

Physical activity promotion initiatives around the world show that healthier cities are possible

Language English



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To mark World Cities Day, held annually on October 31, we look to Bogota, Dhaka, Shanghai and Kigali to see what they can teach us about healthy city living.

A recent review of [170 studies](#) [1] found consistent evidence that people are less likely to be obese or have diabetes if they live in cities where walking and cycling is safe and convenient. The [World Health Organization \(WHO\) says](#) [2] that up to five million deaths a year could be averted if people globally were more active. Those who are not active enough have a 20% - 30% increased risk of death.

[Recent research](#) [3] suggests that the health benefits of promoting physical activity are larger than we thought. That's because, as well as preventing noncommunicable diseases like [cancer](#) [4] and [heart disease](#) [5], it also helps to cut road traffic deaths, decrease death and disease from air pollution, and improve mental health.

Education and awareness campaigns for physical activity is #13 on [WHO's list of 16 'best buys'](#) [6]. The Organization says that investment in promoting physical activity more than pays for itself with \$3.2 saved for every dollar spent.

NCD BEST BUYS

EVIDENCE-BASED COST-EFFECTIVE PUBLIC HEALTH INTERVENTIONS TO PREVENT AND CONTROL NCDs

PROMOTE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



Promote physical activity with **mass media campaigns** and other **community based education, motivational and environmental** programs.

Provide physical activity **counselling and referral** as part of routine primary health care.



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That's why more and more cities in low- and mid-income countries (LMICs) are investing in residents' health by creating ways for people to be more physically active. Here are three that show how urban life doesn't have to mean unhealthy living.

1. Car free days in Kigali

Since they were launched in 2016 by the Kigali City Council, car-free days in the Rwandan capital have become part of a very popular initiative.

The programme is aimed at encouraging healthy lifestyles by promoting physical activity and raising awareness of NCDs while reducing air pollution. Every other Sunday, up to 10 kilometres of roads are freed up for the whole morning for group exercise activities and free medical check-ups, counselling and education on NCDs.

The NCD screening during car-free days is a great example of how to integrate NCDs into existing schemes to facilitate early detection and treatment before conditions become more severe. This is of vital importance for many

countries in Africa where resources are limited and health care delivery needs to be as cost-effective as possible.

An ageing population and an increase in sedentary lifestyles linked to growing urbanisation is causing the risk of diabetes, hypertension and other NCDs to rise rapidly in many parts of Africa.

Given the success of the initiative, Kigali has introduced permanent car-free zones and is considering introducing bicycles as public transport. This is all part of Rwanda's innovative all-of-society approach to tackling NCDs.

2. Cycling in Shanghai

One of the most popular measures being promoted is cycling, which has multiple benefits: reducing vehicle traffic, improving air quality, and getting people active.

China used to be known as the 'bicycling kingdom' until rapid economic growth and rising urban wealth led to cars dominating city streets. But in [Shanghai](#) [7], thanks in part to bike-sharing schemes, the number of cycles on city streets rose from 260,000 at the end of 2016, to 630,000 by April 2017 and to more than 1.5 million by August 2017.

Shanghai is the first Chinese city to have an urban cycling strategy, and it's working: a study of more than 2 million bicycling trips found that they cut air pollution, such as fine particulate matter (PM2.5) and nitrogen oxides (NOx) by 2.7% and 0.9% respectively.

Detailed analysis shows that the reductions in pollution are concentrated in the areas of greatest population density, highlighting how effective pro-cycling policies can be.

Researchers estimated that 23 premature deaths were prevented each year because of the impact of increased cycling in Shanghai on air quality, exercise levels, and numbers of traffic accidents. "These figures suggest that more than 1,000 premature deaths, tens of thousands of hospital visits and millions of respiratory events may be avoided every year by existing urban cycling initiatives across China," added the study.

