



Urban health research in Latin America

Executive summary

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Latin America is one of the most urbanised regions of the world, and the number of people living in urban areas is projected to rise still further. By 2030, more than 90% of the population of Latin America is likely to be living in cities, including a small number of 'megacities' with more than 10 million inhabitants and a much larger number of smaller cities.

Cities offer financial opportunities and are typically more economically productive, driving inward migration and leading to uncontrolled population growth. However, the financial benefits are unevenly spread. Cities in general, and Latin American cities in particular, are highly socially patterned according to socioeconomic status. Incoming migrants with limited assets often establish temporary dwellings with little or no access to household services and healthcare.

Marked socioeconomic stratification in cities is mirrored in deeply-rooted health inequalities. Despite their advantages, cities can have a wide range of health hazards. These include poor air quality, limited access to safe drinking water and effective sanitation services, and low levels of access to green spaces. Latin American cities also experience high levels of violence. Densely populated areas and unhygienic settings favour the spread of infectious diseases. Nearly all of these health hazards have a greater impact on the socially disadvantaged, who therefore have a lower life expectancy and a greater burden of non-communicable and infectious diseases.

Urban health is therefore emerging as a distinct field, and one of particular relevance to Latin America. Research has a key role to play in generating data to support evidence-based policymaking to improve urban health and reduce health inequalities, yet the full potential of research has yet to be fully realised in Latin America. Policymaking is insufficiently informed by evidence from research, and research is insufficiently geared to the needs of policymakers.

To begin to address these issues, workshop participants discussed current activities in urban health research in Latin America, and the challenges and opportunities. These discussions have been used to generate a high-level framework for taking forward a more coordinated approach to urban health research spanning the following key areas:

- 1. Defining the scope of urban health research:** Developing a shared definition and conceptual framework to provide a foundation for collaboration, alignment and political engagement.
- 2. Identifying the key influences on urban health:** Generating a deeper understanding of the many factors – spanning the physical environment, social environment, health behaviours and access to healthcare, and the interactions between them – that affect the health and wellbeing of people living in urban areas.
- 3. Identifying the drivers of health inequalities:** Documenting and analysing the full range of factors leading to health inequalities and their interactions.
- 4. Exploring interventions:** Developing and evaluating policy-level and other interventions to improve urban health and reduce health inequalities.
- 5. Influencing policy:** Strengthening links between researchers and policymakers to ensure a stronger emphasis on policy-relevant research and on evidence-informed decision-making.

Participants also identified a range of **enablers** to urban health research. These included:

- Increased national, regional and global funding.
- Capacity building in areas such as interdisciplinary research, policymaker engagement and community engagement.
- The development of international networks, data platforms and data standards, to facilitate comparative studies.
- The development of new methodologies to assess health and economic consequences, and to model the impact of interventions.
- Additional data on exposures to health risks and their health consequences.
- Political and policymaker advocacy, including integration with other aligned agendas such as sustainability and climate change.

A range of potential next steps was also identified:

Networking: The creation and strengthening of urban health research networks across Latin America.

Urban health research agenda: Further consultation and dialogue to establish a regional urban health research agenda, with an agreed definition, goals and research priorities.

Evidence collation: The synthesis of existing evidence on urban health to inform the development of the regional research agenda.

Political engagement: The strengthening of links with existing city-level political networks to mobilise political support.

Policymaker engagement: The strengthening of links with national policymakers to promote greater involvement in research and commitment to evidence-informed decision-making.

North–South networks: Exploring opportunities for collaboration on topics of common interest with Europe, including the UK, and high-income countries in other regions.

South–South networks: Exploring opportunities for South–South collaboration, for example comparative studies with Asia or sub-Saharan Africa, and to facilitate the exchange of innovations.



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