

NCD Alliance Response: HABITAT III Issue Paper 11: Public Space

This response was prepared by the NCD Alliance, a global network of 2,000 civil society organisations in 170 countries working towards a world free of preventable suffering and death from non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

The NCD Alliance commends the drafting of the Issue Papers, and welcomes the opportunity to submit comments on the Issue Paper on Public Space as part of the Urban Dialogue on Spatial Development. The majority of people with NCDs live in urban settings, and urbanisation is associated with increasing exposure to risk factors for NCDs. As such, urban settings offer great opportunity for implementing effective policies and interventions for the prevention and control of NCDs.

General Comments

- NCDs- including cancer, cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes and mental and neurological disorders- share common risk factors. One of the leading modifiable risk factors is physical inactivity, which is responsible for 3.2 million¹ deaths annually worldwide.
- Physical activity is inextricably linked to access to safe, culturally-responsive green spaces, walkability – and indeed also “cyclability” - of streets, well-designed public transport systems, and thus extremely relevant to this Issue area.
- While the positive effects of accessible public space on mental health are recognized, currently the Issue Paper makes no explicit reference to NCDs, despite NCDs being the world’s being the largest contributor to mortality and morbidity. Almost three quarters of all NCD deaths, and 82% of premature NCD deaths (before age 70) occur in LMICsⁱⁱ, which are nexus of rural to urban transition, hence further linking NCDs to urbanisation and the need for effective urban policies.

Main Concepts

- It would be helpful to make a clearer distinction between “public space” and “urban commons,” or for it to be clarified that “public space” including “streets,” “open spaces,” and “public facilities,” is indeed a subset of “urban commons” as implied in the paper.
- In terms of developing specific policy interventions, the NCD Alliance recommends defining “recreational areas”, “green public space” or “open spaces” such as parks or sports grounds, as these serve different purposes compared to streets or market places, and thus offer very different possibilities in terms of priority improvements.

Figures and Key Facts

- The implications of whether surfaces are impervious or not, and whether streets are a positive or negative feature (or what this depends on for a given street), should be clearly explained.
- The NCD Alliance recommends including statistics on the proportion of land allocated to recreational spaces, which fulfil a very different role to streets, and are essential for facilitating physical, mental and social well-being. The logic for this is clearly evidenced in the Issue Summary section (in the last phrases of the first paragraph on page 5) but the importance is not well reflected in the Figures and Key Facts section.

Issue Summary

- The messages related to health are currently included in the environmental sustainability paragraph, but would be better conveyed in a separate paragraph. Attention to NCD prevention and control has mounted since the UN Summit on NCDs in 2011, and improvements to quality and quantity of public spaces provide the perfect opportunity for member states to address the burden of NCDs.

- While walkability is mentioned in the Main Concepts section, no specific reference is made to walkability anywhere in the main body of the document, and it is essential to expand on this crucial area. Walkability, by definition, increases likelihood of transport by walking rather than by motorised vehicles, which has numerous co-benefits for climate and health through reducing emissions and promoting physical activity. The World Heart Federation recommends that road planning should ensure wider pavements and regular crossing opportunities as standard, for traffic management advisors to be engaged, and where possible, to consider traffic control and “car free” pedestrian areas.ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, creation of cycle lane networks facilitates active transport by bicycle, with similar benefits for climate and health.
- The NCD Alliance commends the emphasis placed on women and children and recommends citing the statistic that globally, women are less active than men, with 27% of women and 20% of men not reaching the level of activity recommended by the World Health Organization. Ensuring safety of public spaces for women is necessary to help combat this.ⁱⁱ
- A strong recommendation to increase trees and vegetation in public spaces should be made, since such measures encourage physical activity, actively combat CO₂ levels, and provide shade from harmful sun rays. UV radiation, which humans are mainly exposed to through rays from the sun, causes over 95% of all skin cancers.^{iv}
- The NCD Alliance applauds the inclusion of “a 10% improvement in a street’s walking quality could yield a reduction of 15kg of CO₂ emissions per household per year as car reliance reduces”. This could be broadened to include associated health benefits resulting from active transport, reductions in localized air pollution, and consequent reductions in morbidity/mortality that follow.

ⁱ World Health Organization, Global Health Risks: Mortality and Burden of Disease Attributable to Selected Major Risks. 2009.

ⁱⁱ World Health Organization, 2014 Global Status Report on Non-communicable Diseases. 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Smith, S. et al, Urbanization and Cardiovascular Disease: Raising Heart Healthy Children in Today’s Cities. World Heart Federation 2012.

^{iv} Cancer Council Australia, How ultraviolet (UV) radiation causes skin cancer (online [here](#))