

Amalia Waxman
Project Manager NMH
World Health Organisation
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Dear Ms Waxman

Global strategy for diet, physical activity and health

Sustrans is a civil engineering NGO which works to promote healthy, active and environmentally sustainable ways of travelling. We co-ordinate development of the UK National Cycle Network and the national Safe Routes to Schools information programme. We also have programmes on public health ("Active Travel"), mobility management, residential planning (Home Zones) and travel choice marketing programmes ("TravelSmart"). We have 150 staff, 40,000 subscribing Supporters and 3,000 volunteers, across the whole UK. Sustrans has over 25 years' experience in this field.

Internationally Sustrans has a network of associate NGOs, mostly in Europe, and some 750 contacts across the world - community groups, national, regional and local government contacts, officials in the EU, international NGOs based both in the UK and overseas, academics, and commercial and professional contacts. We provide regular technical material on sustainable transport infrastructure design and construction, Safe Routes to Schools, and mobility management in the health sector, free of charge to these contacts.

Sustrans international work includes EuroVelo, the European cycle route network, and projects on cycle-rail intermodality, Safe Routes to Schools, VIVALDI, an integrated sustainable transport demonstration under CIVITAS, and the European Greenways Day and Awards as part of European Mobility Week. We recently published the guidelines for implementation of the EuroVelo network, available like other technical materials from our online shop at www.sustrans.org.uk.

Sustrans believes that the environmental, health and safety problems caused by our overuse of private motor transport must be addressed on an international level. As regards physical activity, we strongly advocate that more must be done to encourage and facilitate the incorporation of healthy physical activity into the daily routine, by promoting the active forms of travel.

We welcome the initiative of the WHO in creating a single unified strategy which brings together the closely linked areas of diet and physical activity. These factors have a huge impact on non-communicable disease, wellness and quality of life; the impact of each is very significant, but they can also reinforce one another and, if addressed exclusively, each can confuse and confound research and policy making about the other.

It is clear that societies at different stages of economic development have different needs in regard to diet and physical activity. This does not invalidate your approach, it makes it even more important; developing societies have the opportunity to avoid repeating mistakes, in land use planning, transport planning, traffic law-making and enforcement, fiscal policies with regard to transport, etc. We very much hope the new strategy can help them to do so. We also hope it will impact on our own, “western” society, to reduce the now very severe effects of our sedentary lifestyle and exaggerated reliance on motor transport of all kinds.

We also welcome the work being done to canvass the views of people working within civil society, and have responded to the ongoing web-based debate. Nonetheless, I feel that the new strategy is so important that we should write to you direct about some fundamental principles.

Sustrans’ approach is about positively changing the environment so that individuals find healthier transport choices more attractive and easier to make, rather than pressurising people to move away from harmful activities which they may perceive as enjoyable. I am writing to recommend that the WHO strategy on diet, physical activity and health should where possible take a similar approach. In particular, we would like to see emphasis on:

- environmental changes to encourage and facilitate active forms of travel, such as creation of more and better routes for cycling and walking, for leisure and for journeys to work, school, shops and other services
- the removal of – often accidental – barriers to active travel, such as the location of services in out-of-town sites, lack of cycle parking for staff and visitors, etc
- in developing countries, the avoidance of development patterns which suppress active forms of travel, such as measures to promote urban car use
- Speed management policies to implement low speed areas within settlements, such as 30kph in urban areas, and in particular in the vicinity of schools
- the removal of incentives to unnecessary use of sedentary forms of travel, such as financial support for car use, free car parking, etc
- more stringent traffic law enforcement and measures to make the street environment feel safer and more pleasant for pedestrians and cyclists; in developing countries this may be especially significant where roads are improved, allowing vehicle speeds and numbers to increase
- a good example set by leaders, such as politicians, senior figures in the health world and other sectors – these figures should be seen cycling and walking
- active promotion of the healthy and active modes, by promotional campaigns, media campaigns, and individualised marketing techniques

- intensive and transparent health impact assessment of all transport project proposals; no projects should now be implemented which cannot demonstrate real health benefits.

For your information I have enclosed a small selection of Sustrans published materials addressing the issues of transport, health, and the choice of active forms of travel. If you would like any further information please visit our website, www.sustrans.org.uk, or contact me at philipi@sustrans.org.uk.

Yours sincerely

Philip Insall
Director, Active Travel