





## Informative key messages

Green and open public spaces are crucial for enhancing the health and well-being of urban communities. They promote physical activity, mental wellness, social interactions, and community engagement while reducing air pollution and improving the overall quality of life.



Investment in public spaces, especially urban parks, can yield significant economic benefits by reducing healthcare costs. These spaces promote healthier lifestyles, lower stress levels, and improve air quality, ultimately resulting in better health, leading to financial savings and economic resilience.



Incorporating public spaces into urban planning strategies helps address spatial and environmental inequalities as well as health disparities. A well-planned network of public spaces ensures that all residents, regardless of their socioeconomic background, can benefit from recreational and green areas, which are vital for physical and mental health.



Public spaces play a vital role in fostering social cohesion and community engagement, which is essential for mental health. They provide a platform for social interactions, cultural events, and community activities, which enhance social bonds, reduce social isolation and improve mental well-being.



Designing public spaces that are multi-functional and inclusive is essential. Versatile public spaces that cater to different age groups and activities, such as playgrounds, open-air gyms, and relaxation areas, encourage active and healthy lifestyles and accommodate diverse community needs.





## Summary

Green and open public spaces are crucial in enhancing urban areas' and communities' health and well-being. Public spaces can catalyse physical activity, mental wellness, social interactions, and community engagement when well-planned and maintained. Additionally, they contribute to reducing air pollution and overall improvement in urban quality of life, yielding economic advantages and promoting ecological sustainability.

The global COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of public spaces regarding their availability and accessibility. As we move forward, urban planners and local governments must implement the lessons learned. With urbanisation expected to reach unprecedented levels in the coming decades and an anticipated increase in urban health challenges, it is essential to integrate health considerations into the planning and design of public spaces. This need is particularly pressing in a world facing changing climatic conditions that directly impact health.

This paper explores the intricate nexus through which public spaces can be harnessed to create healthier cities and communities. It targets urban planners and local and municipal governments, beginning with a brief introduction to the topic. The paper then outlines how different global agendas address public space and health, emphasising the synergistic relationship between these domains. It presents seven strategic approaches UN-Habitat has been adopting that positively affect health outcomes through public space interventions. Finally, the paper provides five key recommendations for implementing these strategies.



A busy public street in downtown Port-au-Prince, Haiti © Julius Mwelu/UN-Habitat



## Introduction

The state and quality of urban areas are closely connected to the health and well-being of a significant portion of the world's population. With over half of the global population currently living in urban areas, this number is expected to increase to 60% by 2030 and 70% by 2050. The World Cities Report 2022 offers insights into the future of urbanisation and its impact on health, emphasising the need for sustainable and health-conscious urban planning to accommodate the growing urban population (UN-Habitat, 2022).

Urban areas are not just places with high population density but also hubs of innovation, commerce, science, politics, and cultural exchange. The activities in these areas have a significant impact beyond their borders. Therefore, focusing on health and well-being in urban environments is crucial to advancing the global development agenda. This requires a coordinated effort from policymakers, urban planners, health experts, the scientific community, residents, and other stakeholders to utilise cities' potential to promote health and well-being.

Integrating health into urban and territorial planning is critical for creating healthy cities (UN-Habitat & World Health Organization, 2020). UN-Habitat, WHO, and various other organisations have highlighted the connection between health and urban planning, emphasising the prevention of diseases and creating health-promoting environments through effective urban policies, strategies, and designs. These multi-sectoral approaches improve air and water quality, foster safer and more active mobility, and establish better disease prevention frameworks, thereby enhancing the health and overall well-being of urban populations (Gough, 2017).

Urban health challenges are increasingly concerning in developed and developing countries (Perdue et al., 2003). For instance, cities lacking essential services and sanitation exhibit higher rates of communicable diseases (e.g., hepatitis A and E, cholera, dengue and malaria) and non-communicable diseases (e.g., respiratory infections, cancer). This incidence is often proportionally higher in cities than in rural areas (UN-Habitat & World Health Organization, 2020). In this context, public and green spaces emerge as potential solutions to address the consequences of rapid and unplanned urbanisation.

The Charter of Public Space defines public spaces as "all places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive" (Garau, 2015). According to UN-Habitat, public spaces are classified into three main categories: streets, open spaces, and public facilities. It is recommended that 45-50% of urban land use be allocated to streets and open public spaces, with 30-35% for streets and sidewalks and 15-20% for open public spaces (UN-Habitat, 2019).

### Public spaces and health in the global urban agendas

Public spaces have been recognised as essential in creating healthier cities according to various global agendas and their associated goals and targets. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underscores the role of public spaces in promoting health and well-being (United Nations, 2015). For example, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for action, urging cities to strive for inclusivity, resilience, and sustainability (United Nations, 2015). Through specific goals, they highlight the connection between public spaces, health, and sustainable urbanisation. SDG 3 aims to promote good health and well-being for all ages, with target 3.4 focusing on preventing premature deaths from non-communicable diseases, where urban environmental factors often play a significant role, as well as promoting mental health and well-being. On the other hand, SDG 11 emphasises providing public spaces through its target 11.7: "By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, especially for women and children, older persons, and persons with disabilities" (UN General Assembly, 2017). These public spaces mould our urban environments directly through their design, composition, and resulting qualities.

The New Urban Agenda (NUA) is essential for accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) because it focuses on the urban aspect of sustainable development (United Nations, 2017). It emphasises the significance of safe, inclusive, accessible, green, and quality public spaces and advocates for establishing healthy societies by ensuring access to high-quality public services and facilities. It calls upon national, regional, and local authorities to





consider the impact of urban environments and their composition on public health. Also, it urges them to engage with stakeholders to promote health benefits, economic progress, and environmental resilience.

### The enabling role of public spaces in urban health

Numerous scientific studies underpin the inclusion of health considerations in urban planning. One well-documented example is the significance of green public space in promoting social inclusivity, human health, and biodiversity (Gough, 2017). Health-based urban planning promotes increased physical activity and social capital, improved access to healthy food, and can address non-communicable diseases in cities, such as reduced crime levels, obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and depression (Grant, 2015; Mogo et al., 2019). Urban green spaces also play a vital role in reducing particulate matter concentration, improving air quality, and enhancing respiratory health (Junior et al., 2022).

