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# Healthy cities tackle the social determinants of inequities in health: a framework for action



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# Abstract

This report provides practical guidance for taking action to address health inequalities at the local level. It offers helpful explanations of key concepts and offers examples of how to go about making a case and deciding which interventions to use to tackle more effectively the social determinants of health and increase commitment to addressing the causes of inequalities. The framework for action supports whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches. The main evidence underpinning this publication can be found in the complementary report: *Addressing the social determinants of health: the urban dimension and the role of local government*.

## Keywords

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## Foreword

Translating scientific evidence and policy recommendations into action can be challenging, especially when the aim is to convince, engage and mobilize several sectors and diverse stakeholders. The evidence on the social determinants of health and understanding of the root causes of inequities is very strong, and the imperative for action is higher on political agendas than ever.

The rapidly growing body of scientific evidence in this field has generated more awareness and legitimacy but also urgency for action. The European Healthy Cities movement has a longstanding commitment to tackling health inequalities. However, experience has demonstrated the need for guidance, tools and frameworks that can help decision-makers address these issues systematically.

This publication was developed to support cities in their efforts to generate sustainable commitment and action to address the social determinants of health and health inequalities. Above all, this document is meant to be practical and adaptable to different local circumstances and realities.

I would like to express my gratitude to Anna Ritsatakis, principal author of this publication, and to all the members of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network and European national healthy cities networks, which provided helpful feedback throughout the drafting process. A special thanks is also due to Joan Devlin for her valuable input.

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# 1. Introduction – purpose of the framework

The WHO European Healthy Cities Network remains constant to its founding values of promoting equity in health, social justice, sustainable development and ethical governance. For cities participating in Phase V of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network, the overarching theme is that of health and equity in health in all local policies (1).

In joining Phase V, the cities in the WHO European Healthy Cities Network are aware of the need to implement the recommendations of the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health (2). Since so many countries in the WHO European Region are members of or linked in some way to the European Union (EU), the EU health strategy for 2008–2013 (3) and the communication from the European Commission on reducing inequalities in health (4) are also important.

Consequently, the mission for 2009–2013 is defined as follows:

- The mission of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network during Phase V is to ensure that:
  - social and economic development in cities promotes equity in health;
  - all city departments, and the private sector, acknowledge their responsibility and accountability for promoting greater equity in health; and

three core themes: (1) creating caring and supportive environments; (2) healthy living and (3) healthy urban environment and design.

An extensive report (6) has been prepared for the WHO European Healthy Cities Network that examines the implications for cities in the European Region of the evidence presented by the report on the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (2) and related work in countries. To complement the findings of that report, the WHO European Healthy Cities Network developed a framework for action in cities, highlighting possible points of intervention: how city governance and processes can more effectively tackle the social determinants of health and how capacity-building can ensure that these processes are sustainable.

The framework is intended as a resource document for the WHO European Healthy Cities Network, clarifying certain concepts and offering examples of actions cities might wish to try. These include tools and information available through the WHO European Healthy Cities Network or other WHO programmes and the expertise and experience of other cities. An attempt has been made to include examples from across the European Region. However, given the long history

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