



TECHNICAL EXPERT MEETING ON URBAN HEALTH

JUNE 2021: MEETING REPORT

Technical expert meeting on urban health, June 2021: meeting report

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Summary

With nearly 70% of the global population projected to live in cities by 2050, urban health is a growing priority for the World Health Organization (WHO). For many years, WHO has carried out work in urban health by supporting initiatives for healthy cities, advocating for action through health promotion, identifying sectoral policies at local level that impact upon health, raising awareness, developing health impact tools and methodologies for technical assessments, and building strong networks across the globe. In the WHO Thirteenth General Programme of Work 2019–2023, there has been renewed commitment to promote and scale up urban health work across WHO with a coordinating function in the new Department of Social Determinants of Health (SDH). In this next phase of work, WHO aims to continue its support to urban health by articulating existing and future actions across all levels of the organization and increasing internal and external synergies across urban health activities. This work will entail that Member States at all levels of governance, and in particular at the local level, can easily access the large range of tools and intervention packages available within WHO, benefit from capacity building, are provided with concrete solutions and strategies, and thereby can come closer to achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

On 24-25 June 2021, WHO hosted an Expert Meeting on Urban Health, convening leading global academics and experts to support SDH's new cross-cutting function and workstream in this area. Experts were academics with relevant experience to urban health, selected through consultation with WHO colleagues across different technical areas of urban health as well as in consultation with colleagues from WHO's Regional Offices¹. The meeting was also attended by WHO colleagues from departments across headquarters and regional offices. The approximately 30 experts were tasked with taking stock of the large breadth of WHO's current activities in urban health and providing guidance on WHO's way forward. They discussed gaps and opportunities and focused on strategic directions and priority actions for WHO, based on existing evidence and WHO perceived comparative advantage. An urgent call was made to connect urban health to emerging post-COVID-19 agendas with a strong focus on environmental sustainability and equity. Experts further recommended a WHO-wide strategic approach to urban health and for a cohesive vision of urban health to be articulated from within the organization.

The outcome of the meeting included recommendations across different areas including awareness raising, research, data, monitoring, governance and norm setting, guidance and tools, technical assistance, and partnership activities. Concrete suggestions to increase sustainable impact at local level and develop synergies were provided, such as: (1) increase capacity building for sustained multi-sectoral action for

¹ Note that all participants completed a WHO declaration of any conflict of interest form. No conflict of interest were declared. The experts also reviewed and input into this final meeting report.

health and health equity in cities (2) generate repositories, platforms or catalogues to gather and make existing resources (e.g. tools, case studies, guidance documents) easily accessible to Member States (3) set up a coherent urban health systems approach, framework, or strategy for addressing social, economic and environmental urban determinants of health. The meeting was part of a larger work plan that involves consultations with various internal and external stakeholders to define organizational priorities and set the stage for WHO strategies to increase action on urban health.

Introduction

Urban health is a growing priority for WHO as the global population living in cities is projected to increase to nearly 70% by 2050. In the WHO Thirteenth General Programme of Work 2019–2023, one of the 3 major organizational goals aims at supporting one billion more people enjoying better health and well-being by 2023. Within this goal, Output 3.1.1 explicitly relates to countries addressing social determinants of health across the life course and includes work on urban health. Therefore, in 2019, under WHO Transformation, the Secretariat established the new Department of Social Determinants of Health (SDH) to scale up global work, including on strengthening urban health.

Over the last few decades, WHO has carried out work in urban health by supporting initiatives improving health in cities, advocating for action through health promotion, identifying sectoral policies at local level that impact upon health, raising awareness, developing health impact tools and methodologies for technical assessments, and building strong networks across the globe. The breadth of technical areas covered by urban health work is wide with targeted experience in areas such as air pollution, transport, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and injuries, emergency preparedness for COVID-19 and other disease outbreaks, vector control, and more.

