determinants of Health.**
- **Fair Society, Healthy Lives – Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England Post 2010**
- **Healthy Cities – WHO Europe**
- **DETERMINE** - [www.health-inequalities.eu](http://www.health-inequalities.eu)
- **EUROCITIES** - [www.eurocities.eu](http://www.eurocities.eu)
- **URBAN MATRIX** - [www.eukn.org/urbanmatrix/index.html](http://www.eukn.org/urbanmatrix/index.html)
- **Manual on Management of the European Union Structural Funds.** 2nd Edition. By the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN).

## Contacts

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## Sources

- <sup>i</sup> Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England Post 2010. Fair Society, Healthy Lives. University College London, 2010.
- <sup>ii</sup> Healthy Urban Planning in practice: experience of European cities. Barton, Mitcham and Tsourou. Report of the WHO City Action Group on healthy urban planning, pg.7, 2003
- <sup>iii</sup> Towards a new planning process: A Guide to reorienting urban planning towards Local Agenda 21, pg. 9-10, Breuer, WHO, 1999.
- <sup>iv</sup> Closing the gap in a generation. Report of the World Health Organization Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, pg. 60-64. Geneva, 2008.
- <sup>v</sup> Healthy Cities and urban governance. WHO Europe - <http://www.euro.who.int/Healthy-cities> (accessed 20/01/10)
- <sup>vii</sup> Good practice directory – Vision 2040 - Urban planning for a sustainable metropolis. Eurocities. [http://www.eurocities.eu/uploads/load.php?file=Case\\_Study\\_Amsterdam\\_Final--.pdf](http://www.eurocities.eu/uploads/load.php?file=Case_Study_Amsterdam_Final--.pdf)