

A tool to identify the impact of urban projects on the health of inhabitants and inequalities

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It is mandatory under French law since 2010 (Grenelle I law), in the framework of environmental assessment regulations,

to consider the impacts of development and urban planning projects on the environment and human health. Moreover, the growing number of health impact assessments (HIA) carried out on urban projects [1] illustrates an increasing awareness of the “health” issue among stakeholders. This favourable dynamic nevertheless raises questions: while health equity may be central to the theoretical foundations of the HIA, social and regional health inequalities still constitute a blind spot, and the means of addressing these are poorly identified.

Interview guide

In order to overcome this shortcoming, a tool called Urban-ISS (*inégalités sociales de santé*; health inequities) was created. It was produced through a partnership between public health researchers at the University of Toulouse (l’Institut fédératif d’études et de recherche santé société FED4142, IFERISS)¹ and town planners from the Toulouse Metropolitan Area Urban Planning and Development Agency (AUAT). This tool aims to identify, in a simple and systematic way, the impacts of urban projects on health and on social and regional health inequalities. It is similar to an interview guide and is organized into eight sections – such as public space, access to infrastructure or individual behaviour – that are explored through 22 questions on the determinants of health. Urban-ISS provides the basis for the initial screening stage in an HIA and has three objectives: to identify the determinants of health most subject to positive or negative impacts, to determine whether an HIA is appropriate, and to integrate the issue of health equity. To do this, it proposes a social gradient approach and questions the potential impacts differentiated between several social groups, on the basis of socio-economic characteristics, gender, age or even disability.

A simple and quick tool to use, Urban-ISS is a boundary object, a pretext for creating a dialogue between two worlds that remain parallel – public health and urban planning – through a concrete object which is the project.

40 interviewers trained

Two training sessions in using the Urban-ISS tool (two half-day modules) have been carried out since 2021 by IFERISS and AUAT, joined by the urban planning agencies for Catalonia (AURCA) and the region of Nîmes and Alès (A’U), for around 40 people working in urban planning and public health for local or national government. These training sessions explore a fictional development project. There have been a number of requests to run another session in 2022. Interdisciplinary knowledge sharing and feedback for the benefit of reappropriating the topic of “health” are welcomed, as is the identification of potential links with other tools or devices, e.g. field observation, local health contracts (CLS), regional programmes for access to prevention and care (PRAPS). In partnership with the regional health agency (ARS Occitanie), training sessions have now been scheduled for private urban planning stakeholders – planners, promoters, etc. – over the next three years, offering an opportunity to capitalize on feedback.

Without replacing a health impact assessment, the Urban-ISS tool is easy to integrate into urban planning practices and it can assist in the design and evaluation of urban projects that promote the health of residents. The COVID-19 health crisis has accelerated our reflection on the urban environment, just as the epidemics of infectious diseases in the 19th century paved the way for building sanitation. Re-examining the urban environment and its impact on health, as well as on social and regional health inequalities, is a subject that applies everywhere. Urban stakeholders have every interest in widening the circle of participants, including involving people from public health as early as possible in the process, but also in encouraging the communities concerned to participate, including those less

well-off and least socially integrated, so that they can move from the status of beneficiaries to that of fully involved parties. ■

1. <http://iferiss.univ-tlse3.fr>

For more information:

- Urban-ISS grid, the “health and social inequalities” tracking tool for urban planning that benefits everyone, under Creative Commons license BY-NC-SA made available by the Aapriiss platform (IFERISS FED 4142). Contact: aapriiss@iferiss.org.

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