

Briefing note:

Reducing Health-Harming Commercial Determinants in Cities: Policy Actions for Healthier Urban Environments

Audience: City/Municipal Governments, Provincial Health Offices, Health inspectors, Market Authorities, Urban Planning Agencies, Civil Society Organizations

Date: July 2026

Purpose

This briefing note outlines practical actions that city governments can take to reduce health-harming commercial determinants and create urban environments that promote health, sustainability, and equity. It draws on the principles illustrated in the healthy market and healthy public-space concepts, emphasizing the need to shape environments that make healthy choices easier while limiting exposure to products and practices that contribute to noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), injuries, environmental degradation, and health inequities.



Background

Cities are increasingly recognized as key settings for preventing NCDs, improving mental well-being, reducing injuries, and addressing climate and environmental risks. However, commercial practices often promote products and services that adversely affect health, including:

- Tobacco and nicotine products
- Alcohol products
- Ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages
- Fossil-fuel-dependent transport systems
- High-emission urban development models
- Misleading marketing practices targeting children and vulnerable populations

These commercial influences can contribute to:

- Air pollution
- Road traffic injuries and deaths
- Physical inactivity
- Obesity and diet-related diseases
- Cardiovascular diseases
- Respiratory illnesses
- Mental health impacts
- Environmental degradation

Cities have significant authority through urban planning, licensing, procurement, taxation, advertising regulation, transport policies, and public-space management to mitigate these harms.

Strategic Objective

To create health-promoting urban environments where commercial activities support, rather than undermine, population health, environmental sustainability, and social well-being.

Recommended Policy Actions

Action	Expected outcomes
1. Create Healthy Public Spaces Cities/Municipalities can take following action: • Establish smoke-free and nicotine-free public spaces. • Restrict advertising of tobacco, alcohol, gambling, and unhealthy foods in public areas. • Ensure public parks, squares, and recreational facilities prioritize health-promoting activities. • Expand green spaces and urban tree coverage. • Strengthen waste-management and anti-littering measures.	Expected outcomes: • Reduced exposure to unhealthy products. • Improved air quality. • Increased physical activity. • Enhanced mental well-being.
2. Promote Healthy Mobility and Safe Transport Cities/Municipalities can take following action: • Introduce low-speed urban zones (e.g., 30 km/h in residential and school zones). • Expand protected walking and cycling infrastructure. • Invest in affordable, accessible public transport. • Accelerate transition to low-emission and electric public transport fleets. • Prioritize pedestrian-friendly urban design.	Expected outcomes: • Reduced road traffic injuries. • Lower transport-related emissions. • Increased active mobility. • Improved cardiovascular health.
3. Reduce Ambient Air Pollution Cities/Municipalities can take following action: • Tighten emissions standards for urban transport fleets. • Establish low-emission zones. • Reduce dependence on fossil-fuel-powered transport. • Strengthen monitoring of air quality. • Integrate environmental and health impact assessments into urban development decisions.	Expected outcomes: • Reduced respiratory and cardiovascular disease. • Improved quality of life. • Lower healthcare costs.

Action	Expected outcomes
4. Promote Healthy Food Environments Cities/Municipalities can take following action: • Improve access to affordable fresh foods through markets and local food systems. • Restrict unhealthy food marketing, particularly around schools. • Support healthy public procurement policies. • Introduce clear nutrition standards for public facilities. • Encourage local production and sustainable food systems.	Expected outcomes: • Improved dietary quality. • Reduced obesity and diet-related diseases. • Enhanced food security.
5. Strengthen Governance of Commercial Determinants Cities/Municipalities can take following action: • Establish transparent policies to manage conflicts of interest. • Protect public-health policymaking from undue commercial influence. • Engage communities in decision-making processes. • Incorporate health impact assessments into urban planning. • Develop city-wide Healthy City action plans with measurable targets.	Expected outcomes: • Greater public trust. • More equitable policymaking. • Sustainable health gains.

Key Enablers

Successful implementation requires:

- Strong political leadership.
- Cross-sector collaboration.
- Community participation.
- Public-health expertise in urban planning.
- Monitoring and accountability mechanisms.
- Sustainable financing.

Suggested Indicators

Cities may monitor:

- Air quality levels (PM2.5, PM10, NO₂)
- Walking and cycling rates
- Public transport use
- Road traffic injuries and fatalities
- Access to healthy food outlets
- Advertising exposure to unhealthy products
- Green-space accessibility
- NCD risk factors among residents

Conclusion

Healthier cities require more than individual behavior change. Urban environments must be intentionally designed to reduce exposure to health-harming commercial determinants while promoting active living, healthy diets, clean air, safe mobility, and social well-being. City governments have powerful tools to create urban systems that prioritize people, health, and sustainability.

For collaboration and inquiries:

Dr Suvajee Good,

Regional Advisor and Head
Social Determinants of Health and Health Promotion Unit,
World Health Organization Regional Office for South-East Asia
goods@who.int

Disclaimer: This briefing note is a technical draft informed by WHO public health principles and is not an official WHO publication or policy document.