

Annual Business and Technical Conference

Healthy Cities in times of pandemic: protecting communities and building back better

Web-based conference, 8–10 December 2020

Healthy Cities for Building Back Better

Political statement

WHO European Healthy Cities Network

Phase VII

***Protecting our communities through science and
solidarity for a fair, healthy and sustainable
recovery***

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Political statement

We, the mayors and senior political representatives of cities, gathered on 8–10 December 2020, confirm our commitment to the values and principles of the Healthy Cities movement.

As our cities are the national and international epicentres of the COVID-19 pandemic, we commit to stepping up leadership, individually and collectively, to make our cities healthy, safe, fair, inclusive, resilient and sustainable.

We call on WHO and the global community to support science-based response efforts, not only to protect our communities from COVID-19 and its social and economic impacts, but also for a fair, healthy and sustainable recovery.

Cities and local governments are central to enabling our societies to respond to and recover from this unprecedented challenge facing the world. We cannot afford to resume business as usual; we must build back better, healthier and more resilient. In particular:

- The climate emergency, global noncommunicable diseases burden and inequalities that persistently fail those left behind by our societies and economies must not continue as we build towards our common future.
- Our recovery must be green, inclusive, sustainable, healthy safe and evidence-based, and must deliver new, economic models that keep our populations healthy and foster well-being, keep our environment clean and protected against exploitation, and keep our communities resilient.

We confirm our support for the WHO Manifesto for a healthy recovery from COVID-19, which highlights “building healthy, liveable cities”. We stress that cities have a crucial role in the COVID-19 recovery. Healthy, liveable cities are not simply part of a healthy recovery, they are essential to it; without them, we will not achieve the Sustainable Development Goals or our common goal of a sustainable future.

Therefore, we call on the global community to adopt an economy of well-being that:

- increases opportunities for upward social mobility and for people to improve their lives;
- ensures that these opportunities translate into positive well-being outcomes for all segments of the population, including those at the bottom of the distribution.
- puts equity in health and sustainable development at the centre of strategies to combat COVID-19 and at the centre of future recovery from the pandemic.
- reduces inequalities; and

- ensures environmental and social sustainability.

We call on the global community to look on this time as an opportunity to become stronger, more unified, more resilient, more cohesive, and more prepared to respond to climate change impacts, emergencies, disasters and shocks, and to health, environmental, social and economic challenges.

We are at a turning point in history. The decisions we make now impact our present and will determine our future. They affect us now and will affect generations to come. These decisions shape the environment and conditions in which people will live today and tomorrow. They determine how long we will live, and the quality of our lives. We are held accountable by our young generations, and will be by future generations, for the actions that we take now. The present and future of those generations depends on all of us acting now.

Collectively, we:

- recognize, applaud, and reaffirm our commitment and support to WHO for the key role that it continues to play, both regionally and globally, in supporting all countries, cities and communities in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- stand in solidarity with our fellow cities and their citizens, including frontline health workers and other essential workers, who have suffered unimaginably during this outbreak, and support them through our common networks and platforms, to the best of our ability.
- stress that our planet, our cities and our places, are facing a climate emergency; we must not disregard the action needed to tackle this environmental crisis as we seek to recover from the economic shock of COVID-19.
- reiterate that inequalities underpin the defining public health challenges of our time, including the distribution of the burden of COVID-19, and that the most vulnerable people are the most severely affected. Building a healthier and happier world in the aftermath of COVID-19 means, first and foremost, tackling the persistent inequalities in our societies and at the heart of our economies.
- emphasize that we will only overcome the challenge of COVID-19 through solidarity, cooperation and coordination, in the European Region and globally. We stress the leading roles of cities and local governments as advocates for an equitable, sustainable, and evidence-based response to COVID-19.
- We confirm our support for the WHO Manifesto for a healthy recovery from COVID-19, which highlights “building healthy, liveable cities”. We stress that cities have a crucial role in the COVID-19 recovery. Healthy, liveable cities are not simply part of a healthy recovery, they are essential to it; without them, we will not achieve the Sustainable Development Goals or our common goal of a sustainable future.

