NARRATIVE

There are more than 1.8 billion young people in the world today between the ages of 10 and 24. These numbers are expected to continue to grow, especially in urban settings, where many young people face challenges in accessing opportunities for education, decent employment, health and civic participation.

Cities concentrate people, opportunities, and services, including those for health and education. In a well-known trend, cities house the most and the best hospitals and they attract the most talented doctors, nurses and other health care staff. When cities are planned, managed, and governed well, life flourishes and health outcomes surpass those seen in rural areas.

For a growing proportion of the world’s population, prospects for a better future are tied to living conditions in cities. In every corner of the world, certain city dwellers suffer disproportionately from poor health, and these inequities can be traced back to differences in their social and living conditions.

Cities also concentrate risks and hazards for health. They magnify long-standing inequities and threats to health and wellbeing, and introduce others. When large numbers of people are linked together in space and connected by shared services, the consequences of adverse events – like contamination of the food or water supply, high levels of air or noise pollution, a chemical spill, a disease outbreak or a natural disaster – are vastly amplified.

Cities tend to promote unhealthy lifestyles, like “convenient” diets that depend on processed foods, sedentary behaviour, smoking, and the harmful use of alcohol and other substances. These lifestyle choices are directly linked to obesity and the rise of conditions like heart disease, stroke, some cancers, and diabetes. These conditions are increasingly concentrated in the urban poor.

In many countries, urbanization has outpaced the ability of governments to build essential infrastructure, enact and enforce the legislation that make life in cities safer, healthier and more rewarding. Around one third of urban dwellers, amounting to nearly one billion people, live in urban slums, informal settings, or sidewalk tents.

The growth of urban centres in the 21st century is being accompanied by growing poverty, which in previous centuries was greatest in scattered rural areas, is now heavily concentrated in cities. While the vast majority of urban slums – more than 90% – are located in the developing world, nearly every city has pockets of extreme deprivation together with extreme wealth.

Health outcomes among women, children and adolescents are worse when people are marginalized or excluded from society, affected by discrimination, or live in underserved communities—especially among the poorest and least educated.

Urban areas are now also a frontline of humanitarian response, with disasters increasingly unfolding in cities and a considerable proportion of displaced persons globally relocating to urban settings. These shifts require a new set of measures to ensure availability of health and related services – especially for women and adolescents.

If we are serious about achieving sustainable development and leaving no one behind, we must address the urgent needs of women, children and adolescents in urban settings, everywhere.
One of the key recommendations from the *Every Woman Every Child Global Strategy for Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health* is to build health-enabling urban environments for women, children and adolescents. Multisector enablers include access to cleaner fuels, which could lead to health-system cost savings amounting to US$165 million annually. Gains in health-related productivity would range from 17 to 62 per cent in urban areas.

The outcomes of this event are intended to reinforce commitments to the *Global Strategy*, in support of the SDGs and the *New Urban Agenda*, which aims to “reduce inequalities, promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, in order to fully harness their vital contribution to sustainable development, improve human health and well-being, as well as foster resilience and protect the environment.”