World Heart Federation Calls for Urgent Action To Protect Children’s Heart Health in World’s Most Populous Cities

New S.P.A.C.E strategy to address threat to the cardiovascular health of the world’s urban children

Geneva, 29 September 2011 – On World Heart Day, the World Heart Federation calls for a new approach to make cities heart healthier for the children who live in them. The call to action follows research commissioned by them which shows that increasing urbanization threatens the current and future heart health of children.

The research results are presented in a new report entitled, Urbanization and Cardiovascular Disease: Raising Heart-Healthy Children in Today’s Cities. The report summary – made available today – shows how urban life in low- and middle-income countries – often imposes limitations on the ways in which children live, and restricts opportunities for heart-healthy behaviours. In large cities across the globe, urban living actually facilitates unhealthy behaviour in children, including: physical inactivity, eating unhealthy foods, and even tobacco use by children as young as two. Crowded city living environments can also spread diseases such as rheumatic fever, which if left untreated, can cause rheumatic heart disease.

The report notes that children are particularly at risk of the negative health effects of city life, since they are most dependent on and affected by their living environment. Since urbanization is continuing to occur rapidly worldwide, urgent action is needed to prevent an “epidemic” of cardiovascular disease (CVD) including heart attacks and stroke.

“Although urbanization can be positive, bringing with it great opportunities, inherent to city-life are practical and logistical obstructions to heart-healthy behaviour for children. Lack of recreational space or unsafe environments may cause children to be inactive, or poor economic circumstance may force parents trying to feed hungry children to purchase cheap but unhealthy food high in fat, salts and sugars,” explains Professor Sidney C. Smith Jr, MD, President of the World Heart Federation.

The report concludes that there is an urgent necessity to consider children specifically in discussions – and policy developments – related to both CVD prevention and city planning. However, the report is optimistic, presenting case studies to show that informed action by governments and other stakeholders can dramatically reduce the level of CVD risk.

To support policymakers, city planners, and other adults concerned with making cities more heart healthy, the World Heart Federation has devised the S.P.A.C.E strategy, which incorporates five critical elements:

- **Stakeholder collaboration** – To bring together all those who have an impact on children’s lives and health, including family, neighbours, teachers, religious and community leaders. Local and national governments need to ensure that city planning includes all these stakeholders.

- **Planning cities** – So that they incorporate healthy choices in the natural, built, social and economic environment. As cities grow and land comes under ever more pressure, it is essential that the interests of children and their health are taken into account in the planning process. This includes providing space for outdoor recreation and exercise, limiting the presence of unhealthy food choices, and promoting smoke-free environments.

- **Access to healthcare** – The intensive population of urban areas can make the provision of healthcare easier. However, inequities persist and prevent poor people from getting the
healthcare they need. Investment in paediatric healthcare will greatly improve CVD outcomes within cities.

- **Child-focused dialogue** – All city dwellers face similar risks to their future heart health, but children's needs are very specific and need to be addressed separately from those of adults. It is important that approaches to improving heart health should include elements that are aimed specifically at children.

- **Evaluation** – More information and research is needed to fully understand the impact that cities have on children's heart health. Every city provides different risks and opportunities. Therefore, each city needs to carry out its own evaluation to establish the risks that exist and what can be done to mitigate them.

Earlier this month, the United Nations convened a high-level meeting to discuss the management and prevention of non-communicable diseases, including CVD. The S.P.A.C.E strategy is launched in response to this meeting, and to mark the occasion of World Heart Day. The full report, including recommendations for action, will be published later this year.

"We recognize that the S.P.A.C.E strategy may not be fully applicable or affordable for all nations currently experiencing the rapid urbanization of their populations. But it is hoped that the report presents a range of options to policymakers that are looking for initiatives to make a difference to CVD health outcomes," said Johanna Ralston, Chief Executive Officer at the World Heart Federation.

Creating environments that facilitate healthy behaviour can help children to build a heart-healthy future. By introducing the new S.P.A.C.E strategy, planners, government officials and other adults who have an impact on children's lives can help to make cities as healthy as possible for future generations.

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**Notes to Editors**

**About World Heart Day**
World Heart Day was created by the World Heart Federation in 2000 to inform people around the globe that heart disease and stroke are the world’s leading cause of death, claiming 17.1 million lives each year. Together with its members, the World Heart Federation spreads the news that at least 80% of premature deaths from heart disease and stroke could be avoided if the main risk factors, tobacco, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity, are controlled. You can view the executive summary of the report here: [https://www.world-heart-federation.org/publications/Reports/urbanization-and-CVD](https://www.world-heart-federation.org/publications/Reports/urbanization-and-CVD)

For more information, please visit: [www.worldheartday.org](http://www.worldheartday.org).

**About the World Heart Federation**
The World Heart Federation is dedicated to leading the global fight against heart disease and stroke, with a focus on low- and middle-income countries, via a united community of more than 200 member organizations. With its members, the World Heart Federation works to build global commitment to addressing cardiovascular health at the policy level, generates and exchanges ideas, shares best practice, advances scientific knowledge and promotes knowledge transfer to tackle CVD – the world’s number one killer. It is a growing membership organization that brings together the strength of cardiac societies and heart foundations from more than 100 countries. Through our collective efforts we can help people all over the world to lead longer and better heart-healthy lives.

For more information, please visit: [www.worldheart.org](http://www.worldheart.org)

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