- reiterate our commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Copenhagen Consensus of Mayors: Healthier and Happier Cities for All.
- welcome the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025 – “United Action for Better Health in Europe”, and its four flagship initiatives: The Mental Health Coalition; Empowerment through Digital Health; The European Immunization Agenda 2030; and Healthier behaviours: incorporating behavioural and cultural insights.

Partnerships and governance for public health responses to COVID-19

We underline the critical role of cities in supporting public health measures in the response to COVID-19, to reduce the prevalence of the disease and protect health systems, highlighting that:

- cities are the closest level of government to the people, working in partnership with our communities, including vulnerable groups. Cities are key entry points for reaching all people, informing them, empowering them, protecting them, and engaging them as part of the solution, in a whole-of-system approach.
- cities are the operational partners of national governments in response efforts. They are crucial actors in national preparedness and response plans and measures, providers of essential services, and travel hubs within and between countries.
- cities are crucial to designing, communicating and implementing the public health and social measures necessary to contain the spread of COVID-19, and to reducing the burden on the health care system. Local governments can alleviate this burden by providing support to health care workers and showing solidarity with key frontline workers. Municipalities and local governments are key actors for putting health at the centre of all political decisions. City health requires multidisciplinary and multisectoral work.
- local leaders and administrations need access to quality, disaggregated and intra-communal level data, enabling quick and tailored decision-making at the local level, including to implement proportionate universalism in actions, policies and planning.
- cities need common access to collaborative tools and databases for inter-sectorial and multi-level decision making and monitoring.

Building healthy and sustainable cities

We emphasize that COVID-19 has fundamentally impacted the spatial organization of the cities, communities and societies in which we live, love, work and play. In particular, we:

- note that focusing on place and placemaking is more important than ever, given the impact of COVID-19 on our communities, societies and economies. Social and physical distancing measures have drastically impacted how we interact with the places in our cities, and, to a certain extent, changed what we need from our places. Placemaking must be receptive and sensitive to these evolved needs.
- support the increased focus on active transport and promote the use of all healthy forms of transport, such as walking and cycling, wherever possible. This not only encourages physical activity, but also improves air quality and mitigates the health impacts of pollution that are widespread in many of our cities. We commit to ensuring that in our cities, all possible measures will be taken to enable and promote healthy forms of movement and transport.
- highlight that equitable access to green and blue spaces is crucial for people whose access to nature has been restricted by public health and social measures taken in response to COVID-19. While ensuring the highest standards of health and safety through social and physical distancing in these areas, and in line with WHO and national public health guidelines, we will strive to ensure that access to these community assets will be available to as many people as safely possible, and for as long as safely possible.
- emphasise the importance of striving to become “walkable” cities – where walking is promoted as a viable option of transportation, facilitated by public spaces designed for all, especially all groups at risk of vulnerabilities, in order for them to be able to move comfortably, safely and without interruption. Walking supports physical and mental health and well-being, which has become even more important during the COVID-19 pandemic. This focus on improving pedestrian, cycle, and public transportation infrastructure must also include the reduction of urban spaces reserved for cars. Health and happiness depend on cities designed for people first and foremost.
- note the importance of cities developing dedicated strategies for the use of public space, which are focussed on creating economic, ecological, and social value for society. These strategies should include responses to challenges, such as the reduction, privatization, over management and non-management of public spaces, as well as how they are positioned within the city’s public health infrastructure. They could include a focus on the “15-minute city” – where everything needed by an individual is within a 15-minute walking distance, as well as access to green, blue, and open spaces.
- underscore the risk of food insecurity caused by COVID-19 and the opportunities for strengthening urban food systems to prevent food scarcity among vulnerable children and adults, improve diets and access to nutritious food, reduce obesity, promote sustainable food production and consumption, and improve urban environments through urban agriculture and farms.

- reiterate the role of healthy urban planning in designing cities of the future that promote active and healthy lifestyles, while allowing for the social and physical distancing needed to adhere to WHO and national public health guidelines.
- understand the importance of tackling both communicable diseases and noncommunicable diseases through our cities, in the way we organize relevant health service delivery, including primary health care, and plan our cities and the systems that support our populations.

