

ESF Evaluation of the WHO Healthy Cities Methodology

Originating entity: World Health Organization (WHO) Healthy Cities Network

Primary focus: A city-based public health and governance methodology that seeks to improve urban wellbeing through integrated approaches to health equity, participation, sustainability, climate resilience, social determinants of health, and intersectoral governance. The framework supports cities in embedding health across planning, transport, housing, environment, economy, participation, and local policy systems.

ESF Evaluation Score: 17 / 20

Introductory Context

The WHO Healthy Cities methodology represents one of the most significant global efforts to reposition health as a systemic, place-based, and participatory dimension of urban life rather than merely a function of healthcare systems. Emerging from the WHO Healthy Cities movement established in 1987, the framework has progressively evolved from a predominantly public-health initiative into a broader ecosystemic governance model integrating:

- climate resilience
- equity
- participation
- sustainability
- wellbeing
- social cohesion
- urban planning
- and planetary health

The current Phase VII framework is organised around six interconnected themes:

- People
- Place
- Participation
- Prosperity
- Planet
- Peace

with the forthcoming Phase VIII increasingly integrating resilience and preparedness within the context of climate-health transformation.

The methodology recognises that health is created through:

- housing
- transport
- education
- environment
- governance
- relationships
- participation
- and social conditions

rather than through healthcare interventions alone.

From an ESF perspective, this represents a highly important shift because it aligns strongly with the understanding that flourishing emerges through the interaction of interconnected human, ecological, cultural, and economic systems. As such, the WHO Healthy Cities framework can be understood as one of the strongest existing international models for ecosystemic urban wellbeing governance, with particularly strong alignment across:

- public health
- ecological sustainability
- participation
- equity
- and preventative systems thinking.

However, from an ESF perspective, the framework also remains transitional. While it successfully integrates many dimensions of sustainability and wellbeing, it has not yet fully incorporated:

- regenerative economics
- cultural and existential flourishing
- inner development
- worldview formation
- intergenerational meaning
- and deeper relational understandings of place and human development.

1. Natural Environment Integration

Score: 4.5 / 5

This is one of the framework's strongest areas of alignment. The WHO Healthy Cities methodology increasingly places ecological health and planetary wellbeing at the centre of urban policy and public-health planning.

Particularly strong is its integration of:

- climate-health resilience
- active travel
- green and blue infrastructure
- biodiversity
- clean air

- healthy food systems
- urban ecology
- climate adaptation
- environmental equity
- and sustainable urban planning

The framework strongly recognises that:

- human health
- environmental quality
- and urban design

are inseparable.

Recent WHO and Pan-European climate-health agendas further strengthen this alignment through explicit emphasis on:

- climate mitigation
- heat resilience
- air pollution reduction
- local resilience
- and nature-based urban solutions.

The methodology is especially strong in moving beyond narrow environmental sustainability toward integrated ecological public-health thinking.

However, from an ESF perspective, the framework still tends to operate primarily within:

- sustainability
- resilience
- and mitigation paradigms

rather than fully regenerative or reciprocal ecological worldviews.

The framework could therefore be further strengthened through:

- bioregional thinking
- ecological reciprocity
- regenerative stewardship
- deeper nature connection methodologies
- and more explicit recognition of the intrinsic value of living systems beyond human wellbeing outcomes.

ESF judgement: Very strong alignment. The WHO Healthy Cities methodology demonstrates an advanced understanding that urban flourishing depends fundamentally upon ecological health, climate resilience, environmental quality, and sustainable relationships between cities and living systems.

2. Circular and Regenerative Economics Integration

Score: 3.5 / 5

The framework demonstrates moderate-to-strong alignment in this domain.

The WHO Healthy Cities methodology increasingly recognises the importance of:

- wellbeing economies
- equitable prosperity
- social inclusion
- and broader measures of societal progress beyond GDP.

Its integration of:

- health equity
- social determinants of health
- inclusive urban development
- and preventative public-health investment

reflects an important shift away from purely extractive economic models.

Particularly important is the growing WHO emphasis on:

- wellbeing indicators
- long-term societal resilience
- and integrated economic-health outcomes.

The framework also recognises the importance of:

- affordable housing
- food systems
- transport equity
- access to green space
- and inclusive urban infrastructure

as core determinants of wellbeing.

However, from an ESF perspective, the framework remains less developed in relation to:

- circular economies
- regenerative enterprise
- local wealth-building
- community ownership
- ecological economics
- distributive economic systems
- and post-growth transition models.

Economic systems are still treated primarily as enabling conditions for health rather than as living ecosystemic relationships embedded within planetary boundaries.

The framework also gives comparatively limited attention to:

- care economies
- relational economies
- time poverty
- local resilience economies
- and regenerative civic infrastructure.

ESF judgement: Strongly aligned in relation to equity and wellbeing economics, though the methodology could be significantly strengthened through deeper integration of regenerative, circular, and localised economic models.

3. Cultural Values and Identity Integration

Score: 4 / 5

The WHO Healthy Cities framework demonstrates strong alignment in this domain.

Participation, equity, inclusion, peace, democratic engagement, and community cohesion are central pillars of the methodology.

The framework recognises that:

- trust
- participation
- social connection
- and civic relationships

are foundational determinants of health and urban resilience.

Strong areas of alignment include:

- participatory governance
- community engagement
- intersectoral collaboration
- social cohesion
- and inclusion of marginalised communities.

The methodology also increasingly recognises the importance of:

- belonging
- local participation

- community resilience
- and collective agency

within climate-health transformation.