Open public spaces provide opportunities for leisure, socialising, and physical activity, fostering healthy habits and reducing the incidence of diseases associated with sedentary or isolated lifestyles. A street network characterised by high connectivity and safety can promote active mobility and interaction among citizens, encouraging walking and cycling, which provides a daily dose of low-intensity exercise. Research indicates that active transportation can significantly contribute to public health by lowering the risk of chronic diseases and enhancing overall fitness (Sallis et al., 2016). Reduced reliance on motorised transportation also improves air quality. It lessens exposure to air pollutants, contributing to better respiratory health and reducing the burden of diseases like asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) (Nowak et al., 2006).

Beyond physical health benefits, public spaces significantly impact mental well-being and social interaction. Urban design that invites people to use streets for strolling, relaxing, and spending time outdoors enhances mental well-being and happiness. The presence of well-maintained, accessible public spaces can reduce stress and anxiety levels, providing a natural remedy for mental health issues (Ulrich et al., 1991). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of public spaces in regulating physical, mental, and social well-being became particularly evident due to the restrictions and measures that highlighted the need for accessible outdoor areas for safe social interaction and physical activity (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020).

The holistic benefits of public spaces are multifaceted and extend to various aspects of urban life. For instance, green spaces can serve as community hubs where people from diverse backgrounds come together, fostering social cohesion and inclusivity. These spaces can host community events, cultural activities, and social gatherings, enhancing the social fabric of urban areas and creating a sense of community belonging (Peters et al., 2010). Moreover, public spaces' strategic design and management can mitigate urban heat island effects, contributing to climate resilience and environmental sustainability. Vegetation in public spaces helps cool urban areas, reduce energy consumption, and improve overall urban micro-climates (Bowler et al., 2010). This enhances residents' comfort levels and supports biodiversity by providing habitats for various species, contributing to ecological health and balance.



Young people from the Ibura community in Recife, Brazil, present the model built as a result of the Public Spaces Design workshop held by UN-Habitat within the framework of the Pernambuco Cooperation project © UN-Habitat/ Renatto Mendonça



## Harnessing public spaces for healthier cities

To make the most of public spaces in the urban context, we have compiled a list of considerations that UN-Habitat's Global Public Space Programme previously leveraged to create healthier cities.

### We recognise public spaces as an integrated system for a comprehensive urban strategy

Rather than implementing isolated local interventions, an overarching strategy provides a robust framework for city-wide improvement of public spaces. Such a municipal strategy acknowledges that the distribution, quantity, quality, and accessibility of public spaces significantly influence residents' physical, mental, and social well-being. Research has shown that green and blue spaces are associated with improved mental health outcomes across diverse populations (White et al., 2021).

As outlined by UN-Habitat (2020), a comprehensive public space strategy ensures the provision, maintenance, and upgrading of diverse, enjoyable, clean, and inclusive public spaces throughout the city. This holistic approach can alleviate many spatial and environmental inequalities that drive health inequities in urban areas worldwide.

Cities have the flexibility to shape their vision and strategic approach to prioritise residents' health. For example, some cities may focus on the 'renaturation' of waterfronts, offering residents a chance to reconnect with nature and escape urban congestion. This renaturation process provides aesthetic and recreational benefits and contributes to biodiversity conservation and ecological restoration, enhancing the overall environmental quality of urban areas (Chiesura, 2004). Others may implement greening strategies in streets and public spaces to mitigate carbon emissions and air pollution. Urban greening can be critical in reducing the urban heat island effect, improving air quality, and providing shade and cooling, which are particularly important in climate change (Bowler et al., 2010).

Another example is the 'Active City' strategy, which can be a game-changer. This strategy involves introducing facilities for physical activity in public spaces to combat the prevalence of cardiovascular diseases. This strategy involves creating spaces for walking, cycling, and other forms of exercise, which can significantly enhance public health by encouraging more active lifestyles (Sallis et al., 2016). These facilities can also serve as social hubs that foster community interaction and engagement, further contributing to social well-being.



The Previous Mayor of Bogotá, Claudia Lopez, showing the strategic vision of the city to the former Executive Director of UN-Habitat © UN-Habitat/Hector Bayona

While the approaches may vary, they all share a common goal: to address health disparities. These strategies are designed to ensure that every citizen, regardless of socioeconomic background or location, can reap the benefits of public spaces.

### We assess the quality of public spaces using a people-centred approach

For cities and their governments to make informed decisions and act, they need city-wide georeferenced data on public spaces at a detailed level. However, this data collection and analysis cannot be done by a single entity alone. It is crucial to involve residents, communities, and other stakeholders in the process, making it participatory and inclusive.

Creating a comprehensive inventory and conducting a collective assessment of public spaces throughout the city can help understand the distribution, accessibility, and condition (UN-Habitat, 2020). This assessment provides valuable information on the attractiveness, quality, inclusivity, safety, and use of public spaces from various user perspectives. This information offers a complete picture of the local context when combined with health data. This integrated approach identifies spatial disparities, reveals the specific needs of different groups, and aids authorities in making informed decisions.



A people-centred approach to evaluating public spaces also helps to contextualise urban health indicators within cities. These indicators provide policymakers with valuable data for local urban agendas. It is essential to combine urban and health data to obtain a complete understanding. A collaborative systems-thinking approach is also necessary to integrate health into urban planning, addressing complex policy and decision-making contexts effectively (Pineo, Zimmermann, & Davies, 2020). This comprehensive approach ensures that health considerations are thoroughly incorporated into urban policies, enhancing the overall well-being of urban populations.



Young girls collecting data and evaluating the quality of public spaces in South Africa © UN-Habitat/Her City

Creating healthy public spaces involves integrating city inventory and public space assessment with community engagement. This approach focuses on identifying the general and specific needs and aspirations of diverse groups, such as children, youth, women, older persons, and persons with disabilities, to reflect these in the design, development, management, and use of public spaces. Community engagement throughout the decision-making process supports rights and citizenship, fostering a sense of ownership over public policies and the immediate living environment. This inclusive approach is crucial for addressing urban health challenges and enhancing health outcomes in the community.

