

Deprived neighbourhoods: how urban regeneration can help combat inequalities in health

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Regeneration projects are increasingly taking into account the health of their residents. This movement has grown in the context of:

- the Ottawa Charter, signed in 1986 [1], which supports a global and positive approach to health, focusing on several determinants connected to biological, behavioural and environmental factors, or related to the quality and accessibility of the healthcare system;
- the proliferation of scientific evidence on the relationship between urban planning, development and health [2; 3].

The deterioration of the living conditions and health of populations who live in large housing blocks in deprived neighbourhoods, designated as priority zones (QPV), has been a driving force behind numerous urban regeneration projects. These neighbourhoods are characterized by a concentration of economically insecure populations who suffer from a higher prevalence of chronic disease than in the general population, greater exposure to pollution, greater sensitivity to climate change, and often restricted access to health care. Health therefore raises specific questions for these neighbourhoods where, in addition to a high level of insecurity, residents often

experience lower standards of living, the effects of urban heat islands and sometimes unsanitary conditions. These neighbourhoods also suffer from a poor reputation and a stigmatized image, which leads to reduced social diversity.

Health impact assessment

A health impact assessment (HIA) appears to be an effective way to take social inequalities in health into account [4; 5]. Through a structured approach, in which different aspects of health in urban planning projects can be observed and examined, it encourages partnerships and raises issues of health as early as possible in the decision-making process. The HIA approach has been used for two regeneration projects targeting priority neighbourhoods of Villeurbanne and Grenoble/Échirolles [6].

Les Buers in Villeurbanne...

In Villeurbanne, the overall regeneration of the Les Buers neighbourhood aims to contribute to social diversity, to strengthen the structural role that the main thoroughfare gives to the neighbourhood, and to attract new facilities, in addition to interventions for improving social housing. The specific objective of the health impact assessment was to identify how the project could be used to improve the mobility of children in the neighbourhood, more than 20% of whom were overweight. Several surveys were carried out among some 50 residents and 300 children in order to

KEY POINTS

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▶ **First lessons learnt from the health impact assessments carried out on urban regeneration projects for priority neighbourhoods of Villeurbanne (Les Buers) and Grenoble/Échirolles (Les Villeneuves).**

gather their opinions, along with a dozen semi-structured interviews conducted with various partners and target stakeholders. In the end, around 40 recommendations were drawn up then ranked in order of priority. These recommendations, prioritized according to political, technical and economic criteria, include simple measures related to transport (such as restarting a walking bus system to get to school) or neighbourhood development (improving transit routes, promoting pedestrian and cyclist access to/use of an area using pedestrian streets and cycle paths). Certain recommendations are more complex to implement, such as lowering the speed limit on the main street and on the ring road. All of these recommendations have been directly included in official documents relating to the urban project, the regeneration project, education policy, the local health contract and the local sports project. To date, more than half of these recommendations have been implemented, in particular the speed limits and the creation of a pedestrian street designed to ensure the safety of children [7].

...and Les Villeneuve in Échirolles/Grenoble

Les Villeneuves covers a number of deprived neighbourhoods in Grenoble and Échirolles, which are typical examples of the large housing blocks built in the 1970s, and it is here that a large-scale urban regeneration project is taking place with the aim of restoring their appeal and boosting social and intergenerational diversity. The assessment showed that some major strands of the regeneration programme were likely to have a mix of positive and ambivalent impacts on physical



health, mental health, well-being and social cohesion. The HIA led to the development of around 50 recommendations, the majority of which, once ranked in order of priority, were included in the specifications for project managers. These included recommendations advocating an examination of transit flow when reclassifying roads, promoting opportunities for enjoyment and learning during travel by working on attractive paths and networks, ensuring that ground floors are allocated to building residents and their representatives via community associations, or to plan for spaces dedicated to young people. These recommendations have also been recorded in official documents, resulting in this area being the first in France to obtain the status of a "People's Eco-Neighbourhood"¹ [8].

When an HIA is applied to an urban regeneration project, it becomes possible to implement strategies aimed at transforming the living conditions that are one of the root causes of social inequalities in health. The HIA lays the foundation for a participatory approach that considers with equal weight the viewpoints of all parties involved, including residents. HIA have played a role in fostering an alternative approach to urban projects, not only by acting on the determinants of health, but also by creating a health-focused ecosystem in the long term. This is a scientific approach and not simply a tool: it seeks to predict the consequences that development choices will have on health and consequently contribute to informed decision-making. By focusing on the differentiated impacts that urban planning projects and operations may have on various

social groups, HIA aim to reduce social inequalities in health. In order to achieve this priority actions targeting the most deprived populations need to be delivered.

How effective is a health impact assessment?

One of the challenges of the HIA process is to follow it through to the end in order to judge its effectiveness, which involves drawing up a monitoring and evaluation plan. However, managing an HIA evaluation in urban projects remains complex: the timeframe for completing an urban regeneration project is long (often over 10 years) and it is difficult to measure the immediate impact and concrete effects of applied recommendations, the benefits

of which are only felt over the longer term. In many cases, monitoring and evaluation is never carried out because the people initially involved in the HIA do not remain with the project leaders for such a duration. This means they cannot supervise the regeneration project until the end, which is the main pitfall encountered when an HIA is used for an urban regeneration project. ■

1. An eco-neighbourhood is a development project in which the issues and principles of the city and sustainable communities are an integral part. The approach is supported by the Ministry of Ecological Transition. <http://www.ecoquartiers.logement.gouv.fr/>

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WHO HEALTHY CITIES, FRENCH NATIONAL NETWORK: ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION TO REDUCE INEQUALITIES

The WHO Healthy Cities French National Network is an association bringing together 98 French cities and joint areas that put health first, both in terms of promoting healthy environments (living standards, social and cultural environment, etc.) and access to care. Through this project runs a goal of reducing health inequities related to social, regional and environmental factors.

The network is a space for genuine exchange, strengthening cooperation between its members through sharing experiences and data, working groups, organizing meetings and joint actions, producing advocacy documents and publications, ensuring that the voices of cities and joint areas are heard, particularly by national stakeholders, etc. The French network participates in the WHO's inter-

national Healthy Cities initiative through its affiliation with the European Network of Healthy Cities and it is accredited by the WHO.

For more information:

- French Network of the WHO Healthy Cities initiative (villes-sante.com)