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## Editorial

# Contributing to helping to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Truly shifting from niche to norm



This editorial was written at the first anniversary of the launch of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals ([United Nations General Assembly, 2015](#)). Active living research sits at the intersection of Goal 3 devoted to ensuring 'healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages', and Goal 11 which focuses on the creation of 'safe, inclusive and sustainable cities'.

The way we build cities and live in them has a profound impact on the health and wellbeing of its residents. Safe, inclusive, sustainable and liveable cities foster physically and socially active lifestyles, and encourage active forms of transport. Such behaviours can reduce the risk of chronic disease and reduce environmental and social risk factors so detrimental to the health of individuals and the planet.

Importantly for our field, target 11.7 ([United Nations General Assembly, 2015](#)) specifically focuses on greening of the city and the provision of public open space: "By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities" (p22). Greening can be considered a climate change action and have benefits for physical activity. Placing physical activity within a broader economic and climate change agenda is important as such targets have more immediate penalties and implications for policy makers than arguments for public health benefits.

The question for the active living research field, is what role will we each play in helping to deliver the UN's Sustainable Development Goals? Will we be highly relevant, or will we be on the fringe of this critical international agenda? There is a real opportunity for active living research field to be at the forefront of research that will provide evidence that will help deliver at least two of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. In this issue, we examine emerging evidence and experience across five continents addressing how research on physical activity and the environment can influence the health of people around the globe.

The focus of this special issue is on 'Niche to Norm'. As you read through these papers, we encourage you to ask yourself to think through whether our field is delivering on the promise of active living research of creating evidence that will influence policies and practice? There is no doubt, we are making progress and are well placed to contribute. We use ecological models that recognise multiple levels of influence on individual behaviour; we understand that policy sets the framework for community-wide outcomes; that programming is more proximal and creates opportunities to participate; and there also needs to be efforts to change individuals.

However, do we know enough about translational science, about the politics of changing policy; and conducting natural experimental studies of environment and policy changes to benchmark, monitor and influence policy and practice interventions?

We have excellent examples in this special issue: Bogota's Ciclovía ([Sarmiento et al., 2016](#)) and Recreovía ([Díaz Del Castillo et al., 2016](#)) provide success stories for repurposing existing space to encourage physical activity and reducing traffic exposure and hence improving air quality. This special issue also includes examples of programs targeting different age and population groups (e.g., connecting with older adults) and encouraging individuals to change which have the potential to contribute to Goal 3 of the UN Sustainable Goals (healthier lives for all) ([Alberico et al., 2016](#), [Monsur et al., 2016](#), [Jáuregui et al., 2016](#), [Yoo and Kim, 2016](#)). Importantly, for the first time we see five studies examining the built environment and physical activity in Asia, the most populous continent but not the focus of much previous published work in this field ([Yoo and Kim, 2016](#); [Monsur et al., 2016](#); [Adlakha et al., 2016](#); [Lu et al., 2016](#); [Bauman et al., 2017](#)).

However, have we gone far enough? As a field, are we truly going from 'Niche to Norm', or is there more we can do? For example, how will our field support city planners to deliver on the target of providing 'universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons, persons with disabilities, and those living in low and middle-income countries. How can we meet the challenging targets of reducing air pollution? What evidence can we produce that might assist?

Capacity building is key to changing a niche to a norm. The Active Living Research program has trained a new generation of transdisciplinary researchers. Many of them are working directly with local planning agencies, have community advisory boards, and include policy stakeholders in their teams. As these young investigators take on leadership roles the norm in universities and for community partnerships will change. Further, as we investigate ways to train community members to engage in advocacy efforts for built environment and policy change we will grow. Both youth and older adults are key targets for such efforts.

We can also investigate what, if any, policies are being delivered in our cities on the creation of public open space. Australian research shows a considerable gap between the aspirations of policy and what is delivered on-the-ground. Implementation requires resources and funded mandates for continued evaluation. As implementation science strengthens through clear frameworks and valid measures we will be able to provide stronger evidence of effective approaches.

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We can also actively disseminate the data many of us simply store on our computers. For example, we can produce GIS maps that show that distribution of different types of public open space across cities. We can create public open space spatial indicators and highlight areas across cities where there are inequities in the delivery of public open space. Is public open space spatially patterned? Are there particular inequities in disadvantaged areas? We can also create exposure measures based on current policies in our cities, and assess whether GIS measures created based on government policies for the delivery of public open space are associated with health and wellbeing outcomes (e.g., levels of recreational physical activity and mental health). If there are no associations, we can propose alternative evidence-based measures, and propose alternative indicators to inform better public open space policy. We can also tackle transport indicators: most transportation plans, for example, are based on outputs from models. These models do not often include walking or bicycling data. Collecting GPS data on active transportation can improve transport models and provide local data on the use of transport infrastructure.

Using evidence and working with knowledge brokers and advocates, we can then advocate for better policy: policy that will create health and wellbeing (UN Sustainable Development Goal 3) (United Nations General Assembly, 2015); and also create more sustainable and resilient cities (UN Sustainable Development Goal 7) (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) and ensure universal access to green space.

The need for this type of research is highlighted by UN Habitat and World Health Organisation. These international organizations argue for the creation of indicators that will identify areas of inequities (World Health Organisation, UN Habitat, 2010) and the need for health equity to be at the heart of city planning (World Health Organisation, Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, 2008). The World Health Organisation's Age Friendly Cities initiative (World Health Organisation, 2007) also provides a helpful framework and when large national organizations such as the AARP in the US adopt such initiatives the chance of success, sustainability and scale are much greater.

This special issue of Preventive Medicine focused on global aspects of active living research demonstrates that physical activity and the built environment are important in a wide variety of cities and countries of varying economic development, culture and geography. While the exact nature of the relationships between physical activity and the environment appear to differ significantly based on country, culture, and context, key principles are found across all of these dimensions. It is evident that urban form affects the choices made by people of all ages regarding physical activity and this impacts their health. The way we build cities is therefore important to health, and the capacity to carefully assess these relationships is critical to the health of people around the world. This capacity must be country, culture and context specific as well, if our research is to capture the nuances of different places. The good news as seen in the papers that follow is that early career researchers in diverse countries are actively investigating these issues and publishing their work. However, important gaps remain in both our understanding of physical activity and the environment, and in the capacity to conduct that work. Important, no studies in this issue come from either Africa or the Middle East.

The task ahead may seem a little daunting. However, as many have challenged over the years: 'if not now, when?' and 'if not us, who?' Globally, we are facing seemingly insurmountable challenges with rapid population growth, urbanisation and climate change. Creating healthy liveable sustainable cities is a major challenge, and the time for us to act is now. The active living field has a real opportunity to shift from Niche to Norm: however, the question for each of us, is are we up for it?

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