## We leverage streets as vehicle for urban health

Public spaces encompass various elements, including parks, sidewalks, playgrounds, marketplaces, and streets. Streets, in particular, come in many forms, each serving a unique function and purpose. They connect different spaces within a city and, when carefully designed, ensure accessibility and mobility. Streets are vital conduits, facilitating access to essential amenities such as

educational institutions, healthcare facilities, recreational areas, and workplaces. Properly designed streets that prioritise walkability can foster physical activity, which in turn helps reduce the prevalence of cardiovascular diseases and conditions like diabetes (Sallis et al., 2016).

By providing safe and pedestrian-friendly streets and sufficient emission-free public transportation options, we can reduce our communities' dependence on automobiles. This shift in transportation habits not only curbs air pollution but also improves respiratory health (Frumkin, 2002). Emission-free transportation options, such as cycling lanes and electric public transit, play a critical role in reducing the urban carbon footprint and mitigating climate change impacts. This is a powerful reminder of the impact we can make through sustainable urban planning.

Moreover, well-planned streets in densely populated neighbourhoods, coupled with appropriate speed limits, can prevent injuries and accidents. Strategic street design and thoughtful traffic management can transform streets into secure spaces that enhance urban dwellers' overall quality of life and well-being (WHO, 2013). Traffic calming measures, such as speed bumps, pedestrian zones, and roundabouts, can significantly reduce the incidence of traffic-related accidents and fatalities (Elvik, 2001).



Community members doing physical exercises in Nairobi street during placemaking week, Kenya © UN-Habitat

Streets are not just thoroughfares, they are social spaces that foster community interaction and cohesion. By incorporating elements such as benches, street art, and green spaces, streets can become vibrant public spaces that encourage socialisation and community engagement (Gehl, 2011). These interactions contribute to mental well-being and build a sense of community, which is essential for a cohesive urban environment. This sense of belonging is a testament to the power of well-designed streets in shaping our urban experience.



Furthermore, the role of streets in urban health is not limited to physical health alone. Well-lit, clean, and aesthetically pleasing streets can enhance residents' mental health by providing safe and attractive environments for daily activities.

### **We acknowledge public spaces as a podium for livelihood and well-being opportunities**

Public spaces hold significant potential as income-generating areas, particularly for those facing economic challenges. Beyond their recreational and ecological benefits, public spaces support livelihoods by enabling vendors to sell their produce and other goods. Cities and local governments must acknowledge and support these livelihoods, especially in rapidly urbanising and resource-limited cities where a large part of the population earns a daily wage in the informal sector. Often undervalued in terms of their economic importance, these spaces can offer a wide array of income-generating opportunities, which serve as a financial base for a healthier life. Research by Wilson and Xiao (2023) highlights that investment in urban parks can yield significant health benefits, translating to economic savings in healthcare costs.



Al-Attaba Market in Cairo, Egypt © Khaled Desouki

Public spaces for local economic activities, such as fresh food stalls, which contribute positively to a varied and healthy diet, art and crafts markets, and cultural events featuring local talents, bolster the informal economy. These activities can alleviate pressures by providing informal opportunities and accessible resources within communities. This is particularly crucial as limited financial means often cause significant stress in people's lives. Financial worries are strongly associated with psychological distress, impacting mental health (Ryu & Fan, 2022). This stress can lead to anxiety, depression, and various other mental health challenges, all of which are prevalent urban health issues.

However, in some cities, legal constraints and policies impede certain groups' use of these spaces, limiting their ability to generate income. These restrictive measures inadvertently perpetuate inequality, impact mental and physical well-being, and hinder social and economic mobility for already marginalised communities. To address this issue, policies should recognise public spaces as income generators and be shaped by by-laws that facilitate the engagement of individuals. Kellett and Tittle (2000) found that inclusive urban policies that support informal economic activities can significantly enhance the livelihoods of marginalised populations. The World Bank (2015) also emphasises that integrating informal economic activities into urban planning can contribute to more resilient and inclusive urban economies.

### **We embrace the activation of public spaces into vibrant hubs**

It is not enough to create public spaces; it is equally important to maintain them and introduce programming and various activities and events to bring life to the space and make it enjoyable for the people living there. These activities and events can positively impact overall well-being and contribute to better health. Social and cultural events such as street festivals, health fairs, carnivals, pride celebrations, and sports events can encourage active lifestyles, promote community engagement, foster a sense of belonging, and provide opportunities for relaxation (Gehl, 2011).



Canals in Amsterdam used as public gathering to celebrate Kings' Day, Netherlands © Kounkuey Design Initiative

Activities can facilitate interactions among diverse communities, fostering leisure and intercultural exchanges on a more personal level. Consequently, mental well-being, social cohesion, and inclusion are promoted while diminishing social isolation and conflicts. For example, community gardening projects have effectively promoted urban health and social cohesion by



encouraging residents to work together, share resources, and build stronger community ties (Wakefield et al., 2007). These initiatives underscore the importance of creating vibrant public spaces that are physically active, socially engaging, and inclusive, ensuring the overall health and well-being of urban populations.



Community garden in a public space in the informal settlement of Kibera, Kenya © Kounkuey Design Initiative

Research supports the benefits of vibrant public spaces. For instance, Whyte (1980) highlighted the significance of lively public spaces in encouraging social interaction and enhancing urban safety. Similarly, Montgomery (2013) highlighted that well-activated public spaces contribute to happier, healthier, and more connected communities. Moreover, studies have shown that social events in public spaces can reduce stress and improve mental health by providing opportunities for social interaction and community engagement (Sullivan, Kuo, & Depooter, 2004).

### We use health data to better design active and attractive public spaces

Cities must recognise their public spaces' potential to promote positive behavioural changes and harness this potential for more active and healthier lifestyles through thoughtful urban design and planning. Why should residents consider walking when no pedestrian path is available, going for a bike ride without a bicycle lane, or playing Frisbee where there is no greenfield? Providing an inviting and diverse range of amenities from the outset can encourage residents to become more active (Active Design Guidelines, 2010).

