

Megacities pose health risks

China makes significant gains in tackling issues like obesity triggered by rapid urbanization, forum hears

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Asia is now home to 19 of the world's 33 megacities, and China is out in front with six of them — Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Tianjin and Wuhan.

A megacity is an urban agglomeration housing 10 million or more inhabitants. Such metropolises are often the primary nodes for investment in a country and feature the most affluent households.

Chinese megacities have seen extraordinary growth since the opening of China to the outside world 40 years ago and will continue to grow, analysts say. But what will the future hold for China's urban expansion in the coming years?

This was one of the themes canvassed at The University of Sydney's 2018 Sydney China Business Forum on Oct 22.

The theme this year, "China's healthy cities: opportunities and challenges for Australian businesses", comes at a time when urbanization in China has become a national priority.

With the permanent urban population accounting for almost 60 percent of China's total population, and with an anticipated increase of 300-700 million people by 2050, it is a key part of the country's strategy to boost domestic demand.

Presented by The University of Sydney China Studies Centre in collaboration with The University of Sydney Business School & Charles Perkins Centre, the forum heard from several Australian and Chinese business leaders and academics on the opportunities and challenges arising from China's urbanization, in health, food safety, city development, environmental protection and lifestyle changes.

Selina Lo, consulting editor of the medical journal *The Lancet*, delivered the first of three keynote speeches, in which she focused on the findings of The Tsinghua-Lancet Commission on Healthy Cities in China.

The study began in 2015 and was carried out by a team of experts from Tsinghua University, China's National Health Commission, the World Health Organization (WHO), the University of California, Berkeley, and other organizations.

Published in April this year, the report and its findings were subtitled "unlocking the power of cities for a healthy China".

"In just over 30 years, China has seen unprecedented migration from rural to urban centers," Lo told the forum. The study said that by the end of 2030, more than 70 percent of China's population will live in a



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Academic director of the Charles Perkins Centre at The University of Sydney

city, and the urban population is estimated to reach 1 billion.

"Although urbanization has brought unprecedented health benefits, new challenges have emerged that threaten the well-being of people," Lo said.

Her list of some of the risk factors from urbanization included air and water pollution, lack of access to free market food; also tobacco, alcohol, extreme weather conditions, poor diet, lack of exercise, and growing obesity levels among adults and children.

Obesity, which is often referred to as a Western disease, can develop into Type 2 diabetes and can cause many noncommunicable diseases like heart disease.

The WHO has put the number of adults in China with diabetes at more than 100 million, which is expected to rise to 150 million by

2040, putting a major strain on the public health system and economy.

"The report is special in that it was a Chinese initiative rather than an initiative by us (*The Lancet*)," Lo said.

Professor Li Duo, who gave the second keynote speech, also spoke about the problems associated with obesity as China becomes more urbanized.

"Growing up in Northwest China 40 years ago, it was rare to see a fat person," he told *China Daily Asia Weekly* during a break in the forum.

Li, chief professor of nutrition at the Institute of Nutrition and Health at Qingdao University, in East China's Shandong province, said that obesity, and all its associated non-communicable diseases, has become a problem not only in China but around the world.

The forum was told by various speakers that China's new affluence

and the urban explosion following Deng Xiaoping's reforms 40 years ago have not been without some cost to the nation.

Health has become a key issue for China and was referred to by General Secretary Xi Jinping, also the nation's president, in his address to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2017, when he said: "A healthy population is a key mark of a prosperous nation and a strong country."

According to Li, the rise in obesity in China is not the result of any single factor. "When I was growing up, it was unheard of," he said.

"Diet has been a big factor. As people move from the rural to urban areas, their diets change. They are exposed to fast food, food full of sugar and preservatives.

"When I was growing up, we had rice, fresh vegetables and meat ...

that was a luxury. But today all that has changed."

Li said solving the problem of obesity starts in the kindergarten. "It is a problem the nation is well aware of and is addressing," he said. "But it will take time. It won't happen overnight."

He said China's obesity problem has emerged in just one generation, whereas in many Western countries it has taken three generations.

The Lancet's Lo said during one of the panel discussions that in the last 50 years China has made some of "the globe's most impressive gains" in health.

"Many of those gains have been in areas like combating infectious diseases and reducing child mortality. But with the growth in urbanization, a new set of issues needs to be addressed.

"Issues such as obesity, poor diets, lack of physical exercise, cancers and so on are problems. From a health perspective, these are issues that require services that are in place and affordable. China is making significant gains in that area," she said.

"It's a top-down solution, and if any country can do it China can."

Professor Stephen Simpson, academic director of the Charles Perkins Centre at The University of Sydney, said China has seen an "incredible movement" of people from rural to urban areas.

"What this has done is further distanced people from their traditional food supply, resulting in a rapid change in diet," he said during the panel discussion.

"The further you are away from the food supply means more processed foods. The more you process food, the more you lose sight of the ingredients used, such as fats and sugars.

"What these do is dilute the nutritional value of the food, which leads to the health problems we have been discussing."

He said lack of physical activity is also a problem, alluding to the fact that rural jobs tended to be hard, physical work, something not required of most people in an urban environment.

China, however, is trying to address that issue with nationwide exercise and physical fitness programs.

Simpson said he has been struck by the way China has managed the problems of a growing urban environment. "The scale is enormous, but the top has been very quick to move, as the populace wants a cleaner environment and more nutritious food.

"And for the first time on the planet, there is an opportunity to try out new things to address these issues."