

From red and amber to green

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Raising physical activity levels through modification of cities, public spaces and transport choices has a beneficial effect on health

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Can living in a green, walkable community and engaging in more physical activity actually add years to life, besides adding life to those years? Apparently, yes.

An early study of senior citizens in Tokyo, Japan, living close to walkable green spaces showed that their longevity over a five-year period was higher when compared to those not in similar surroundings. This was irrespective of variations in marital status and wealth. Therefore, promoting the health of senior citizens required urban planners to focus on developing green public areas and re-developing existing ones, said researchers T. Takano, K. Nakamura and M. Watanabe.

Since that study a quarter century ago, cities around the world have attracted millions from rural areas, and the rapid pace of urbanisation has brought with it many problems for emerging economies like India.

Beyond anecdotes on how people who live close to nature are not just well but also happier, there is evidence to indicate that raising physical activity levels through modification of cities, public spaces and transport choices has a beneficial effect on health. More on that below.

Starting with Quito

As countries prepare to debate the future of urbanisation at the UN Habitat III conference in Quito, Ecuador from October 17, and work to adopt the New Urban Agenda, the domestic focus is on what India should do for its cities.

India is already committed to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Here, Goal 11 sets specific targets: "By 2030, [to] provide universal



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access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities," says the text. Also, "access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons".

Evidence on how compact, better planned cities improve health — and reduce the burden of diabetes, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases — was reported in September 2016, by *The Lancet*.

The Delhi example

The modelling studies for Delhi reported in the paper indicate that even

for a dense city with relatively low motorisation compared to some western metros, there could be a 3.2 per cent reduction in transport-related particulate matter emissions if there is a shift away from the use of private vehicles. The choice of transport could also result in an 18.5 per cent rise in physical activity (measured by energy spent). The gains are likely to be far greater for highly motorised cities such as London or Melbourne, if they make a big shift to walking and cycling.

What this shows is that Indian cities, starting with New Delhi, already have some good things to build on: they have high density, and a significant proportion of trips are made by public transport, walking and cycling. In the national capital, for example, 31 per cent of vehicle kilometres that people travel are estimated to be on public transport. Yet, other factors that affect public health, include external sources of air pollution.

Where things could improve in Delhi, as the authors point out in the *Lancet* article, is in "other interventions such as access to proximate public transport or a mix of local destinations". Conversely, continuing motorisation trends and failure to stop biomass burning and construction dust would harm public health through rising particulate emissions.

Quito's draft New Urban Agenda says the country members, "...commit to promote safe, inclusive, accessible, green, and quality public spaces, including streets, sidewalks, and cycling lanes, squares, waterfront areas, gardens, and parks that are multi-functional areas for social interaction and inclusion, human health and well-being." Urban India can take a healthy turn if there is genuine commitment towards this ideal.

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