This transformation should be a collaborative effort between city governments and the communities they serve to ensure inclusive and innovative design. One avenue a city can explore is breathing new life into underutilised areas, such as converting spaces beneath highways or bridges into vibrant skate or climbing parks.

By repurposing neglected spaces, cities can optimise urban environments, transforming them into hubs for active recreation and creative expression (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995).



From a neglected stream, to a paved highway to bringing the river back to life in Cheonggyecheon © hoteldephil

However, public spaces need to be versatile platforms catering to different population groups' needs and interests. They should allow everyone, regardless of age, gender, and abilities, to participate in activities and experience the benefits of a more active lifestyle. This diversity needs to be reflected in the design of spaces that promote relaxation, meditation, and active movement. Cities can further diversify their public space designs by incorporating areas tailored to slow mobility, creating serene havens, and other areas dedicated to rapid motion, promoting vibrant energy (Gehl, 2010).



Meditation session on the Highline public space in New York City, USA © Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Center

Outfitting public spaces with benches, tables, and insulated shelters also ensures a comfortable and welcoming environment. Creating multifunctional public spaces can also positively contribute to social cohesion,



a sense of community, and intergenerational dialogue. For instance, combining playgrounds for children with open-air gyms for the elderly ensures accessibility for all generations and fosters inclusivity. This way, cities create opportunities for individuals or groups who previously may have rarely crossed paths to interact, contributing to social well-being (Chiesura, 2004).

Health data plays a critical role in informing the design of public spaces. Understanding the health profile of a city allows urban planners and designers to design the right interventions that directly address prevalent health challenges. For instance, if data indicates a high obesity rate in a city, the design of public spaces can prioritise active mobility. This can include the development of extensive networks of pedestrian paths, cycling lanes, and outdoor exercise facilities, all of which encourage physical activity and help reduce obesity rates. Research has shown that urban environments that promote active transportation and provide accessible recreational spaces can encourage physical activity and combat obesity (Sallis et al., 2016).



Open Air Gym at the Beachside, La Corniche, Dakar © Flickr/dlorenz69

Similarly, if a city's health profile reveals high levels of social anxiety among residents, public spaces can be designed with mental wellness in mind. This could involve creating serene environments that facilitate relaxation and meditation, such as quiet gardens, green spaces with ample seating, and areas dedicated to mindfulness practices.

If a city's health data indicates a high prevalence of malaria, public spaces can be designed to minimise the risk of mosquito breeding. This can be achieved by ensuring proper drainage systems to prevent stagnant water accumulation, incorporating water features that are appropriately maintained to avoid becoming mosquito habitats and planting mosquito-repellent vegetation. Public education campaigns integrated into these spaces

can raise awareness about preventive measures and the importance of maintaining a clean environment (Walker, 2002).

For cities with a high incidence of cardiovascular disease, public spaces can be designed to encourage physical activity. This can involve creating walking trails, jogging paths, and exercise stations that are easily accessible to all residents. Integrating green spaces that offer shade and aesthetic beauty can motivate people to spend more time outdoors and engage in physical activities, which are crucial for maintaining heart health (Lee & Maheswaran, 2011).

In areas where respiratory diseases are prevalent, urban design can focus on improving air quality by strategically placing green spaces and vegetation. Trees and plants act as natural air filters, reducing pollutants and improving air quality. Designing public spaces that promote low-emission activities, such as walking and cycling, can further reduce air pollution. Additionally, creating buffer zones with greenery around industrial areas and major roads can protect residential areas from harmful emissions (Nowak et al., 2006).

### **We develop management and maintenance frameworks to keep public spaces in good quality**

The continuous maintenance of public spaces is essential for enhancing their attractiveness and maintaining the community's overall well-being and satisfaction. The attractiveness and size of public open spaces are crucial factors in encouraging walking and physical activity among urban residents (Giles-Corti et al., 2005). Without adequate and long-term management and maintenance, public spaces lose their health-promoting qualities, reducing their effectiveness in fostering community health and well-being.



Community members maintaining and upgrading the Jardín Primavera in Barrios Altos © Eleazar Cuadros - ArchivoCCC

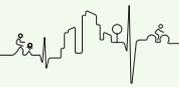


Place-keeping refers to the strategies employed to preserve and maintain a space's identity and quality over time. It involves actively safeguarding public space's cultural, social, and environmental aspects to enhance its liveability (Dempsey & Burton, 2012), thereby ensuring its contribution to positive health outcomes. Efficient management and maintenance planning include allocating maintenance funds, potentially through participatory budgeting, and addressing critical concerns such as litter, security, and preventing accidents and injuries. Participatory approaches to budgeting and decision-making can ensure that the needs and preferences of residents are considered, leading to more relevant and effective interventions (Foster & Iaione, 2016).

Cities should establish effective mechanisms for maintaining cleanliness and involve communities in a participatory manner. Collaborative efforts between city authorities and local residents are essential to ensure that public spaces are well-kept and meet the community's needs in the long run. When people take ownership of their shared spaces, they are more likely to respect and protect them, reducing vandalism and ensuring that public spaces remain safe, clean, and enjoyable (Carmona et al., 2008).



Community members transforming San Nicolas de los Garza public space, Mexico © UN-Habitat Mexico



# Recommendations

In order to fully utilise the potential of public spaces in promoting urban health and well-being, it is important to implement strategic approaches that cater to the diverse needs of urban populations. These recommendations are meant to guide urban planners, policymakers, and community stakeholders in creating and maintaining public spaces that contribute to healthier, more inclusive, and sustainable urban environments. By focusing on evidence-based practices, engaging multiple sectors, employing innovative financial mechanisms, allowing for flexibility in design, and promoting community

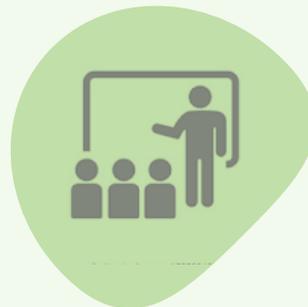
engagement, cities can transform their public spaces into vital assets that support physical activity, mental wellness, social interactions, and environmental sustainability.

