

Cities in transition: challenges and opportunities for the elderly

Highlights of a narrative produced by the FRESH consortium in 2013

Why a narrative?

The project on Foresighted Reasoning on Environmental Stressors and Health (FRESH) used the powerful tool of a narrative to consider, link and communicate relevant themes looking from an integrated environmental health and well-being perspective.

As an example, a narrative on urbanisation was developed which focused on the elderly.

An urban focus

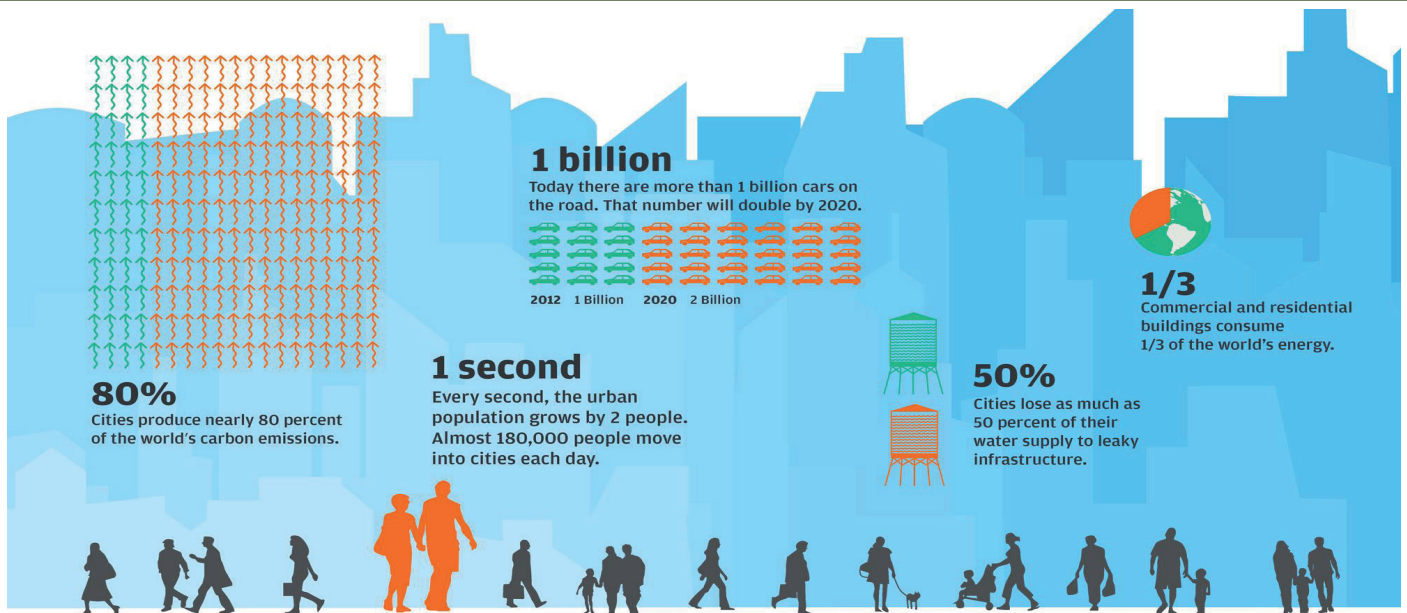
The enduring challenge of public health is to build and sustain health and well-being on continually changing foundations. The ways in which we live our lives, obtain and expend energy, produce and distribute food, communicate, travel and much more besides have changed beyond recognition and continue to evolve in ways relevant to health and wellbeing.

Relentless urbanisation, an ageing population and a global crisis around sustainability are just some of the reasons why Europe's cities are key battlegrounds for a new environmental conceptualisation of public health and new approaches to improve both the environment and health.

The following material distilled from the narrative conveys the complex nature of this 21st century environmental health challenge.

Weaving together stories from cities past and future, alongside illustrations and data, offers an accessible way to illustrate the nature of the challenge but also points to promising ways forward.





Cities are reaching their limits (IBM, 2012)

Challenges

Cities change how people live their lives, the ways in which they behave and what they consume. For many, they offer unprecedented access to employment, education, social mobility and good housing to the benefit of their health and well-being. Yet for others, city living can mean high living costs, social isolation, fear of crime and a polluted low quality community and home environment — in short, a cocktail of disadvantage that undermines health and well-being. Unsurprisingly then, poor health and inequality in health and well-being are frequently concentrated in urban environments.

The European population is ageing rapidly. There is a need to create an urban environment and infrastructure attuned to this demographic change, whilst accounting for a shifting economic and global ecological context.