WHO approaches to urban health are also widely diverse. The Healthy Cities approach is long standing and with experience and successful achievements dating as far back as 30 years. Broadly, technical teams have supported initiatives in over 1500 cities in the world and built strong networks for supporting actors and increasing governance at local level. Beyond this, work in urban health within the organization has also been strongly linked to the Health Promotion agenda, with advocacy for action at global and local levels and a strong emphasis on sharing experiences and building on lessons learnt. WHO has also adopted a robust environmental health approach to urban health by assessing and mitigating health risks at urban level. The environmental health approach leads in the development of a large range of health impact tools and methodologies for technical assessments and guidance, while also identifying key sectoral policies having potential to increase health in urban populations.

To support SDH's new cross-cutting function and workstream in this area, a WHO Expert meeting on urban health was held on 24 and 25 June 2021, virtually. The programme (Annex 2) started with a presentation from a global expert and WHO head of unit on the challenges, opportunities and initiatives to improve urban health within and beyond WHO. Then, approximately 30 experts were tasked with taking stock of the large breadth of WHO's current activities in urban health and providing advisory guidance on WHO's way forward. The meeting was also attended by WHO colleagues from departments across headquarters and regional offices. The meeting is intended as a first of a series of meetings, to align WHO's agenda with advice from scientific experts in order to meet the needs of cities. Subsequent meetings will focus on exchanges with local governments, and key collaborating partners.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- Outline WHO's current work, achievements, and challenges on urban health.
- Seek experts' guidance on strategic directions and priority actions for WHO, at the three levels of the organization, based on existing evidence and WHO's perceived comparative advantage.
- Identify best mechanisms to engage with cities and local governments as well as to strengthen internal and external synergies.

During the consultation, experts discussed gaps and opportunities and focused on strategic directions and priority actions for WHO, based on existing evidence and WHO perceived comparative advantage. An urgent call was made to connect urban health to emerging post-COVID-19 agendas with a strong focus on environmental sustainability and equity. Experts further advised WHO to take an organizational strategic approach to urban health and for a coherent vision of urban health to be articulated from within the organization. It was noted that implementation research and work to assess impact at local level has been limited so far. Moving forward, experts proposed several concrete suggestions to address urban health and increase local leadership and governance that are detailed here.

General overview of expert input

The expert meeting was useful to highlight the important role of WHO in promoting and intervening on urban health issues, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and growing inequities worldwide. An urgent call was made to connect urban health to the emerging post-COVID-19 agendas with a strong focus on solutions to address unsustainable systems which disregard the needs of the urban poor. While the COVID-19 pandemic continues to showcase cities as epicentres for disease transmission, it also highlights the key role of city governments and local community organizations in deploying effective responses and in curtailing the epidemic. Experts underlined the need for WHO to support cities in acting as centers and entry points for action while engaging citizens as part of the solution and as key actors in preparedness and response plans. Addressing WHO's steps forward in urban health is therefore a timely discussion as the local and international arenas show increased interest in how cities are tackling the pandemic.

During the meeting, the experts took stock of the wide breadth, diversity and depth of WHO's work in urban health over the years. There was consensus that urban health as a field should be tackled with a broad focus and should not be restricted to the health space only. However, they reported the need for conceptual clarity on urban health and for a cohesive and coherent vision of urban health to be articulated from within the organization. This vision would strengthen WHO's approach to urban health and create synergies between urban health and broader social, ecological and economic

determinants agenda. Conceptual clarity on urban health can facilitate further consideration of megatrends that currently shape the world (e.g. climate change and resilience) and clarify how they connect with urban health.

There is an urgent need to merge efforts at programmatic level and between key players in order to understand and change urban systems. Experts have underlined the benefits of promoting a systems approach to urban health – i.e. understanding the structure of systemic relationships and positive and negative feedbacks that determine system trajectories. Within this approach, there is a need to better clarify typology of cities (not only in size, but also in terms of how rapidly cities are reacting to changes, tackle inequity and practice governance. Clarifying typology of cities also means underlining typologies of planning systems and taking into consideration the increased connection between health and urban planning. The challenges of primary care were also highlighted, emphasizing the need of linking informal, NGO, private, governmental providers. A systemic approach would bring closer focus on (sometimes fragile) urban cohorts to make cities more visible and make stronger links with other organizations that drive the urban question within the global agenda.

