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New Global Programme For Urban Health and Wellbeing

World health, environmental, behavioural and social science experts have launched a major new interdisciplinary scientific collaboration that aims to achieve better health for billions of people living in fast-growing urban areas. The new global Urban Health and Wellbeing Programme has these key objectives:

- Empower planners and policy-makers with better science to create healthy urban environments and improve wellbeing;
- Identify and manage unintended health consequences of urban policy; and
- Understand connections between cities and planetary change.

The consortium of science and health organisations behind the new global initiative is led by the International Council for Science (ICSU), with co-sponsorship from the InterAcademy Medical Panel (IAMP) and the United Nations University (UNU). The secretariat is hosted by the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Urban Environment in Xiamen, China.

The launch comes amidst warnings that urban health risks and illnesses are increasing in tandem with rapid urban growth worldwide, compounded by climate change, resource depletion and other major 21st century trends.

To address these challenges, programme investigators will apply a "systems approach" to understanding the relationships between urban design, management, lifestyles, and health and wellbeing.

Urban health-related concerns are growing in step with urbanisation. About 54 percent of all people today live in cities, up four percent in just five years. By 2050, two-thirds of all people will live in cities, a reversal from 1950 when two-thirds of all people lived in rural areas.

"As most people now live in cities, and urban environments are important determinants of health, urban decision-making will affect the future health of the majority of the world's people," said Professor Anthony Capon, Director of the International Institute for Global Health at UNU. "This new interdisciplinary science programme is particularly timely for the United Nations' post-2015 development agenda because it will deliver critical new knowledge for healthy and sustainable urban policy and planning."

The programme will help spur the development of cities where healthy choices are made easy, where urban decision-making does not lead to unintended negative consequences, and where sustainable design allows

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current and future generations to share equally in the great benefits of urban living.

Increased Health Risks for City Residents

Compared with rural residents, people in cities generally have better access to healthcare, employment and education opportunities, leading to higher incomes. However, city dwellers often confront one or more elevated health risks:

- Chronic non-communicable diseases resulting from risk factors associated with urban living, such as physical inactivity, unhealthy diets, tobacco and other drug use. Non-communicable diseases include cardiovascular disease, certain cancers and Type 2 diabetes, all now at epidemic proportions worldwide;
- Infectious diseases that thrive where people are crowded together, often in substandard living conditions. Urbanisation is a factor in the global expansion of dengue, for example, and may have contributed to West Africa's current Ebola outbreak. Increased global mobility between cities also facilitates the rapid spread of pathogens like influenza;
- Health effects of air, water and soil pollution from motor cars and industrial sources, including heart and lung diseases, cancers, developmental disorders, and others;
- Motor vehicle collisions, violence, crime and workplace accidents;
- Increased risk of mental disorders, potentially arising from stress, social isolation and other factors; and
- Health impacts of climate change - amongst the biggest 21st century health risks - including heat stress and risks from natural hazards, as well as broader societal impacts.

In addition, major health-related inequities are common in cities, including differences in life expectancy for people living in slum conditions, in access to healthcare and vaccination coverage, and in the rate of work-related accidents and injuries, amongst others.

"Risks to human health and wellbeing are growing with rapid unplanned urbanisation. Infectious diseases spread more quickly and chronic diseases are fostered by more sedentary, unhealthy lifestyles," ICSU President Professor Gordon McBean noted. "Rather than narrowly focusing on healthcare, effective solutions for these problems are more likely to be found by addressing and making adjustments to the urban environment. Coastal cities in particular are vulnerable to rising sea levels, storms and riverine flooding with higher impacts of people and the economies as the climate changes. Adaptive strategies are needed to reduce risks."

Despite the significant challenges, experts say there is reason to be hopeful. Around the world, decision-makers have identified a wealth of practical innovations and insights into how to improve urban health, including innovative design of public spaces, transport and housing; distribution of resources and services; and new models of governance, risk management and economic development.

The challenge is to scrutinise and elaborate on these ideas, integrating them into strategies that build toward a healthy urban ideal tailored to local needs and respecting the limits of natural resources.

Hence the rationale for this new programme, the novelty of which lies in its systems approach, which is "a particularly effective way to understand and manage changing urban environments with profound implications for the way people live, work, learn, move and play, all of which have health implications," said Professor Capon.

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