Rapid population ageing means health systems must adapt to higher demands alongside financial and

staffing constraints. Equally, it demands promotion of healthy and active ageing for all Europe's citizens. More years in good health translates to a better quality of life, more independence and the possibility of meaningful activity. A population in good health reduces pressure on health systems, while fewer premature retirements from work due to ill health will contribute positively to European economic growth (European Commission, 2012).

However, an older population also requires urban green spaces that can provide opportunities for physical recreation, relaxation, and the experience of pleasant surroundings. Green spaces can improve the health outcomes of all members of the community, directly and indirectly, and, through supporting vital ecosystem services, reduce the threats to health. Re-vitalizing existing green areas and developing new ones is consistent with traffic-free active travel, sustainable urban drainage, and the maintenance of biodiversity.

Opportunities

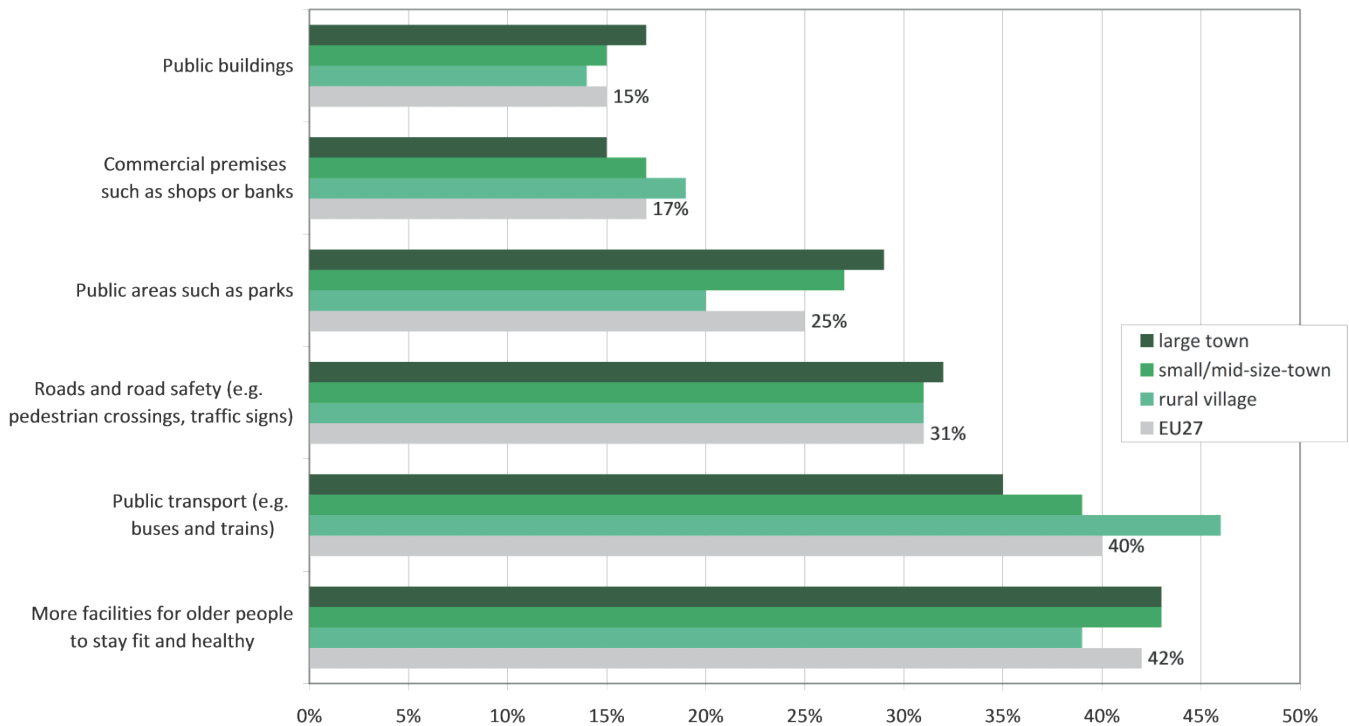


Urban community gardens initiatives in Hungary



Hyde Park, London

Where are improvements most needed to make your local area more "age friendly"?
(EU27, max. 3 answers)



Data source: Special Eurobarometer 378

A combination of data, personal stories and case-studies describing how cities work to create more age-friendly environments.