Experts also advised building on the WHO's normative role to identify and evaluate urban health activities that can have a good return on investment. This included considering stronger involvement with the business sector and strengthening ties with international multi-lateral agencies (e.g. UN, ICLEI, C40), development banks (e.g. Asian or African Development Banks), etc. Considering that some countries such as the UK have started requiring Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) from commercial developers, WHO can play an important role in bridging non-health actors, third parties and public health practitioners who can assist in judging the impact of projects and programs on health. HIAs are iterative processes that can improve urban proposals as they undergo consultation and development. Therefore, WHO's specific role would include to consolidate what positive role HIA can play in urban development proposals at local level.

The discussion about increasing impact at local level was also driven by the need for capacity building activities that sustainably engage people from outside of the health sector and bring urban health curriculums to non-health people. This involves focusing on population groups as interlocutors and actors in shaping policies and recommendations. Defining engagement in urban health by focusing on population groups such as youth, children and ageing populations carries different benefits, including the adaptation of tools and interventions that have sustainable impact at local level.

Experts recognized that city-to-city approaches are the most effective for urban health to be promoted and pushed to the top of city agendas. By supporting city-to-city learning, WHO can assist in further articulating health concerns for all scales of government and for other major city actors (communities, developers, etc.). There is a need for WHO to showcase successful methodologies, policies and case-studies that

can enable contrast between cities and generate mechanisms for evidence-based policy-making. WHO can help with knowledge exchange on how to adapt indicators, especially spatial, policy, health equity and capacity-building indicators. By sharing and contrasting experiences and lessons learnt, WHO can aim for horizontal and vertical integration to break down silos and better communicate to local governments.

1. Data

The experts addressed how to strengthen urban health data and indicators to facilitate monitoring and action on urban health trends in cities. Feedbacks and comments included the following:

- Policy tracking should be considered as a priority on the monitoring and evaluation agenda.
- It is necessary to show quick real-time information on real time issues.
- Trend analysis is very important.
- Cross-city comparison should be conducted (qualitative and quantitative).
- WHO should shepherd systems and platforms to harmonize data collection and monitoring across cities globally.
- Tools should be responsive to satisfy demand-side of governance and citizen needs.
- Ways to include the poorest in surveys and evidence used for policy-making are needed.
- It is necessary to develop links between data collected and urban agencies that can use such data.
- The use of qualitative indicators for urban health is encouraged as they do not entail large surveys.

2. Tools, guidance, norms and standards

The experts discussed WHO's role in providing different technical guidance and tools aimed to support cities. They also addressed approaches to assess the needs for, define relevance and improvement of tools and guidance for local decision-makers. Feedback and comments included the following:

- There are many tools, methods, indicators and frameworks but they may not work in all places and therefore should be adapted to different contexts through lessons learnt from local experiences.

- All the projects, products, guidance materials and resources should be in one place.
- It is necessary to do a gap analysis in order to define what tools are missing.
- It is necessary to identify and compile existing tools that have demonstrated their ability to be adapted easily and quickly in order to catalyze action to improve urban health and well-being.
- There is a need for stronger involvement of communities in the development and assessment of the policies, norms guidance and standards (importance of co-production).
- Simple tools to evaluate different features of urban living and their impacts are needed.

