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VOICES FROM THE PERIPHERIES

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JAFFNA HEALTHY CITY: TURNING VISION INTO ACTION FOR A HEALTHIER URBAN FUTURE

Background

Jaffna, perched at the northern tip of Sri Lanka about 305 km north of Colombo, is a prominent cultural, economic, and urban hub in the Northern Province. It spans the Jaffna peninsula and seven inhabited islands. Historically agricultural, with livelihoods rooted in farming, fishing, animal husbandry, home industries, and self-employment, Jaffna is undergoing rapid urban and social transformation.

In recent years, the city has seen a sharp rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) resulting from changing lifestyles—higher consumption of processed and high-calorie foods, declining dietary fiber intake, increasing fast food, alcohol consumption, smoking, drug misuse—as well as from environmental and infrastructural stressors tied to urbanization. Sluggish waste management, flooding, crowded public spaces, unsafe roads, and inadequate WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) further endanger health.

Recognizing these challenges, the Jaffna Healthy City Project was formally launched in July 2020, building on multi-sectoral discussions that began in November 2019. The project aims to harness the WHO Healthy Cities framework to improve the well-being of citizens by addressing key determinants of health. The themes chosen for intervention are solid waste management, physical activity, WASH, and healthy foods, with implementation settings in schools, workplaces, and public spaces.

Why This Matters: Context & Evidence

The WHO South-East Asia Region's Healthy Cities Network was launched in 2022; by 2025, 23 cities across eight countries have joined, with ten cities awarded for progress.

Research shows that city-level initiatives targeting the 'Vital 5' risk factors—tobacco use, harmful alcohol use, physical

inactivity, unhealthy diet, and planetary health (environmental determinants)—are the most effective levers for reducing NCDs.

Case studies from Southeast Asia (e.g. Semarang, Indonesia) show that healthy city efforts lead to improved sanitation, clean water access, lower incidence of vector-borne diseases like



Cycling awareness event to promote physical activity

dengue, and enhanced urban amenities (parks, walkways) tied to increased physical activity. In addition, healthy city programs improve health equity: especially when vulnerable or underserved populations are included in planning, improving WASH, access to basic services, safe environments.

Healthy Cities Initiative: Structure & Objectives

To give institutional shape to the project, the Jaffna Healthy City Coordinating Committee (JHCCC) was established. Its core partners are:

- Jaffna Municipal Council (JMC)
- Provincial Department of Health Services, Northern Province
- Faculty of Medicine, University of Jaffna

Core objectives:

- Aligning initiatives with regional and national strategies
- Build stakeholder capacity in the selected thematic areas

- Coordinate multi-sectoral activities and development projects
- Facilitate local partnerships and collaboration
- Identify, design and execute innovative, context-appropriate solutions to underlying health determinants

makes it eligible for recognition once certification criteria are met, following in the path of Badulla (which in 2025 received WHO certification) and Kandy.

Achievements and Ongoing Projects

Since inception, several concrete actions have been implemented across Jaffna Municipal Council area. Key highlights include:

- A large cycling event to raise awareness and promote physical activity
- Zero-plastic pilots in selected wards (e.g. Teaching Hospital, local banks)
- Training of Trainers (ToT) and workshops in schools to promote environmental awareness and healthy behavior
- Educational banners in hospitals and social media campaigns on healthy eating & physical activity
- Traffic safety interventions: one-way roads during school hours, zebra crossings / rumble stripes near schools and key public buildings
- Waste & environmental infrastructure: incinerator project for non-degradable waste, drainage improvement in flood-prone zones
- School food environment assessment: pre-assessment of canteens using structured surveys to benchmark healthy food provision



Menstrual Hygiene and Health Workshops at Schools

VOICES FROM THE PERIPHERIES

Continued...



Introduction of Zero Plastic Projects at hospitals

Future Directions

To consolidate gains and scale up impact, the following strategic actions are being planned:

- Enforce one-way road systems during school times, with restrictions on heavy vehicles
- Develop pedestrian-friendly infrastructure: dedicated by-lanes, clear pavements (removing unauthorized vendors), better access near hospitals
- Establish public toilets in high-traffic zones, improved public waste collection schedules
- Expand incineration for sanitary waste (e.g. sanitary pads), and ensure safe disposal
- Enforce zero-plastic rules in all public spaces across JMC limits
- Construct comprehensive drainage systems, particularly in flood-vulnerable areas
- Create and maintain recreational, cycling, and leisure public spaces for physical activity
- Scale up health promotion: visible signage, health messages, campaigns spanning the city
- Strengthen school canteen regulation and inspection; ensure nearby food vendors meet healthy food standards

Challenges & Policy/ Governance Needs

Following challenges have been identified during the implementation of the programme.

- Political commitment and governance support: Sustained leadership from local government (mayor, council), provincial/national authorities is critical for

resource allocation and regulatory enforcement.

- Integration into existing public health systems: To avoid duplication and promote sustainability, the Healthy City approach must align with national policies (e.g. Sri Lanka's NCD Strategy, Environmental Regulations, Urban Planning laws).
- Multi-sectoral coordination: Many determinants of health lie outside health departments – city planning, transport, education, sanitation, environment – necessitating strong interdepartmental collaboration.

- Community participation: The involvement of citizens, schools, civil society groups is essential both for legitimacy and for behaviour change.
- Policy & regulatory tools: Laws/regulations on food safety, vending near schools, plastic use, traffic laws, parking; regulatory oversight of school canteens and food outlets.
- Monitoring, metrics & evaluation: To pursue WHO certification, robust data on health outcomes, environment, behaviour and policy implementation are required. Benchmarking, periodic evaluation, feedback loops.

National Scaling & Call to Action

Jaffna's experience shows that with local institutional capacity, collaboration, and strategic focus, a city can make measurable progress towards becoming a Healthy City. To fully realize this potential across Sri Lanka, there is a need for:

A national Healthy Cities Programme or strategy that offers guidance, standards, incentives, and funding for cities

Clear certification criteria and support from WHO, country should be utilized by provincial authorities, and national ministries (Health, Urban Development, Local Government)

Sharing of best practices among cities (e.g. Jaffna, Badulla, Kandy) for peer learning

Dedicated financial resources (local government budgets, grants, donor support) for infrastructure (drainage, public spaces, waste management)

Policy reforms to embed health in urban planning, environment, transport, food regulation

Conclusion

Jaffna is well on its way to becoming a model Healthy City in Sri Lanka. Through a mix of policy, community engagement, infrastructure, and environmental interventions, the city is addressing urgent health risks and improving quality of life. With continued governance support, adequate resources, effective monitoring, and expansion of interventions into more neighborhoods and sectors, Jaffna can not only gain WHO certification but serve as a blueprint for other rapidly urbanizing Sri Lankan cities.

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Zero Plastic sessions in banks

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