

Healthy built environments @ Rio+20

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In his address to city mayors at Rio+20, the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, declared that 'The road to sustainability runs through the world's towns and cities. By building sustainable towns and cities, you will build global sustainability'.

The preparations for Rio+20 identified sustainable cities as a key priority. Although intergovernmental negotiations on sustainable development, and action on climate change, continue to move at a glacial pace, many cities around the world are stepping up efforts to reduce carbon emissions. Urban planners play a critical role in such initiatives.

Beyond cities, ecosystems are the planet's life support systems – for people and all other forms of life. Ultimately, human health and survival are entirely dependent on the health of ecosystems because the human body has a fundamental need for food, water, clean air and relative climatic constancy.

Cities concentrate people and economic activity and, therefore, they also concentrate resource consumption and waste production. This means that the way cities work can affect the health of ecosystems. It follows that cities must be planned, designed, developed and managed to protect both the health of ecosystems, and the health of people.

What should our priorities be then?

First, we should plan so that people can meet most of their daily needs (i.e. getting to school, university and work; shopping for food and other necessities) by walking, cycling, or public transport.

This means improved conditions for walking and cycling by ensuring safe routes for these modes of transport are given equal priority to safe routes for motor car transport. It also means investing in mass transit infrastructure (trains, light rail, buses).

It also means getting serious about distributing economic development throughout our cities. Our historical pattern of urban development, with residential areas well separated from commercial activity, means that many people spend hours every day commuting. This can only change if we invest in suburban economic development and bring jobs and higher education opportunities closer to home.

Second, we should re-imagining our public spaces. Historically, city councils across Australia have not prioritised investment in

public spaces because most people have lived in houses with plenty of room in the backyard. As more and more people live in apartments and townhouses, we should invest in the public domain and develop lively, safe and convivial public spaces.

Third, we should protect fertile agricultural land in peri-urban areas. This will help secure future food supply for our growing population. Indeed, by doing the first two things, there will be less need for the city to spread out and we could put firm growth boundaries around our cities.



Sustainable cities are characterised by well designed higher density residential development within a lively, safe and convivial public domain for all to enjoy.

While urbanisation presents challenges, it also brings opportunities. At Rio+20, the International Council for Science (ICSU) presented its new global interdisciplinary science program on health and wellbeing in the changing urban environment using systems approaches.

The program aims to bring scientists together with counterparts in government, industry and communities to tackle critical urban policy and planning questions. The approach will identify leverage points for intervention, while recognising causes of policy resistance and potential unintended consequences of such interventions.

The new program will strive for 'co-creation' of knowledge to improve decision making – an approach that acknowledges the expertise of those who make decisions on a daily basis (such as urban planners,

landscape architects and transport engineers), seeking new insights through effective applied research.

Human health and wellbeing, on a sustainable basis, should be a primary objective of urban policy and planning. The time to act is now – particularly so in NSW with the release of the Green Paper for a new planning system. We have to ensure that health is an objective of the new planning system, as was recommended by the Victorian parliamentary inquiry into the impacts of environmental design on public

health (see <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/standing-committee-on-environment-and-planning/references-committee/references-committee-inquiries/article/1521>).

There are compelling reasons for action – both for the sake of the health of future generations, and for the sake of our own health right now.

More information about local government perspectives on Rio+20 is available from the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) website http://local2012.iclei.org/fileadmin/files/ICLEI_at_Rio_20.pdf

More information about the new ICSU program is available from <http://www.icsu.org/what-we-do/interdisciplinary-bodies/health-and-wellbeing-in-the-changing-urban-environment/> ■