We stress the critical importance of the social and cultural elements of the response to COVID-19. Together, we:

- commit to protecting the most vulnerable in our communities. This includes our older populations, people with underlying health conditions and those most at risk from the disease, as well as children and their carers;
- We emphasize the importance of education as a key social determinant of health, which is fundamental to current and future well-being, and we commit to minimizing the disruption to education at all ages, especially of children, by delivering virtual, innovative, and tailored educational activities, to the best of our abilities. We are committed to taking necessary precautions to ensure uninterrupted continuity of academic education, research and activities that will ensure scientific development
- We note with concern the increases in interpersonal violence – including intimate partner violence and violence against children – and commit to taking every measure possible to address these worrying trends.
- We also note with concern the increasing mental health burden of COVID-19 and the subsequent social and economic impacts on our health workforce, public servants, communities and children, and we commit to taking action to address this.
- acknowledge the significant mental health and psychosocial impacts of the public health and social measures implemented to stop the spread of COVID-19 and commit to taking the necessary actions to respond to these impacts.
- emphasize the importance of culture, art and education for mental and physical health and well-being, and commit to delivering, to the best of our abilities, virtual access to arts and cultural activities and events, including museums, theatre, music and performance. This is particularly important at times of collective stress, such as now, when access to cultural life is limited, and embrace our role as cultural enablers and facilitators for the people in our cities.
- understand our role in building peaceful and cohesive societies that are resilient to future shocks, and – in the context of fragile and conflict-affected states – are able to transition to, and sustain, peace.

We acknowledge the significant economic challenge that is a by-product of the pandemic, and the impacts of the pandemic on global, national, and local economies. We therefore:

- commit to engaging with our national governments to ensure adequate financial and economic support for local authorities as key actors, as well as providing financial and economic support packages that are equitable and focus on the most vulnerable in our societies, and which will mitigate the mental health burden caused by loss of income and financial uncertainty.
- commit to supporting local businesses and enterprises through the period of social and physical distancing, allowing them to retain their businesses and also their workforce, and continue to operate with the necessary public health measures in place to contribute to a healthy and sustainable recovery.
- emphasize the importance of public health measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 and alleviate the burden on the health care system, while attempting to balance the economic impacts of businesses pausing trading.
- stress that redesigning economies at the national and local levels will provide an opportunity to invest further in green, silver, and other transformative economic models that support a more sustainable future and build back better.

We reiterate the importance of governance in an effective response to the pandemic, and the fact that equity and effective governance are key principles in building resilient cities and societies that are able to rebound from COVID-19 and its impacts. We therefore:

- reiterate the importance of the leadership of cities, and mayors, locally, nationally, and internationally, and of coordination between municipal and other levels of governance.
- commit to taking whole-of-society and whole-of-city approaches to the COVID-19 response, participating in whole-of-government approaches, and engaging all relevant stakeholders and actors, wherever and whenever necessary.
- address the COVID-19 crisis effectively by acting as collaborators, creating partnerships with civil society and the private sector in a whole-of-society approach and inclusively engaging all communities and stakeholders in seeking solutions to the various challenges posed by the pandemic.
- commit to reaffirming the relationship between governments and people, enhancing credibility and trust, and combatting misinformation. In times of crisis, governments at all levels must act with transparency and integrity, supporting and protecting their populations, with no exceptions and leaving no one behind – principles that we will ensure are at the centre of our response efforts.
- ensure that responses for people and communities involve those people and communities, by increasing participatory governance that engages the whole of

society and fosters ownership of the rebuilding process to be undertaken in the wake of COVID-19.

- commit to consistently and unequivocally taking scientifically grounded decisions, based on evidence, that follow WHO guidance and the gold standard of public health evidence, while combatting misinformation and messages to the contrary, to ensure no harm is done to the people that rely on us.
- prioritize the protection and continuity of supply chains, internationally and nationally, for medicines, food, personal protective equipment, and all necessary items to maintain a sustainable and equitable response to COVID-19 across all countries.
- note that an effective response to COVID-19 is ultimately dependent on engaging people and communities, and that, as the closest form of governance to the people, local and municipal governments must enable and facilitate the collective community action needed in the context of COVID-19. Investing in people and communities means investing in local governments. We are the key to any successful COVID-19 response.