However, from an ESF perspective, culture is still treated more as a social determinant than as a living system of:

- meaning
- worldview
- narrative
- identity
- memory
- and relational belonging.

The framework gives comparatively limited attention to:

- cultural flourishing
- symbolic life
- beauty
- spiritual wellbeing
- sacred relationship with place
- Indigenous knowledge systems
- intergenerational memory
- and the “soul” of the city.

Similarly, while participation is strongly developed, the framework is less explicit in relation to:

- values formation
- civic imagination
- cultural transformation
- and deeper relational understandings of identity and belonging.

ESF judgement: Strongly integrated in relation to participation, inclusion, and civic cohesion, though capable of further development through deeper integration of cultural meaning-making, worldview formation, place identity, and relational belonging.

4. Human Capacities and Potential Integration

Score: 4 / 5

This is another major strength of the framework.

The WHO Healthy Cities methodology strongly supports:

- preventative wellbeing
- life-course health
- mental wellbeing
- social inclusion
- participation
- healthy ageing
- resilience
- and community capacity-building.

The framework demonstrates an advanced understanding that:

- health
- wellbeing
- opportunity
- and social participation

are shaped through interconnected social and environmental conditions.

Particularly strong is its focus on:

- reducing structural inequalities
- supporting vulnerable populations
- improving community wellbeing

- and creating conditions for healthier lives.

The methodology also aligns strongly with the ESF levels of:

- security
- relationship
- engagement
- and contribution.

However, from an ESF perspective, the framework remains comparatively underdeveloped in relation to:

- inner development
- emotional maturity
- flourishing psychology
- creativity
- contemplative development
- purpose
- meaning
- and transformative human growth.

While wellbeing is central, flourishing is still primarily framed through:

- health outcomes
- participation
- resilience
- and social functioning

rather than through deeper understandings of human consciousness, aspiration, and developmental potential.

The framework also gives relatively limited attention to:

- trauma-informed development
- nervous-system regulation
- relational intelligence
- contemplative practices
- and the developmental conditions underpinning long-term civic and ecological flourishing.

ESF judgement: Strongly integrated in relation to public health, participation, and preventative wellbeing, though capable of further development through deeper integration of inner development, flourishing psychology, and transformative human potential.

Overall ESF Score

ESF domain	Score
Natural Environment	4.5
Circular and Regenerative Economics	3.5
Cultural Values and Identity	4
Human Capacities and Potential	4
Total	17 / 20

According to the ESF evaluation scale, a total score of **17 / 20** places the framework in the category of:

Highly Integrated

Overall Assessment

The WHO Healthy Cities methodology represents one of the strongest currently available international frameworks for integrating:

- public health
- participation
- climate resilience

- sustainability
- equity
- and urban wellbeing

within a coherent governance model.

Its principal strengths are:

- strong systems thinking
- climate-health integration
- preventative public-health orientation
- participatory governance
- urban ecological awareness
- equity and inclusion
- place-based implementation
- intersectoral collaboration
- active travel and healthy environments
- and growing integration of wellbeing economics.

The framework's greatest contribution lies in its recognition that:

- health is produced through systems,
- cities are relational environments,
- and wellbeing depends upon the quality of social, ecological, economic, and civic conditions.

It therefore represents a major shift away from fragmented or purely biomedical understandings of urban health.

However, from an ESF perspective, the framework could be further strengthened through:

- deeper regenerative economic integration
- more explicit cultural and existential dimensions
- stronger relational and place-based identity frameworks
- integration of inner development and flourishing psychology
- greater emphasis on meaning, beauty, and belonging
- deeper engagement with Indigenous and plural worldviews
- stronger intergenerational flourishing methodologies
- and more explicit regenerative and reciprocal ecological thinking.

As a result, the WHO Healthy Cities methodology can be understood as a highly integrated ecosystemic public-health framework, especially powerful in its:

- governance
- ecological
- equity
- and participatory dimensions.

Concluding Assessment

The WHO Healthy Cities methodology should be regarded as one of the leading global examples of ecosystemic urban governance in practice.

It already shares ESF's concern with:

- systems thinking
- health equity
- ecological interdependence
- participation
- climate resilience
- preventative wellbeing
- social cohesion
- and long-term urban sustainability.

However, it stops short of ESF's broader contribution, which is to integrate these dimensions within a fuller framework of:

- human flourishing
- cultural meaning
- regenerative economics
- inner development
- worldview formation
- and the living relational identity of place.

The next evolutionary stage of the Healthy Cities movement may therefore involve moving beyond:

- healthy and resilient cities

toward:

- flourishing and regenerative cities.

ESF Assessment

The WHO Healthy Cities methodology represents one of the most advanced international frameworks currently available for translating systems thinking, preventative wellbeing, ecological sustainability, participation, and climate-health resilience into practical urban governance.

The Flourish Project is a global initiative dedicated to advancing the Ecosystemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework - an integrative approach to wellbeing that recognises the deep interdependence between human development, cultural values, regenerative economies, and the natural world. Rooted in systems thinking, relational practice, and emerging research on flourishing, the project seeks to support the development of compassionate, resilient, and ecologically conscious individuals and communities through education, policy innovation, research, and cross-sector collaboration. A global multidimensional framework designed to complement GDP through the measurement of equitable, inclusive, and sustainable wellbeing across present and future generations. The framework integrates wellbeing, inclusion, sustainability, resilience, institutional quality, and environmental conditions into a unified dashboard architecture for national and international policy application.