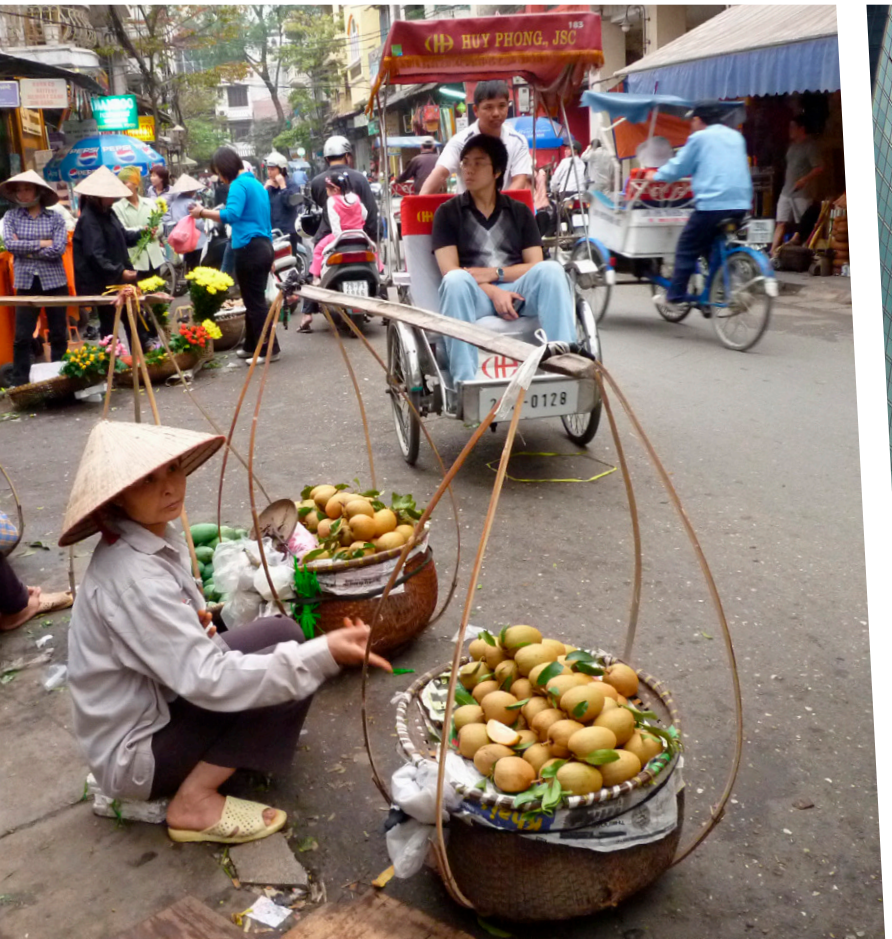
World Health Organization

Providing health intelligence to meet local needs

A practical guide to serving local and urban communities through public health observatories



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The initial draft of this guide was prepared for the World Health Organization Centre for Health Development (WHO Kobe Centre) in Kobe, Japan, by Bobbie Jacobson, OBE, Honorary Senior lecturer, Institute of Health Equity, University College, London, United Kingdom and Carlos Castillo-Salgado, Professor, Department of Epidemiology, Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, United States of America. The guide reflects the knowledge, expertise, and views of these two individuals as well as the collective views of the Expert Reference Group (see Annex) which provided inputs through a consultation meeting hosted by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health on 19-20 June, 2014. This guide also embodies the programme of work led by the WHO Kobe Centre over a two-year period to develop technical support and guidance for new and existing urban public health observatories, a process which engaged a broader group of experts in research and consultations.

Funding for the development of this guide was provided by the WHO Kobe Centre. Megumi Kano commissioned the work and provided overall technical guidance. The Expert Reference Group contributed to earlier drafts of this guide. Beatriz Araceli Díaz Torres prepared the case study of the Juárez City Observatory. Peter Aspinall conducted a background review and survey of public health observatories and provided technical input. Lee Warren also provided technical inputs. Ana Lucia Ruggiero contributed information and knowledge management expertise. Robert Blum, Philip Leaf and team of the Urban Health Institute, and Stacey Lloyd, Amanda Latimore, Aracelis Torres and Marissa Bailey of the Department of Epidemiology, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, helped organize and facilitate the June 2014 consultation meeting. Technical editing was done by David Bramley and Megumi Kano.

Authors' Note

By Bobbie Jacobson and Carlos Castillo-Salgado

In a rapidly urbanising world where inequalities in health and their causes are growing at an alarming pace, there is an equally urgent need to be able to understand and quantify the depth and range of inequality so that effective action can be taken at every level in society. Local public health observatories have helped make visible the health inequalities within and between neighbourhoods and localities that have in the past remained invisible.

