

Feedback on WHO's Global Action Plan for Physical Activity from Living Streets Aotearoa

Background

Living Streets Aotearoa is an advocacy not-for-profit organisation. We aim to be a voice for people on foot, including those with visual and mobility impairments. Living Streets Aotearoa is a member of the International Federation of Pedestrians and maintains close links with Walk21.

While each country has different priorities and situations, physical activity should be a lower cost solution to many NCDs than medical intervention.

Encouragement, pressure and incentives need to address Transportation and Planning, not only Health organisations. Local government is as important as national or state government.

Different countries have hugely disparate walking infrastructure and budgets however walking is useful for all population health.

Comments below address different parts of the GAPP. However our most important recommendations are

- ensuring member states, at an urban level, consistently measure and report on mode choice for trip stages,
- implementing walk to school initiatives,
- supporting inclusive design of city transport and urban planning including pervasive sidewalks and lower speeds
- funding walking organisations, rather than expecting volunteers to match the contributions of the automotive industry
- sharing strong messages about the population benefits of daily physical activity with health, transport, planning and education professionals and decision-makers.

Commentary on the draft GAPP

In the overview there is great background on why physical activity is essential, with comprehensive references that provide good evidence for actions and advocacy.

We agree that (para 18) three broad domains provide a useful classification system for policy actions: (i) work; (ii) active transport (including walking, cycling and use of public transport); and (iii) leisure. We would like to add that the second one is relevant to the vast majority of the population and can be achieved most cost-effectively. It's good to see that Public Transport is recognised as a component of the active transport journey but more work is needed by most cities to identify the active journey component stages of these journeys. Useful work has been done on standards for measuring walking at the Walk21 conferences, resulting in a new International Walking Data Standard being adopted in 2015. (www.measuring-walking.org) In the sports commentary about schools (para 26) the paper points out "being active is associated with improved cognition, and academic achievement" this is just as true for walking to school but is only mentioned under the sports aspects.

We are pleased the GAPP sees a role for non-governmental agencies (para 49). However funding is a challenge for many of these. Walking is an activity that almost everybody does (though not often enough or long enough) but this means people don't identify strongly (compared to the "out group" of cyclists), nor is there significant funding at stake compared to motor vehicles (support from car manufacturers and oil companies) or public transport (bus and train manufacturers). Nevertheless

walking is a stage in almost all journeys and particularly essential to support increasing ridership of transit. Addressing the safety and general walkability in the 400metre and 800metre pedestrian-sheds of bus stops and train stations would reduce barriers to usage that are potentially ignored by public transport advocates, planners and engineers.

Gender is only raised in GAPP in relation to organised sport activity and health insurance. There are also gender issues regarding walking. In most countries data appears to show more women walk, however they can be subject to intimidation, rape and violence. This is also true for other groups, especially people identifying as LGBTI. However almost all walking figures (traffic lights, diversions, recreational way-finding) use a distinctly male outline with curves or feet. This is partly a relic of the past when stencils had to be simplistic but there is an undercurrent of “no women here”. Our experience in New Zealand when the Transport Agency was challenged was that they were unwilling to welcome alternatives. Some exceptions have been made to address individual traffic lights with female and transgender individual representations but no moves have been made to make the dominant symbol more androgynous or to offer some female alternatives. Some people don't recognise that such a broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped figure IS predominantly a male form. There have been a few pedestrian diversion signs with women depicted but this is rare.

Cycling is also an excellent mode choice but as a walking advocate it seems that the draft GAPP pays less attention to walking or mentions them “in the same breath” when some of the issues and barriers are different. For example, people with visual impairment can still walk but rarely cycle, walking is even more supportive of transit than cycling, many towns and cities already have significant sidewalks although they are often commandeered for parking, cafes and the storage of private goods to the detriment of walking space. Of course outdoor café space can contribute to vitality and safety but when poorly managed it can exclude walking. Sidewalks on all city streets would be an admirable goal and I acknowledge the work Walk21 Foundation is doing to advocate for the Sidewalks project. Delineating cycle lanes, (re)moving parked cars and slower speeds are all useful actions but the absence or presence of sidewalks is absolutely fundamental to more sustainable urban transport choices. In some cases shared spaces can also work well.

