

Did you know?

The landscape of global public health is shifting from a centralized, top-down approach to one that recognizes the city as the primary laboratory for well-being. True health is not merely the absence of infirmity; it is a product of the physical, social, and economic environments we inhabit.

As rapid urbanization accelerates, cities face unprecedented challenges—unsustainable resource consumption, the rise of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and the urgent need for climate resilience. Solving these complex issues requires more than municipal policy; it demands the active, conscious participation of every resident. Changing individual health behavior is ultimately a personal commitment that requires genuine awareness to be sustainable. When local governments design environments that support these choices—providing accessible exercise facilities and safe public spaces—they empower their citizens to take charge of their own destinies.

Today, we explore how two distinct cities, **Jaffna in Sri Lanka** and **Yasothon in Thailand**, are utilizing community engagement to redefine urban health.

Case Study: Jaffna, Sri Lanka



A boy cycles through the streets of Puthukkudiyiruppu, a village to the east of Jaffna that is slowly recovering from the heavy impact of the recent war. Source: Hiranya Malwatta

Tackling NCDs through Lifestyle Transformation

In the historical city of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, the public health challenge is urgent. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer, account for nearly 50% of reported deaths in government hospitals. Rapid urbanization and a transition in dietary patterns have increased the population's exposure to behavioral risk factors, including high rates of physical inactivity—identified as a major risk in over 52% of screened adults over 35.

Jaffna’s response has been a comprehensive development plan that integrates primary health care (PHC) with deep-rooted community participation. With technical and financial support from WHO and UNICEF, the city has transformed health from a medical task into a "whole-of-society" movement. To combat physical inactivity, the city launched the **"Jaffna as Cycle Icon"** initiative. This is not merely a promotion of a hobby; it is a structural intervention involving the Police, Road Development Authority, and the Municipal Council to implement one-way road systems around selected schools during peak hours, ensuring safe cycling environments for students.



Jaffna as Cycle Icon initiative. Source: Jaffna Municipal Council

Community engagement in Jaffna also bridges the gap between nutrition and social empowerment. **Mothers' Support Groups** have been mobilized to establish home gardens and clinic-based gardens, ensuring consistent access to fresh, organic vegetables for families. Furthermore, the city has tackled social determinants of health through innovative education. Workshops on menstrual health and hygiene at schools like Vembadi Girls' High School have empowered female students by dismantling myths and energy-depriving dietary taboos, allowing them to compete as equals with their male counterparts.



A Home Garden in Jaffna. Source: NAFSO

Infrastructure efficiency has also been revolutionized through digital community networks. To strengthen solid waste management, the Nallur Divisional Secretariat established fixed collection schedules disseminated through **organized WhatsApp groups**. This ensures that environmental cleanliness is a shared, equitable responsibility. Through "Well Women Clinics" providing early cancer detection and adolescent clinics focusing on mental well-being and substance abuse prevention, Jaffna demonstrates that a healthy city is built on the pillars of education, screening,

and multisectoral collaboration. Read more: https://ughw.org/healthy-lifestyles-ncd-risk-southeast-asian-cities/

Case Study: Yasothon, Thailand



Community-led aerobic exercise in Yasothon. Source: Yasothon Town Municipality

A "Happy and Healthy City" Driven by People

Yasothon, a vibrant city in Northeast Thailand, has emerged as a beacon of urban health governance, recently achieving the "Gold Level" Thailand Healthy City standard and receiving the prestigious Princess Health Award. At the heart of its success is the "**YASO Happy and Healthy City**" initiative, which operates under a holistic framework of "**Healthy People, Healthy Setting, and Healthy Environment**". The city's philosophy is simple yet profound: enable residents to *eat well, live well, and thrive in a sustainable, low-carbon society*.



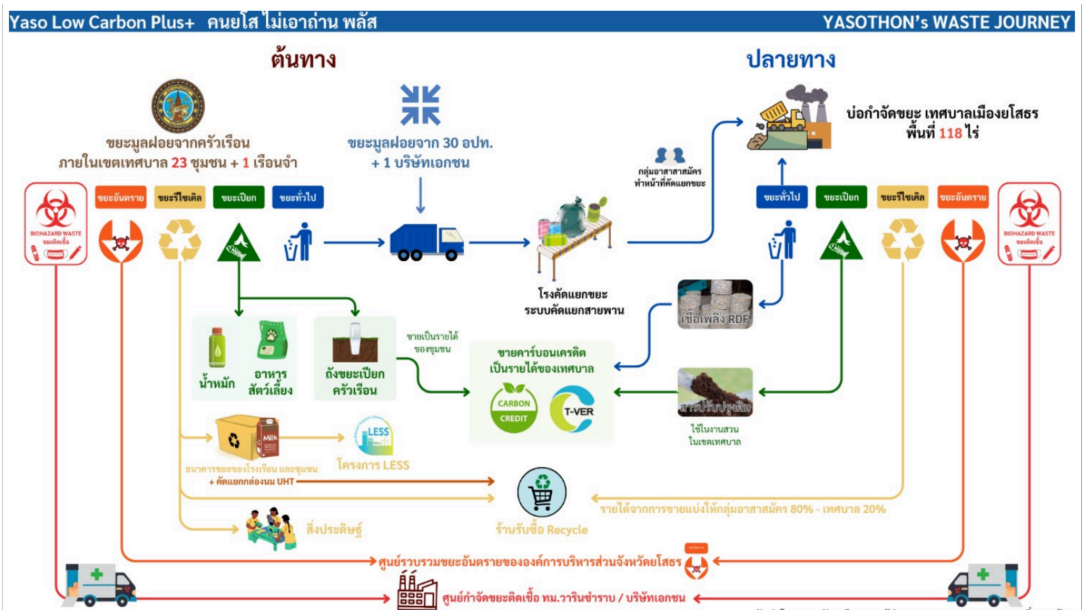
YASO Happy and Healthy City Framework. Source: Yasothon Town Municipality