Below are **five key recommendations** for using public spaces as entry points to creating healthier cities and communities. The following section explains these recommendations in further detail.

## Anchoring health and well-being in local urban policies



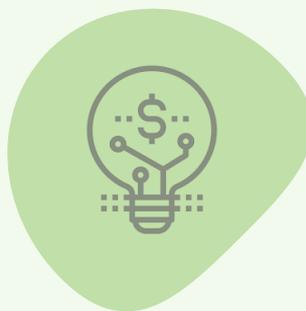
## Building capacities of urban planners and decision-makers



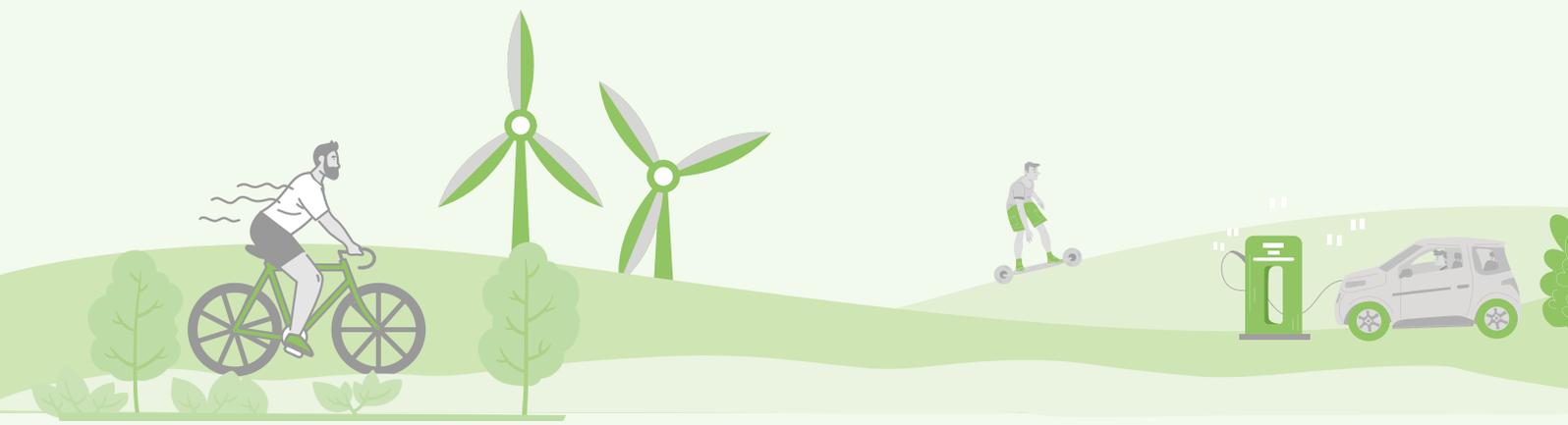
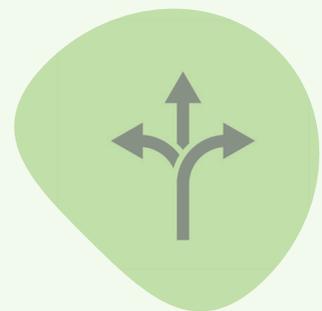
## Strengthening evidence-based approaches through multi-sectoral collaboration



## Encourage innovative financial mechanisms



## Introducing flexibility and combinations of functions





## 1

## Anchoring health and well-being in local urban policies

Effective collaboration among different sectors and professionals is essential to achieve better urban health. This includes urban planners, designers, health experts, and policymakers working together to implement a comprehensive urban health agenda. Collaborative partnerships in cities are crucial for successfully implementing health-promoting urban policies (Lipp et al., 2003). The Health in All Policies framework highlights the importance of integrating health considerations into all areas of policymaking (World Health Organization, 2013). Therefore, urban policies must prioritise health considerations to facilitate this collaboration.

Moreover, by embedding urban health in urban policies, such as developing a well-coordinated city strategy, we can ensure that every city government, during its limited term, prioritises urban health in the long term. An example of a successful health-promoting urban policy is Bogotá's Ciclovía, which has transitioned from an urban experiment to an international best practice for promoting active lifestyles (Montero, 2017).

### Case Study: Bogotá's Ciclovía

Bogotá's Ciclovía began in 1974 as a sizeable militant demonstration protesting the dominance of cars in public spaces in the Colombian capital. Over time, it has become a vital element of the city's urban policy for leisure and improving the quality of life of its inhabitants. Today, Ciclovía is managed and organised by the Department of Leisure and Sports of the Bogotá City Hall, involving numerous public actors in health, events, youth, transport, and mobility. The city leverages this dedicated public space to host various recreational and sports activities, such as gym sessions and theatre performances, to attract a broader spectrum of participants and foster social cohesion. Additionally, Ciclovía provides a platform for information dissemination and awareness-raising events on topics like civic culture and public health issues. With significant political, financial, and administrative support, the event benefits from an annual budget of 1.4 million euros, ensuring proper logistics and organisation. This includes traffic closures with barriers and signage, supervision and security by stewards, and the rollout of various activities. Bogotá's Ciclovía demonstrates how an urban policy centred on a recreational event can effectively promote active lifestyles, social inclusivity, and overall urban health, offering valuable lessons for other cities worldwide.



Cyclists enjoying the Ciclovía in Bogotá, Colombia © Colprensa



## 2 Building capacities of urban planners and decision-makers on how to integrate urban health and well-being into public space

Urban planners and decision-makers shape urban environments and public spaces all around us. This directly impacts our daily lives and health by determining access to services and environmental quality. Therefore, they must acknowledge their power and responsibility and actively expand their knowledge on pathways for urban health.