2. Opening up public spaces in Dhaka

Rayerbazar Boishakhi Playground is located in ward 34 of [Dhaka North City Corporation in Bangladesh](#) [8]. The ward's area is 1.36 square kilometres and it houses roughly 250,000 people. 15,000 students study in 38 education institutes in the ward, however, only one school has a playground and only its students are permitted to use it. As a result, many children have no place to play and stay at home.

The playground was the only public space in the ward but it was dominated by teenage boys playing football and cricket. It was not considered safe for women and children and was not accessible for people living with disabilities.

A renovation of the park by [Work for a Better Bangladesh](#) [9] and partners included installing playground equipment (see-saws, swings, slides, tires and football goalposts). Also added were 200 plants, 8 benches, 2 tables and a wall painting.



The results have been dramatic. After the redesign, daily users of the park rose from 2,000 to 3,000. Particularly significant was the impact of the changes for women and girls with female users nearly doubling from 17% to 33%.

The success of Rayerbazar Boishakhi is now being replicated in areas across North Dhaka.

3. Traffic-free days in Bogota

If any city can take the credit for really getting pedals turning around the world then it's Bogota.

On Sundays and public holidays the Colombian capital transforms its streets and highways into the Ciclovía, or Bicycle Way, by banning vehicles from 7 am to 2 pm.

It started in 1974 with a simple bicycle path, which has since rolled into [the 127-km long Ciclovía](#) [10]. Today cities in [more than a dozen countries](#) [11] around the world are following the model.

Mapa rutas Ciclovía por corredores

N1	Norte 1 Boyacá Norte	10,21 km
N2	Norte 2 Av. Pepe Sierra y Av. Córdoba	8,82 km
N3	Norte 3 Carrera 7 Norte	11,36 km
N4	Norte 4 Carrera 9, Calle 147 y Calle 170	11,5 km
N5	Norte 5 Carrera 60 y Calle 72	5,46 km
C1	Centro 1 Boyacá Sur	10,75 km
C2	Centro 2 Carrera 50	10,72 km
C3	Centro 3 Carrera 7 Sur	10,1 km
C4	Centro 4 Calle 26 Oriental	7,76 km
C5	Centro 5 Calle 26 Occidental	10,4 km
C6	Centro 6 Parway y Parque Nacional	4,7 km
S1	Sur 1 Bosa conexión Soacha	8,74 km
S2	Sur 2 Yomasa	9,41 km
S3	Sur 3 Calle 17 Sur y Calle 39 Sur	7,77 km



For many participants going for a cycle ride is just one part of the day's activities. Stages are set up in city parks, where aerobics instructors, yoga teachers and musicians lead people through various performances. Traditional food and drinks are also sold in snack stalls, another motivation for many Ciclovía users.

The weekly open roads are used by [roughly 1.5 million people](#) [10] of Bogotá's more than 7 million residents. One estimate is that bicycle use [has risen five-fold](#) [12] since the Ciclovía started rolling.

**This news item is an extended version of an earlier release that appeared on this website on 6 April 2022 on the occasion of [World Physical Activity Day](#) [13].*

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Teaser Image:

Links

- [1] <http://www.newscientist.com/article/2309343-pedestrian-friendly-cities-have-lower-rates-of-diabetes-and-obesity/>
- [2] <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/physical-activity>
- [3] <https://journals.humankinetics.com/view/journals/jpah/18/10/article-p1163.xml>
- [4] <https://ncdalliance.org/why-ncds/ncds/cancer>
- [5] <https://ncdalliance.org/why-ncds/ncds/cardiovascular-diseases>
- [6] <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240041059>
- [7] <http://urbantransitions.global/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Towards-Sustainable-Mobility-and-Improved-Public-Health-Lessons-from-bike-sharing-in-Shanghai-China-final.pdf>
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- [11] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ciclov%C3%ADa>
- [12] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bogotá's_Bike_Paths_Network
- [13] <https://ncdalliance.org/news-events/news/this-is-what-bogota-dhaka-and-shanghai-can-teach-us-about-healthy-city-living>
- [14] <https://old.ncdalliance.org/taxonomy/term/1348>
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