It is heartening to discover that many cities, regions and countries are actively establishing and expanding their own local health observatories. Although many successful local health observatories have been operating for decades on many continents, there has been little detailed guidance on what is needed to ensure success. This guide is the first of its kind that brings together knowledge and expertise across several continents to help those intending to develop and expand their own local health observatories. It builds on the considerable work that the WHO Kobe Centre has already developed. We have tried to produce a guide that is easy to use and packed with references to local resources and wisdom gleaned from international experiences of running an effective local or urban health observatory, including two case studies from very different parts of the world.

It is clear from our assessments that no two observatories are the same, each operating in different political, financial and stakeholder climates. Our aim has been to provide clarity on what principles and processes need to be observed to establish and sustain a robust health observatory to monitor, provide local evidence and support effective decision-making. Rather than provide a prescription for implementation we have focussed on offering a range of options, resources and questions that might need to be answered at each step.

Our discussions went well beyond the impact that a guide alone could have. We focussed on what further support might be needed by health observatories in the making. Strongest amongst these was to ensure that observatories in the future are sustainable and that they have a means of fostering and continuing mutual learning and support. This is the next challenge that we hope will be successful.

INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, inequalities in social and economic well-being have increased at unprecedented rates, particularly in urban settings, according to reports from national and international agencies *(1–5)*. Some estimates suggest that, depending on the world region, 50–80% of the world's population will live in cities by 2030 *(3)*. Latin America, at 79% urban, is currently one of the world's most urbanized regions. Social and economic determinants and their impacts on health and health inequalities need to be understood and quantified at both the level of the city as a whole and, crucially, at the level of the neighbourhood or small area. Health observatories have developed the expertise that local decision-makers need to target resources effectively in order to tackle the root causes of inequalities in health, both locally and city-wide. The analytical and knowledge outputs of local health observatories have become essential tools for local evidence-based decision-making, particularly in major urban areas.

The WHO Centre for Health Development (WHO Kobe Centre) in Kobe, Japan, has conducted research and developed tools to support such health observatories *(6, 7)*. The last decade has seen the successful development of a number of examples of well-established and emerging public health observatories *(8)* serving largely, but not exclusively, urban populations.

Although the successful creation of a local health observatory is ultimately dependent on the context in which it operates *(9)* it also needs to integrate a number of common public health and other functions and competencies. This guide draws together the learning and experiences of a broad range of local health observatories.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim is to provide a user-friendly guide for local government agencies in health and other sectors, academia, civil society organizations and individuals who are planning, developing or sustaining a public health observatory (PHO) designed to provide information and intelligence on local and urban populations. While excellent observatory-type organizations provide health intelligence at international or national levels, the focus of the guide is observatories that serve local – primarily urban – populations and their stakeholders.

In achieving this aim, the objectives are to:

- develop a globally relevant working definition of a local PHO;
- define the range of core and other functions of a local PHO, and the resources and competencies that would be required to fulfil such functions; and
- provide practical resources and case studies to illustrate how such functions might operate in practice.

Multiple methodologies were used to produce the guide. The members of the international Expert Reference Group (see Annex) provided valuable input on the basis of their experience, a scoping review was conducted of the literature on public health observatories and a selective e-survey of PHOs was carried out *(10)*.

ESTABLISHING A PUBLIC HEALTH OBSERVATORY SERVING LOCAL AND URBAN POPULATIONS

Earlier work commissioned by the WHO Kobe Centre defined an overall conceptual framework within which PHOs serving local urban populations should operate *(11)*. The framework, summarized in Figure 1, is not prescriptive but provides a useful prompt for the principles, functions and processes that a local health observatory needs to consider carefully. Essentially, every PHO should ask:

- What is our overall mission and strategy?
- What are our specific objectives?
- Do we have a clear governance framework?
- Do we have the right structures and processes in place?
- Do we have an effective strategy for data access and management?
- Are our knowledge and intelligence outputs tailored to local decision-makers and civil society leaders?

Furthermore, a "social determinants of health" approach *(12)* is regarded as fundamental to a PHO's understanding of, and responses to, public health problems and health inequity *(9)*. This is in recognition of the large body of evidence from around the world that demonstrates the effects of the broader determinants of health. The use of a "social determinants of health" approach is apparent, for instance, in health situation analysis reports by PHOs which take into account factors beyond the health sector.

FIGURE 1. A WORKING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF AN URBAN HEALTH OBSERVATORY