3. Research

The experts considered the WHO research agenda on urban health and discussed how it can be shaped to more effectively close earlier identified gaps through the generation, translation, and dissemination of valuable knowledge. Feedback and comments included the following:

- There is a need to synthesize learnings from COVID-19 to build better cities.
- Urban life and health in the post-COVID-19 world should be the research agenda in the next 2-3 years.
- There is a need for a better understanding of urban policy making through more implementation and co-designed research and generation of more spatial data.
- There is a need for a research agenda that builds into capacity building. Research and training should be conducted at the same time – particularly for researchers from the global south.
- It is important to support city-to-city comparison, including collecting and showcasing case studies.
- Policy analysis and natural experiments should be promoted.
- Advance on costing and identifying return on investment work.

4. Awareness raising

The experts discussed WHO's role in raising awareness on urban health. Feedback and comments included the following:

- There is a need for WHO to articulate a cohesive/coherent vision of urban health as an area of inquiry for the broader world.
- Finding synergy of urban health with broader social and economic determinants agenda + SDGs is necessary.
- WHO might consider the drafting of Urban Health report(s).
- There is a need to increase the work directly with other large multi-lateral organizations to galvanize around crucial urban health questions (particularly for finance partnerships).

5. Leadership and Governance

The experts discussed the role of WHO in supporting local leadership and strengthening urban governance for health and wellbeing in cities. The discussion included consideration of current mechanisms such as networks, partnerships and awareness raising at local level, as well as existing WHO resolution and decisions addressing urban health. Feedbacks and comments on actions that WHO can take to increase leadership and governance involve:

- Facilitating health in all urban policies approaches at government level.
- Facilitating links across primary care providers with focus on frontline health workers in deprived urban settlements and city governments to make sure urban poorest can access care and prevention.
- Using leadership and governance to address root causes of inequities in urban health and well-being political and administrative accountabilities, community engagement, financing of urban health intervention and civil society engagement and ownership of efforts to improve health of the poorest.
- Developing adaptable methods and concepts to promote evidence to inform policy making and implementation.
- Conducting in depth analysis and review of WHO urban health implementation frameworks.
- Conducting a situation analysis and mapping of stakeholders – what are their policies, what are their priorities, and how can WHO bring them together across levels (national, local)?

- Collecting and showcasing case studies on good leadership, governance and demand-side efforts towards accountability.
- Encouraging policy makers to acknowledge and practice citizen participation/engagement as an element of governance and inclusion of populations from most deprived urban areas.
- Building local capacity for urban health research and practice, including how to use data, particularly in global south.
- Nurturing networks that can engage local civil society in research and action on urban health.
- Consulting with Member States on the need for an urban health WHA resolution replacing the 1991 WHA resolution on urban health development.

Conclusion and next steps

The experts from different fields such as public health, urban planning, policy, transport and others provided inputs on different topics and aspects of WHO-related urban health work. Experts provided comments across different areas including awareness raising, research, data, monitoring, governance and norm setting, guidance and tools, technical assistance, and partnership activities. Concrete suggestions to increase sustainable impact at local level and develop synergies, highlighted the importance of: (1) increasing capacity building for sustained capacity building for multi-sectoral action for health and health equity in cities: (2) generating repositories, platforms or catalogues to gather and make existing resources (e.g. tools, case studies, guidance documents) easily accessible to Member States (3) setting up a cohesive urban health systems approach, framework, or strategy for addressing social, economic and environmental urban determinants of health.

Immediate next steps and priority actions for WHO over the next 6-12 months

Through recommendation, feedback and comments from experts WHO has been advised to conduct or generate the following as priority actions over the next 6-12 months:

- A gap analysis and mapping of existing tools
- Compilation of tools and approaches that can facilitate direct action to improve health of the city's low-income groups.
- Repositories of urban health materials
- WHO digital library of available data resources

- Repository for questionnaire samples and survey scripts
- Platform to showcase city case-studies and encourage city-to-city experience sharing
- Compendium of policies and interventions for activities with return on investment
- Research agenda focusing on implementation and sustainable impact at local level
- Conducting in depth analysis and review of WHO urban health implementation frameworks
- Develop a capacity building course on urban health

As this is the first of a series of subsequent meetings to be held during the second half of 2021, (including an expert consultation on WHO urban health research agenda, a meeting with partners institutions and a meeting with local government representatives) experts present at the urban health meeting will be informed about the outcomes of all subsequent meetings and will be invited for further engagement into subgroups based on key areas of interest and affiliations. By increasing visibility of the existing work and by synchronizing actions in urban health, WHO aims to support local governments in building strong urban policies and bringing them closer to achieving many of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.



