

Media advisory

Cities of the WHO European Region unite to stop COVID-19 and build a better urban life

Many cities in countries across the WHO European Region have become epicentres of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the wake of this unprecedented challenge, local authorities came together to analyse good practices and lessons learned in tackling COVID-19 outbreaks and to find ways to build back better – in the fastest way possible.

COVID-19: similar urban challenges – different solutions

The challenges of the pandemic are similar across cities and countries.

- Structural inequalities contribute to the distribution of the COVID-19 burden, with the most vulnerable people among the most severely affected.
- Local businesses and enterprises urgently need support from urban governments.
- Schools and other educational facilities have had to close, leaving an obvious demand from local authorities to minimize further disruption to education.
- COVID-19 has exacerbated risks of food insecurity and food scarcity, while unhealthy diets have added to the burden of noncommunicable diseases.
- The mental health consequences of the pandemic have affected the well-being of communities and health-care delivery in turn.
- The importance of urban space reorganization has become evident for people's lives outdoors and for physical distancing. Cities need more green and blue spaces and a renewed system of healthy transport.

Many cities across the Region have implemented measures that have proven effective in solving some of these problems.

Athens, Baku, Brest, Milan, Moscow, Limerick are all examples where urban communities have organized themselves in their own neighbourhoods - striving to keep countries healthy, sustainable, inclusive and economically active during times that are hard for everyone. City authorities in Milan cooperated with nonprofit organizations to create a food systems initiative, in Baku authorities concentrated on ground transport disinfecting buses, taxis and parking areas, and a network of over 1700 volunteers in Limerick maintain a daily freephone service for older people in need. Read these and more examples of [Initiatives cities have taken to face COVID-19](#).

Today more than ever, urban authorities need a way to come together and discuss their experiences. Not only will this exchange help them to find best practices to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, it will also be the basis to make cities healthier and more resilient for future generations.

The other face of the pandemic

Mayors and representatives of local government from dozens of cities of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network have called on the global community to work together. They are confident: experience of

the pandemic can be used as an opportunity to come out of this stronger, resilient, cohesive and more prepared to respond to new health, environmental, social and economic challenges.

“The brutal test of COVID-19 has accelerated our understanding of the challenges we need to solve to protect our communities. The Healthy Cities Network plays a central role in this work, including in the realization of our agenda for health for the next 5 years: the European Programme of Work – ‘United Action for Better Health’,” said Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe.

The call for united action is the central topic of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network Annual Conference, held online on 8–10 December.

Cities play a crucial role in the global COVID-19 recovery. Healthy, liveable cities are not simply an important element of this process, they are the key to reaching success. Without investing in healthy urban life, we will not achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and our common goal of a sustainable future.

Time to spread the message

The WHO European Healthy Cities Network is over 30 years old and comprises more than 1500 cities and municipalities, 100 of which are Flagship WHO Healthy Cities.

WHO is convening partners to spread the message: We must respond to this crisis as one – 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.

More information:

WHO European Healthy Cities Network Annual Conference

<https://www.euro.who.int/en/media-centre/events/events/2020/12/who-european-healthy-cities-network-annual-conference>

Healthy Cities Vision

<https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/environment-and-health/urban-health/who-european-healthy-cities-network/healthy-cities-vision>

COVID-19 and Healthy Cities

<https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/environment-and-health/urban-health/who-european-healthy-cities-network/the-who-european-healthy-cities-network-a-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic-close-to-the-people>

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