Building capacities in integrating urban health into public space involves understanding how design and spatial interventions promote health in urban environments and implementing a broad range of strategies. To achieve these strategies, city governments and urban planners should invest in specialised training programs and workshops focusing on health-promoting design principles and spatial interventions. They should engage in continuous professional development by participating in courses, urban health conferences, and online learning platforms to stay updated on the latest research and practices. Fostering partnerships with academic institutions, health organisations, and community groups can provide valuable insights and resources. Additionally, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and knowledge exchange is crucial for developing and implementing effective urban health strategies.

### Case Study: Sustainable Micro-gardens to Address Food Insecurity, Gayaza Parish, Uganda

This initiative illustrates capacity-building among urban planners and decision-makers to integrate urban health and well-being into public spaces through sustainable micro-gardens. By tackling food insecurity, this project not only enhances nutrition but also fosters community resilience and environmental sustainability. Agriculture for Health and Wealth, a local non-state actor, launched this initiative by establishing a model demonstration farm and conducting extensive community consultations and training sessions. Urban planners and decision-makers facilitated the mobilisation of local communities and provided learning opportunities on contemporary urban agriculture practices. This approach not only boosts food production in low-income households but also educates residents on sustainable farming techniques and the reduction of agrochemical misuse. The project's expansion phase included the institutionalisation of training programmes, the development of a mobile application for disseminating agricultural information, and the engagement of political and private sector leaders to garner wider support and recognition. By developing capacities in urban micro-gardening, encompassing skills development, farm management, and educational outreach, the initiative demonstrates a holistic approach to integrating health and well-being into public spaces. It underscores the importance of local governance and community engagement in promoting sustainable urban development practices that enhance both food security and environmental quality.





## 3

### Strengthening evidence-based approaches through multi-actor and multi-sector collaboration

Establishing a baseline using existing sources' health data and conducting additional surveys is essential to address urban health issues through public spaces effectively. This helps in understanding spatial disparities, accessibility, and the quality of public spaces. In order to comprehensively assess public spaces, insights and expertise from professionals across various disciplines (urban planning, public health, sociology, environmental science and sociology, etc) need to be incorporated right from the beginning.

It is also important to consider the needs and preferences of residents when developing urban health policies and planning interventions. This helps promote community co-ownership, build institutional trust, and ensure meaningful engagement within the local urban agenda. This evidence-based approach, involving multiple sectors, provides decision-makers with a solid foundation for targeted public space improvement.

#### Case Study: Using Neighbourhood Spatial Liveability Assessments to support evidence-based urban health, Tasmania and New South Wales, Victoria, Australia.

The "Neighbourhood Spatial Liveability Assessments" initiative in Australia illustrates the critical role of data and evidence in planning cities that enhance urban health and well-being. With Australia's urban areas experiencing rapid population growth, challenges such as housing affordability and sedentary lifestyles are increasingly prevalent. These assessments are crucial in comprehending and addressing regional liveability issues, equipping urban planners with necessary skills to integrate health considerations into strategic planning. Key outcomes include the creation of colour-coded maps depicting social determinants as liveability indicators, and aiding communication with government officials and communities alike. These maps facilitate evidence-driven decision-making and bolster engagement in planning processes. Collaborative efforts among local governments, health planners, and state agencies such as the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services have been pivotal in implementing these assessments across Victoria, Tasmania, and New South Wales. By aligning with sustainable development goals and informing council plans, these assessments assess the health impacts of planning decisions including public spaces, supporting evidence-based urban health policies. This initiative underscores the significance of local context and partnerships in advancing urban health agendas, offering a blueprint for integrating health considerations into public space planning beyond major cities.





## 4

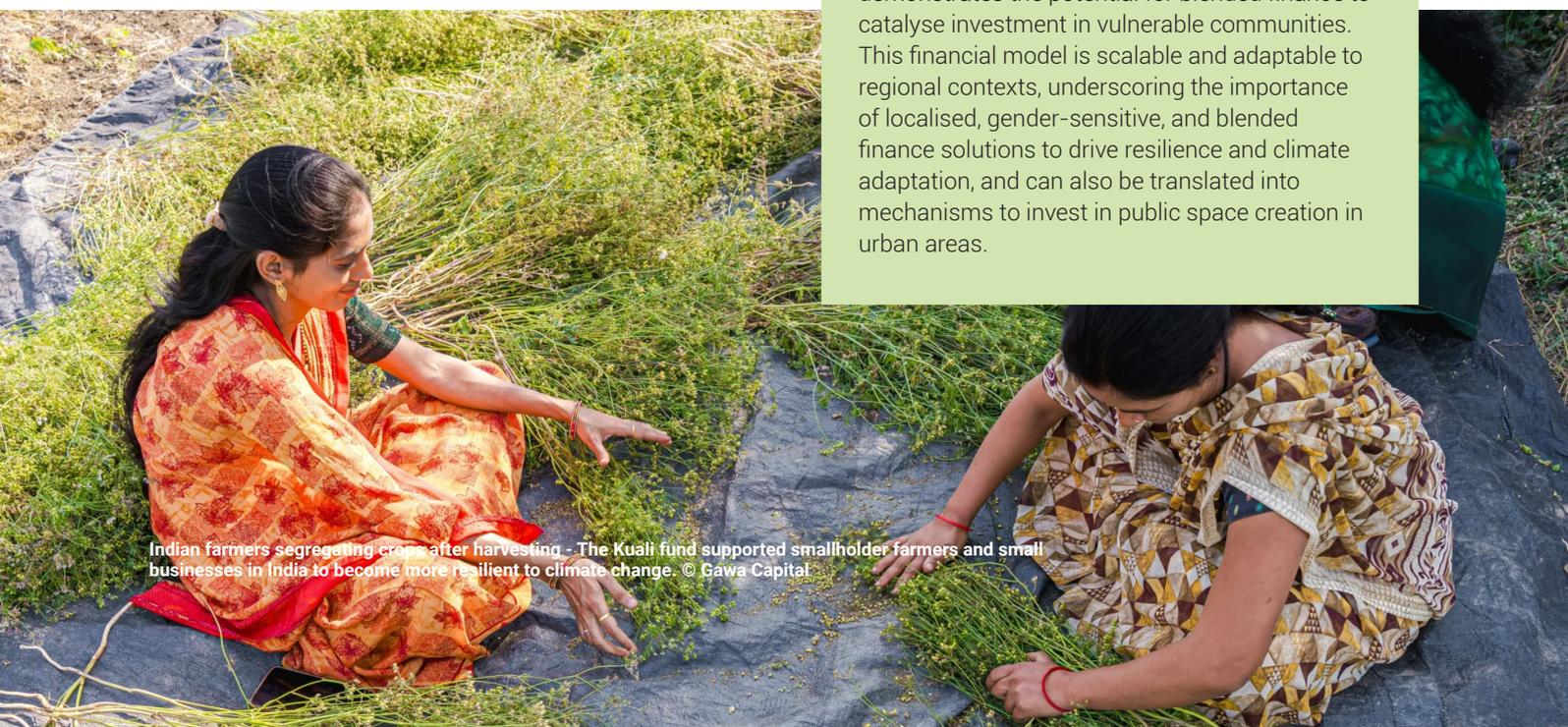
## Encourage innovative financial mechanisms for public spaces creation and maintenance