Healthy cities promoting healthy elderly in France

Madame Landon (86) lives in Wasquehal, a city in Northern France that is member of the French World Health Organisation (WHO) Network of Healthy Cities. On a weekly basis she visits a one-stop shop which supports the elderly and their health requirements, located close to her home. Whilst there, she meets health professionals, volunteers, and other elderly people. As the people are friendly, Madame Landon always feels welcome. She likes that the one-stop shop has many purposes, covering health, cultural, political and economic matters. She has met many new friends in the shop, and now meets them regularly. In addition, she enjoys the workshops and debates that are held there. She learns how she can



change her lifestyle to benefit her health and the environment. She likes the fact that through those initiatives, attention is given to people of her age. It makes her feel included in the society.

This is an example of a good practice to promote the health of the elderly in French cities. Seventy eight cities and 4 urban communities are member of the French WHO Network of Healthy communities, which have established consultative bodies in the field of public health. They often include the participation of the local population to develop a collective awareness of the local health situation and its disparities, empowering the population in the promotion of health.

Other objectives include facilitating cooperation between these cities, sharing experience and data, and organizing workshops and joint actions. This

network of cities exists not only in France; a similar initiative is the Croatian Healthy Cities Network (Croatian Healthy Cities Network, 2013).

Another example of a good practice is a Slovenian initiative to keep elderly people mentally active in the 'University for Elderly'. The association has educational, social and cultural activities, directed towards the elderly. Attending such programmes enables older people to improve mental abilities, to be physically active (by visiting courses and excursions) and helps to build cohesive social networks.

Kangaroo houses: multigenerational co-habitation concept

To face the exponential demographic growth, the Belgium capital Brussels has been inspired by the Australian, Canadian, French and Holland's experiences and launched her first 'kangaroo houses' in 2011. The idea is that multiple generations live together under the same roof. It will provide starters with the opportunity to get a house and will enable the elderly to stay at home as long as possible.

A lone parent and her 7 year-old daughter live with two seniors. Everyone has a private apartment but they meet each other whenever they wish on the ground floor to share meals and assist the little girl with her homework. "I do not have to worry about shopping alone and how to carry all the shopping' bags; I am not alone anymore and still live at home. I have discovered how amazing it is to be a grandma and I want to tell everyone what a great experience it is. It is like sunshine" says the new grand-mother.



To simplify administration problems like planning permission for adaptation of apartments, financial issues, lease agreements, a legal framework has been developed to support this approach.



“

As a retired person it is valuable to me to meet other people for recreation and conversation.

”

Member of Ballymena Walking group,
Co. Antrim,
Northern Ireland

Conclusions

The increase in the proportion of people aged over 65 in the next twenty years demands measures that enable people to stay active and self-sufficient as long as possible

The elderly are more vulnerable to air pollution, extreme temperatures and more prone to falls and accidents. Disability in old age is frequent and not only lowers the quality of life of its victims, but also strains society's limited resources for assistance, care and rehabilitation.

Over the last century, great progress has been achieved in tackling and eliminating health problems in Europe. This is particularly true in Western Europe. Life expectancy has increased in many places and the disease burden has significantly reduced.

The pressure on vital green space, available areas for agriculture, and on resources such as water and fossil fuels will increase dramatically if we continue

developing urban areas in the same way as the 20th century. Smart sustainable solutions are needed.

With progressive globalization, environment and health issues have expanded from beyond the local and proximal issues to more distal and global issues like climate change, ecosystem degradation and resource depletion. The new environmental agenda is dominated by issues which emerge from the interaction of the environment with other societal factors. It has never been so obvious that human health and well-being are inextricably linked to planetary survival. The environment is a key factor in the inequalities in health and well-being between different socio-economic groupings both within and between countries.

Age-friendly living environments are necessary to promote active ageing and may lead to less demand for health care.

Smart alliances between major cities, regions and municipalities and representatives of the elderly can promote active ageing more broadly and strengthen the involvement of older people in city and urban policy development.

Cities should become safer and cleaner, incorporating better accessibility to multi-functional green spaces, public transport and health services. Housing suitable for the elderly is also needed. Age-friendly urban living environments facilitate social interaction and physical activity and limit impacts of harmful exposures.

Multifunctional green spaces, better and accessible public transport and more cycling and walking contribute to better health of all age-groups as well as a reduction of environmental exposures and greenhouse gases.

A flexible and integrated approach to urban development should be employed, taking into account the interconnections between land use, energy and resource use and health. Smart investments in energy efficiency, renewables, green transport, e-health and age-friendly housing are needed, as well as incentives to tempt people to save energy or use green transport. Administrations should facilitate this process, connecting stakeholders and supporting smart alliances, making good use of the knowledge and initiatives of citizens and other stakeholders.