Regional Director’s Message on
World Health Day 2010 —

Urbanization and Health

For the first time in history, more than half of the world’s population resides in urban areas. It is estimated that by 2030, 6 out of every 10 people will be living in cities. This rapid urbanization is more pronounced in the low- to middle-income countries of Asia and Africa.

World Health Day 2010 — “Urbanization and Health: Urban Health Matters” is a call to action. The World Health Organization regards urbanization as an urgent public health concern. The urban setting influences health outcomes, both positively and negatively. In terms of health, urbanization presents challenges as well as opportunities.

Rapid urbanization is due to natural growth in populations, and migration as a result of people searching for better opportunities in cities. In general, urban areas offer better education, jobs, social mobility, and services. However, many people who move to cities are trapped in marginal situations as a significant proportion of them are poor, have large families and are not well educated. The health of the urban poor suffers the most both because of the living conditions and the high, sometimes prohibitive cost of health services. The urban poor face illnesses and premature death from preventable diseases due to lack of safe drinking water, sanitation, health facilities, safety, security, and health information. The World Bank estimates that more than one billion people — one third of the global urban population — live in slums.

Urbanization is happening and will continue; countries are faced with a choice between planned and unplanned urbanization. Planned urbanization requires a holistic and multidisciplinary approach by all sectors of the government, industry and community. It is imperative that national governments invest in pro-poor policies and strategies in order to reduce the urban equity gap. For example, extending resources and coverage of services to all urban populations improves health outcomes and reduces the social costs of inequity. WHO estimates that every one dollar spent on sanitation gives a return of US$ 9.1 in terms of prevention and treatment of illnesses. Improved transportation, infrastructure and greener technologies enhance urban quality of life, including fewer respiratory ailments and accidents and better health for all. Building-in increased capacity in all systems and infrastructure and service
delivery in view of inevitable urban growth reduces the risk of future damage to health and widening equity gaps.

The goal of governments and municipalities in addressing urbanization and health should be to invest in health-promoting cities and take actions that encourage social connectedness among city dwellers irrespective of social status. An understanding of the negative effects of urbanization and the shared responsibility for balancing and conserving resources and services needs to be fostered among all urban dwellers.

Urbanization is one of the major threats to health in the twenty-first century. Closing the urban equity gap and promoting healthy cities requires urgent actions including the efforts of both rich and poor urban dwellers. To reap the potential benefits from urbanization, we must act collectively.

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