In conclusion, we state that:

- global solidarity will underpin any effective response to COVID-19. Challenges are similar across all cities and countries, and we must stand with each other. This statement is intended to bring us together, unify our individual messages, make them stronger as one, and build momentum for a local response to a global issue.
- collectively, we must emerge from this pandemic healthier, more resilient, more empowered and more connected. WHO is convening partners to spread this message – international partners from the United Nations system and beyond, partners from across the whole of society at regional and national levels, national organizations, and most importantly, cities and municipalities themselves. We must respond to this crisis as one.
- our strong response will be an example of a global alliance to address future public health threats, such as the health effects of climate change, which are likely to emerge or develop suddenly.
- collectively, we commit to supporting the implementation of the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025 – “United Action for Better Health in Europe”, focusing on its four flagship initiatives:
 - ✓ The Mental Health Coalition;
 - ✓ Empowerment through Digital Health;
 - ✓ The European Immunization Agenda 2030; and
 - ✓ Healthier behaviours: incorporating behavioural and cultural insights.

We commit to reporting to the 71st session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe in 2021 on our progress in this regard.

As Mayors and political representatives from across the WHO European Region, we therefore:

- commit to the actions outlined in this Political Statement.
- call on cities to join together, repeat this call for solidarity, and work as one to achieve a healthy and sustainable response to COVID-19.
- call on all partners to support this effort, enabling where they are able to, facilitating within their mandates, promoting in all instances, and engaging throughout.
- call on WHO Member States to engage cities and local governments in COVID-19 response efforts, especially through the WHO Healthy Cities Network and national networks, and to use the resources of our networks and support us through this crisis.
- call on WHO to work with cities and local administrations to produce public health guidance and advice directed at the local level, and to use the reach of existing WHO networks to further strengthen efforts to respond to COVID-19.
- call on each and every one of us to emerge from this stronger, healthier, happier, better prepared and more resilient.
- will leave no one behind.

Annex 1. Previous commitment documents

- Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986)
- Athens Declaration for Healthy Cities (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 1998)
- Action for Equity in Europe: Mayors' Statement of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network in Phase III (1998–2002) (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2000)
- WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO, 2003)
- Belfast Declaration for Healthy Cities: The Power of Local Action (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2003)
- Designing Healthier and Safer Cities: The Challenge of Healthy Urban Planning – Mayors' and Political Leaders' Statement of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network and European National Healthy Cities Networks (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2005)
- Health for All: the policy framework for the WHO European Region – 2005 update (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2005)
- Gaining health: the European Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2006)
- European Charter on Counteracting Obesity (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2006)
- Aalborg+10 – Inspiring Futures (2006)
- The Tallinn Charter: Health Systems for Health and Wealth (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2008)
- Prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases: implementation of the global strategy. Report by the Secretariat (WHO, 2008)
- Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008)
- Political Declaration of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases (United Nations, 2011)
- Rio Political Declaration on Social Determinants of Health (2011)
- Liège Healthy City Commitment (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2011)
- Health 2020: a European policy framework and strategy for the 21st century (2012)
- Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases 2013–2020 (WHO, 2013)
- Implementing a Health 2020 vision: governance for health in the 21st century – making it happen (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2013)
- Athens Declaration for Healthy Cities (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2014)
- Contributing to social and economic development: sustainable action across sectors to improve health and health equity (World Health Assembly resolution WHA67.12, 2014)
- The Minsk Declaration the Life-course Approach in the Context of Health 2020 (2015)
- The New Urban Agenda, Habitat III (United Nations, 2016)
- WHO Shanghai Consensus on Healthy Cities (2016)
- United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015)
- 2017 Healthy Cities Pécs Declaration (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2017)

- Statement of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network and WHO Regions for Health Network presented at the Sixth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2017)
- Roadmap to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, building on Health 2020, the European policy for health and well-being (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2017)
- Copenhagen Consensus of Mayors. Healthier and happier cities for all (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2018)
- Astana Declaration on Primary Health Care (2018)
- Ljubljana Statement on Health Equity (2019)
- European Programme of Work, 2020–2025 – “United Action for Better Health in Europe” (2020)