Encouraging innovative financial mechanisms for the creation and maintenance of public spaces is crucial for urban development and community wellbeing. The strategic reallocation of financial resources to support public spaces not only saves healthcare expenses but also enriches community life. Public green spaces yield numerous health benefits, including increased exercise, reduced stress, improved wellbeing, and reduced exposure to air pollution. These benefits can lead to significant reductions in healthcare costs, presenting a compelling financial argument for investing in public spaces.

Local authorities should consider various approaches to fund these initiatives. They can allocate a portion of the annual municipal budget specifically for the creation and maintenance of public spaces. This proactive allocation ensures that these areas are not only developed but also well-maintained over the years. Local businesses and corporations can be encouraged to invest in public spaces through sponsorship opportunities or public-private partnerships, which may include direct funding, in-kind contributions, or maintenance contracts. Community-based financing mechanisms such as crowdfunding or neighbourhood associations dedicated to raising funds for local public spaces can enhance community engagement and ensure ongoing local support. Additionally, utilising government grants and subsidies designed to foster urban development and public health can unlock additional funding streams. By diversifying financial strategies for funding public spaces, cities can create sustainable environments that foster healthier communities and generate long-term economic benefits.

### Case Study: Blended finance for climate resilience: The Kualu Fund's Model for Supporting Smallholder Farmers

The Kualu Fund is a blended finance initiative, launched in November 2024 by the GAWA Capital. Its main purpose is to invest in both debt and equity within financial institutions and climate tech companies. Its primary focus is to support smallholder farmers, who play a critical role in global food security but are highly vulnerable to climate change. The fund aims to create social impact while generating financial returns for investors, and therefore, enhance the private and public collaboration in the implementation of climate resilience methods. GAWA Capital's approach involves €213 million in private investments, along with €37 million set aside to cover potential losses, helping protect investors if things do not go as planned. This makes the fund less risky and more appealing to investors. The Kualu Fund focuses on three main goals: 1) reducing CO2 emissions by seven million tons through nature-based solutions; 2) helping businesses change their models to better adapt to climate change; and 3) making sure local communities are involved in designing and shaping the projects. GAWA's prior success with initiatives like the Huruma Fund, which benefitted nearly 500,000 smallholder farmers, demonstrates the potential for blended finance to catalyse investment in vulnerable communities. This financial model is scalable and adaptable to regional contexts, underscoring the importance of localised, gender-sensitive, and blended finance solutions to drive resilience and climate adaptation, and can also be translated into mechanisms to invest in public space creation in urban areas.



Indian farmers segregating crops after harvesting - The Kualu fund supported smallholder farmers and small businesses in India to become more resilient to climate change. © Gawa Capital



## 5

## Introducing flexibility and combinations of functions to public spaces

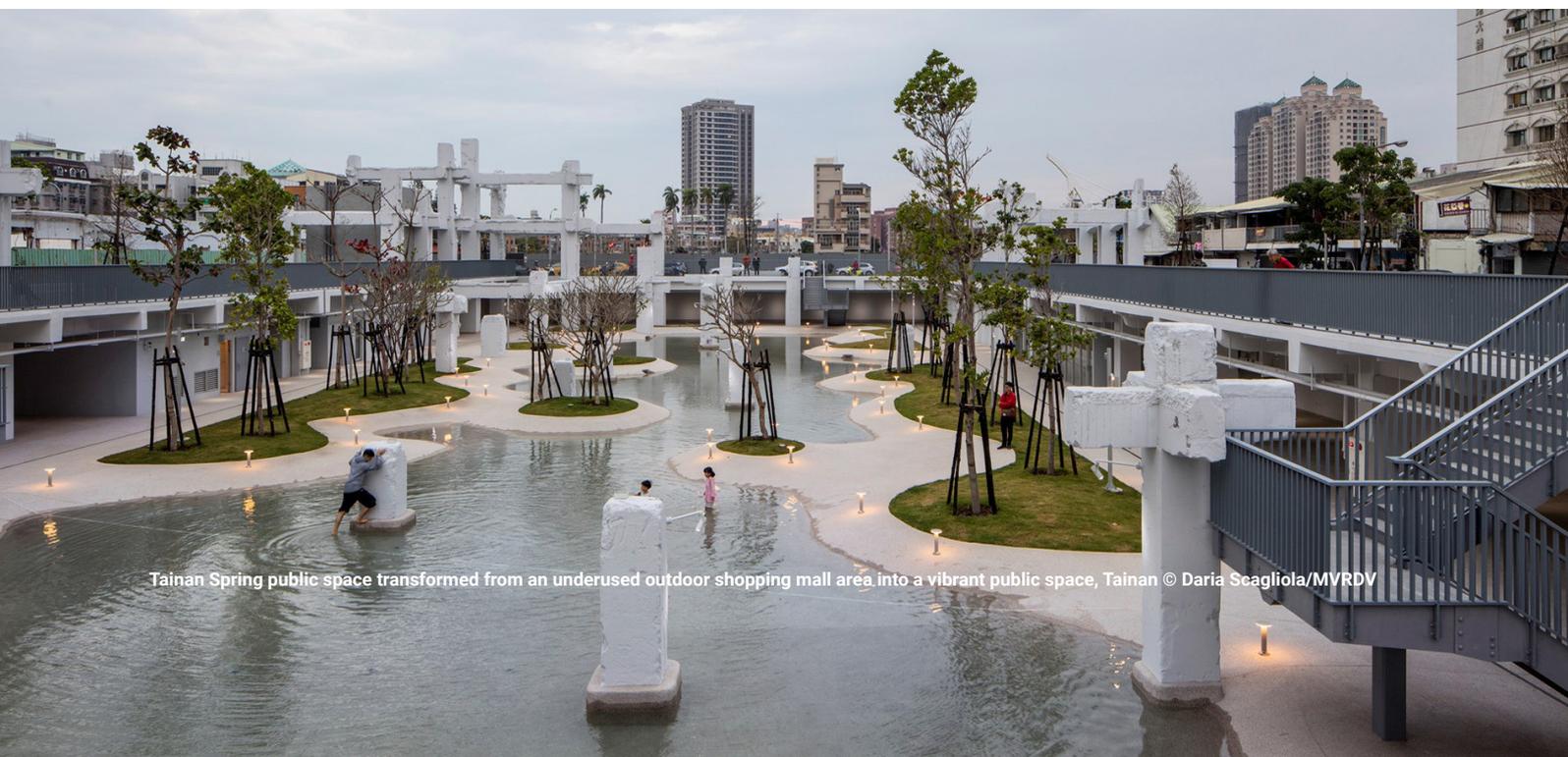
It is important to prioritise multi-purpose and multi-functional designs for public spaces. This approach is efficient and cost-effective as it caters to different purposes. Flexible public spaces can host various events and activities, from vibrant street festivals to sports and health fairs. These activities promote active lifestyles, encourage meaningful interactions among communities, and strengthen a strong sense of community identity and belonging.