A cornerstone of this vision is the **Yaso Low Carbon Plus+ Project**, an integrated waste management system that utilizes strong public participation to manage refuse from "upstream" (the source) to "downstream" (disposal). In Yasothon, waste segregation is not merely a bureaucratic pre-condition; rather, it is the behavioral engine through which the municipality qualifies for international carbon standards. Under this program, residents are the primary actors, actively sorting solid waste at the household level into categories including organic, recyclable, hazardous, and general waste.

The relationship between this grassroots segregation and the generation of **carbon credits** functions through a specific technical and economic pipeline:

- **Emission Reduction at the Source:** By sorting organic waste, the community prevents it from entering landfills where it would otherwise decompose and release methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Simultaneously, the separation of recyclable materials reduces the overall carbon footprint associated with municipal waste processing.
- **Verification and T-VER Application:** The municipality, supported by **village health volunteers** who record quantitative data from each household, calculates the potential reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. This data allows the city to apply for the **Thailand Voluntary Emission Reduction (T-VER)** program managed by the Thailand Greenhouse Gas Management Organization (TGO).
- **Monetizing Sustainability:** Once these emission reductions are verified, they are converted into tradeable carbon credits. As of 2022, Yasothon has accumulated **12,149 tCO2-eq** in carbon credits.
- **Economic Circularity:** The revenue from selling these credits—which has exceeded **1 million THB** since trading began in 2018—is used to create direct income for the residents and reduce municipal expenditures.

This model demonstrates that while the municipality provides the governance framework, the actual generation of economic value through carbon credits is entirely dependent on the daily participation of residents in sorting their waste.



Yasothon's Waste Journey. Source: Yasothon Town Municipality


Recyclable wastes sorted from each household in a community were gathered and their quantities were recorded before being sold. Source: Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning



Village health volunteers were a key person who records and gathers the quantitative data of separated organic waste of each household in their community. Source: Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning

Beyond the environment, Yasothon has prioritized the cognitive and physical well-being of its citizens. The city boasts a remarkable **93.23% health literacy rate** among residents aged 15 and older. This is achieved through community-led "Active Aging" clubs and the "Yaso Happy and Healthy" network, which promotes physical activity through traditional and modern methods—from line dancing and yoga to food safety monitoring.



Yaso Happy and Healthy Network. Source: Yasothon Town Municipality

Mental health is treated with equal priority through the **"2Q 9Q" assessment program**, which monitors residents for signs of depression and isolation. The city uses the poignant local slogan, *"Good people help the sick, rich people help the poor,"* to foster deep social capital and ensure that no citizen is left behind. By combining high-tech urban solutions like carbon credit trading with high-touch community care, Yasothon proves that local government potential is limitless when backed by an engaged and literate public.

Path Forward

The stories of Jaffna and Yasothon offer a powerful roadmap for other cities in the network. While their specific challenges differ, their core success factors are remarkably similar:

1. **Multisectoral Collaboration:** Health is not just the responsibility of the health department. It involves waste management, transport, education, and law enforcement.
2. **Decentralization:** Bringing services to the neighborhood level increases accessibility and builds trust.
3. **Empowerment through Education:** High health literacy transforms residents from patients into proactive health managers.
4. **Sustainability through Participation:** When the community owns an initiative —whether it's a cycling group or a waste-sorting program—it lasts.

How is your city engaging its residents? What "Healthy Lifestyle" initiatives are working in your streets? Join the conversation at the **Regional Laboratory on Urban Governance for Health and Well-being**. Let us share these case studies, learn from our setbacks, and continue to build cities that are not just smart, but truly healthy and happy.

Editor’s Pick



Regional Webinar Key Takeaways

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) remain the leading cause of mortality in the South-East Asia Region, accounting for nearly 70% of all deaths. Explore four city showcase success stories in promoting healthy lifestyle addressing NCD risk factors.

Read more

Stay tuned for more inspiring stories from our healthy cities network in our next update!

Share with us your city's best practices!

Email Us

WHO South-East Asia office and Regional Laboratory on Urban Governance for Health and Well-being are pleased to invite you to join South-East Asia Region Healthy Cities Network.

More information and details here

Recommended Resources

Selected resources supporting this issue’s theme

WHO Community Engagement Guide

WHO Competency Framework, Risk Communication and Community Engagement

Further Reading & References

Jaffna Municipal Council. (2026). *Building a healthier Jaffna: Actions for NCD Prevention and Healthy Living [Presentation]*. Retrieved from https://ughw.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Jaffna_Healthy-Lifestyle.pdf

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