The linkages with urban air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions are important but may not be the most motivating factors for people's transport choices. We support point 44 about the multiple factors influencing participation in physical activity. The media will certainly be a significant factor. Cultural traditions also make different messages necessary. *El paseo* in Spain and *la passeggiata* in Italy are deeply rooted traditions. The Māori hikoī, the Aboriginal walkabout and many other indigenous traditions can be led by indigenous people rather than being appropriated which risks alienation of the target population rather than motivation. These may be more appropriate for specific social walking initiatives but should never replace the need for safe infrastructure and inclusive town planning and management.

The Goal

“A hundred million people more active by 2030” is 10% change for the existing adult populations.

This goal is less than the 2013 World Health Assembly's global voluntary target of 10% reduction in the prevalence of insufficient physical activity by 2025. It needs to be measurable and more ambitious. The easiest increase would be in daily travel and the simple, memorable, modest message seen in New Zealand practice is 30 minutes a day, five days a week. This translates particularly easily for those in work or education to including walking as part of their daily commute.

Para 5 notes “the new window of policy opportunity offered by the Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030) with the call for accelerated action but the goal is LESS ambitious.

We submit that the goal should be a) more ambitious and b) include a focus on the least active now, who have the most to gain and c) have a focus on young people as habits begun early are essential. If the most active people become even more active there is much less impact. This would also potentially address inequalities too.

The four strategic objectives seem inextricably linked and for clarity it might have been better to stick with the three broad domains mentioned earlier – work, active transport and leisure. However, the four that have been chosen do provide a comprehensive approach to the issue of insufficient physical inactivity so we don’t seek change in the wording.

1 Creating an Active Society – positive attitudes can be led by a range of role models – rugby players in New Zealand could advocate for walking to school, fashion designers in Spain could advocate for clothes appropriate for *el paseo* etc.

2 Creating Active Environments – this is possibly the most important. As well as good active transport infrastructure and not spending large amounts on facilitating private vehicle travel, some encouragement for policies against urban sprawl would be helpful. Housing affordability is used as an excuse to argue against metropolitan urban limits but the price of land is only one of at least 18 factors in affordability and ignores the cost to health and local authorities and businesses of sprawl. We advocate for universally accessible public spaces and buildings so everyone can “walk” – whether with a cane, a wheelchair, a baby buggy or a wheeled suitcase.

3 Creating Active Lives – the focus of the indicators (para 107) is on PE in schools whereas a focus on the % of children walking (and cycling) to school is completely missing. What is measured will be reported. We would like to see member states encouraged specifically to support and fund Walking School Buses (led by parents, elders or older students) and Safer Routes to School.

4 Creating Active Systems – reducing silos between health, transport, planning, parks and education would help. A new opportunity - or threat - is the advent of autonomous vehicles. It would be terrific to see a world body lead with model regulations that protect and enhance the encouragement of walking (and cycling). We don’t want to see people on foot banned from areas or from crossing at mid-block to speed up the flow of one – person – one - vehicle traffic. Good regulations would encourage the safety of rapid reactions and rules to protect the more vulnerable but not by restricting our rights of access. Rules governing autonomous vehicles crossing or accessing sidewalks/footpaths also need to favour those on foot.

The proposed actions and indicators

1.1 Creating an Active Society: Communication – we agree that some campaign messages can help but suggest that a particular focus could be on educating decision-makers in transportation, land-use and urban design on the advantages of being physically active and the barriers they continue to put up. Health professionals being encouraged to prescribe physical activity (and pedometers/fit-bits/smartphone apps) is important too. The transnational pharmaceutical companies put much resource into promoting pills to improve health and we need at least as much emphasis on cheaper preventative messages from doctors and nurses who are trusted advisors.

The local health systems cannot afford the increasing costs of physical inactivity but are timid about challenging the insatiable demand for low-cost parking near their facilities for staff and

visitors. We agree with using messages about physical activity in international campaigns led by WHO and other organisations including Walk21.

Educational organisations from preschools to tertiary level should have consistent physical activity messages which should include walking or cycling, establishing good healthy habits from a young age.