WHO Expert meeting on urban health

Day 1: 24 June 2021, 12:30 – 15.00 CET

Day 2: 25 June 2021, 12:30 – 15.00 CET

FINAL AGENDA

Day 1: 24 June 2021, 12:30 – 15.00 CET

Time	Topic
12.30-13.00	<p>Welcome and introductions: Meeting objectives, inputs, and expected outcomes Etienne Krug, Director, Social Determinants of Health, WHO</p>
13.00-13:45	<p>Session 1: The state of affairs in urban health <i>This session sets the scene on the current importance and global landscape of urban health. The session also reflects on different WHO entry points to urban health and will be complemented by results from WHO urban health mapping exercise across HQ, RO, CO. Finally, it discusses gaps in and opportunities for supporting global health through local action.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introductory presentations <p>Carlos Dora, President elect, International Society for Urban Health Nathalie Roebbel, Head, Urban Health, WHO</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roundtable discussion <p>Session Chair and Moderator: Olga Sarmiento, Professor, Universidad de los Andes, Colombia</p>
13:45-14:30	<p>Session 2: Technical products (policies/norms/standards/tools) <i>This session discusses WHO’s role in providing different technical guidance and tools aimed to support cities. This session aims also to discuss approaches to assess the needs for, define relevance and improvement of tools and guidance for local decision-makers.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roundtable discussion <p>Session Chair and Moderator: Siddharth Agarwal, Director, Urban Health Resource Centre, India</p>

14.30-15:00	<p>Session 3: Research agenda on urban health <i>This session addresses how the WHO research agenda on urban health can be shaped to more effectively close earlier identified gaps through the generation, translation, and dissemination of valuable knowledge.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roundtable discussion <p>Session Chair and Moderator: Jose Siri, Senior Science Lead, Wellcome Trust, UK</p>
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Day 2: 25 June 2021, 12:30 – 15.00 CET

Time	Topic
12.30- 12:40	<p>Overview of previous day</p> <p>Nathalie Roebbel, Head, Urban Health, WHO</p>
12.40-13:20	<p>Session 4: Data and indicators for urban health <i>This session addresses how to strengthen urban health data and indicators to facilitate monitoring and action on urban health trends in cities.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roundtable discussion <p>Session Chair and Moderator: Billie Giles-Corti, Professor, Director of the Centre for Urban Research’s Healthy Liveable Cities Lab, Australia</p>
13:20-14:05	<p>Session 5: Leadership and governance in urban health</p> <p><i>This session addresses the role of WHO in supporting local leadership and strengthening urban governance for health and wellbeing in cities. It discusses current mechanisms such as networks, partnerships and awareness raising at local level.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roundtable discussion <p>Session Chair and Moderator: Mohammad Assai, Senior Public Health Expert, former WHO representative Pakistan, Iran</p>
14:05- 14:50	<p>Session 6: Review of the strategic meeting and reflections on next steps <i>This session will reflect on the two days discussion, and will:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Seek experts’ guidance on strategic directions and priority actions for WHO, at the three levels of the organization, based on existing evidence and WHO perceived comparative advantage.</i> 2. <i>Identify the best mechanisms to engage with cities and local governments as well as to strengthen internal and external synergies.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roundtable discussion

	Session Chair and Moderator: Sandro Galea , Professor, Dean at Boston University School of Public Health, Unites States of America
14.50-15.00	Conclusions and close of meeting Etienne Krug , Director, Social Determinants of Health, WHO

ANNEX B: List of Participants

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Brazzaville, Congo

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WHO South-East Asia Region

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