Combining functions in public spaces can significantly enhance their utility and effectiveness. A great example is the Watersquare Bentemplein in Rotterdam, which serves as both a basketball court and temporary stormwater storage, integrating recreational and climate resilience purposes (De Urbanisten, 2023). By incorporating multiple uses, such spaces maximise benefits for urban residents, supporting physical activity, fostering social interactions, and addressing environmental challenges.

Other examples include well-designed urban parks or green roofs, which improve air quality, reduce indoor and outdoor air temperatures, increase biodiversity, allow for local food production, and serve as recreational community spaces. These examples highlight the importance of promoting diverse spaces and creating versatile, multi-functional environments. This approach addresses various social needs, fosters inclusivity, and maximises the use of the limited available city space, ultimately enhancing the quality of urban life.

### Case Study: Tainan Spring: Transforming disused spaces into climate-resilient public havens

“Tainan Spring” is a public space project based on the reuse of the structure of an old shopping centre that had fallen into disuse. The mall's underground parking area has been converted into a sunken public plaza, featuring an urban pool, and lush local plants, and encircled by a shaded arcade that provides shaded areas. The plaza has been designed for year-round use: during the rainy season, the plaza serves as a reservoir in case of heavy rainfall, and during the dry season, as a climatic refuge, giving the city a public space to cool off and take refuge from the heat. The square also serves as a meeting place, has areas with playgrounds for children, and can act as a stage for performances. The project is complemented by the renovation of Ha'ian Road, reducing vehicle traffic, introducing local vegetation, and promoting urban art installations. Through this project, the city of Tainan has gained an open space, in an already congested city.



Tainan Spring public space transformed from an underused outdoor shopping mall area into a vibrant public space, Tainan © Daria Scagliola/MVRDV



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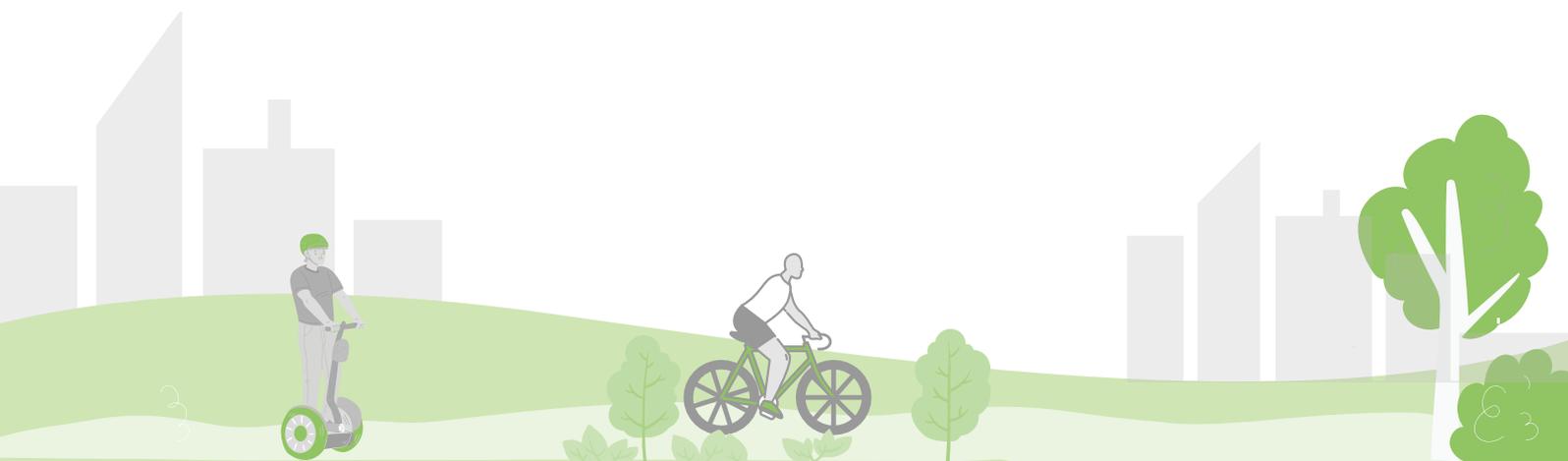
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