Some - but not all - New Zealand - healthcare and health education services promote the Mental Health Foundation's "5 Ways to Wellbeing" which endorses holistic health that is achievable for most of the population. Physical health has a close association with mental wellbeing. "Be Active" is one of the calls to action in the 5 Ways to Wellbeing

2.1 Creating Active Environments

The indicators miss the most important area – measuring mode choice for journeys. All cities should be doing this and it's a fundamental measurement. Ideally it would be all ages and all journeys and census and household travel surveys plus new technical measurement with GPS/ continuous smartphone surveys offer additional and more localised options. There are now agreed standards - see www.measuring-walking.org

We need the global trends to reverse, as they have done in some cities already e.g. both the proportion walking to school and walking to work in Wellington have increased.

2.2 We support initiatives that provide opportunities to be active in local public spaces and suggest you include dog-walking, buggy-walking and other walking initiatives as well as Ciclovia/ Open Streets. Promoting local walking groups encourages new residents to get involved, albeit on a leisure front. They address physical activity with a positive social connection. We hope newly learned shortcuts and attractive routes may be incorporated into daily activity.

<http://www.livingstreets.org.nz/node/1950>

2.3 Proposed Action 2.3: Improve the level of safe access to quality public and green open space, recreational spaces and sports amenities by people of all ages and abilities, in all cities and communities, with a priority focus on reducing inequalities. We support this but suggest most significant work is done to introduce greenery along existing preferred routes as mentioned with Open Streets so the "daily dose of nature" is achieved on those utilitarian walking journeys rather than expanding walking reserves for leisure which is not universally a cultural practice nor achievable by people with time poverty. Daily utilitarian walking means it's an opportunity for physical activity, not an optional extra that may disappear when other commitments crowd it out. There are particular benefits from walking in nature for mental health (the view of trees in distance is enough to boost wellbeing apparently). See www.biophiliccities.org

Much of the global health budget is used in hospital services to address the immediate effects of preventable, lifestyle diseases rather than long term, preventative measures, i.e. public health programmes and activities. General Practices may lack capacity or intent to address lack of PA with their patients. Government funding allocation would be improved if the politicians and senior advisers understood how the future budget demands would be reduced by investing in increased physical activity. Of course this is a challenge when politicians have a three to five year term. However, Ministry and local government officials usually have longer tenure and may be open to longer term budget planning.

Further comments on areas not mentioned in the GAPPA – what’s missing?

There is no mention of signage but this is very helpful for increasing walking. Where there are signs that show shortcuts, or the length of time to a destination, there is immediate encouragement to walk. This can be done in combination with transit stops, showing destinations within five or ten minutes’ walk. City maps can show the same “ped-sheds”. Even in these days of googlemaps and similar, a physical reminder is useful. Some connection with an international or national campaign such as 10,000 steps could be even more effective.

Using “households without cars” as a measure of poverty is becoming outdated. People living in dense urban areas with adequate facilities, safe walking environments and good public transport may well not need to own a car. Car share, taxis and the advent of autonomous vehicles will likely change this dramatically.

WHO providing some incentives that share good initiatives could help. Specific suggestions include sponsoring a walk-friendly category for infrastructure and/or communications at conferences like World Cities Summit in Singapore, Guangzhou Urban Innovation as well as directly supporting the most walking-focussed international showcase Walk21 and encouraging member states to provide direct financial support to walking promotion and advocacy organisations and conferences, including general Public Health and Transport, as well as for infrastructure and management.

There is significant funding for public and private motorised transport and cyclists self-identify as an active group but the very generalised nature of walking means we are often volunteers or minimally-funded. This is not an even playing field.

Thank you for the opportunity of contributing on such an important issue.



Celia Wade-Brown

- * *Executive member of Living Streets Aotearoa*
- * *Trustee of Walk21 Foundation*
- * *Advisory Board Member of Biophilic Cities*
- * *Mayor of Wellington, New Zealand 2010 - 2016*

+64212478360

National Office

Living Streets Aotearoa

PO Box 25-424 Panama Street,

Wellington 6146

New Zealand