

2024

Benchmarking Active Cities in India

Issue Brief #2



What are active cities and why do we need them?

"Today, cities must re-think the way they address their urban planning and growth, how they design infrastructure and mobility, how they operate and integrate their diverse communities, in order to enable their citizens and communities to be more active and healthier."

- Active Wellbeing Initiative (2023)

Urban residents in India and around the globe are grappling with the adverse effects of increasingly sedentary lifestyles. The concept of active cities presents a promising solution. This brief underscores the importance of active cities, and building from international best practice, advocates for the development of a uniform, consistent framework to benchmark the progress of such cities within India.

The concept of 'active cities' has become globally prominent spurred on by unprecedented levels of urbanization and rapidly transforming urban environments. Active cities effectively integrate sports and physical activity (SAPA) into the daily lives of residents, aiming to enhance their health, well-being, and quality of life.¹ Through purposeful design, policy, and cultural interventions, active cities foster an environment in which activities such as walking, cycling, outdoor recreation, and other forms of active mobility are safe, accessible, and enjoyable for all residents.

There is an impending health crisis fuelled by the growing incidence of inactivity and sedentary lifestyles, especially in cities. In 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO)

released a first-ever "Global status report on physical activity" highlighting data from 194 countries that showed that over 80% of adolescents and 27% of adults globally do not meet recommended levels. In fact, according to the report, the world is set to see a 15% relative reduction in physical activity by 2030. This would pose a heavy burden on health systems and society, with almost 500 million people set to develop heart disease, obesity, diabetes, and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs) if nothing improves.²

A study of sports participation in cities across the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) found that nearly 35% of urban residents were insufficiently active.³ Moreover, a pronounced gender disparity existed, with women trailing men by 10 percentage points (on average) in meeting these activity standards. This discrepancy was more striking in smaller cities. The research illuminated concerning trends in specific demographic groups: youth and seniors exhibit notably reduced activity rates. Only a third of the youth population (35%) manages to stay active, and the figure for the elderly is only slightly better, at 55%. The data underscores a pressing need to address physical inactivity across different age groups and life-stages and genders. As Indian cities

¹ Sport Ireland, "Active Cities," Sport Ireland, 2023, <https://www.sportireland.ie/activecities>.

² World Health Organization, "WHO Highlights High Cost of Physical Inactivity in First-Ever Global Report," October 2022, <https://www.who.int/news/item/19-10-2022-who-highlights-high-cost-of-physical-inactivity-in-first-ever-global-report>.

³ ASEAN Secretariat, "ASEAN Survey on Sports Participation 2021" (Jakarta, Indonesia: ASEAN, November 2022), https://portasconsulting.com/media/8dad1cdbb6d1ebb/for-publication_asean-sports-participation-study-2021-7706.pdf.

get older, these numbers indicate that the health crisis could get worse, making now the best time to act upon it.

This health crisis has severe economic implications for cities. The WHO report on physical activity highlighted this, estimating the vast economic cost of physical inactivity to be around potential losses of \$27 Billion annually.⁴ Other global findings suggest that in many scenarios, as a collective we are missing out on potentially more than an estimated \$100 billion - \$300 billion increase to the global GDP as an associated cost of physical inactivity.⁵ Studies also link absenteeism and presenteeism at work (as a result of a lack of full health) being a major driver of this opportunity cost. This is further linked to costs associated with increased reliance on healthcare systems, where billions of dollars could potentially be saved as a result of healthier populations. Increased physical inactivity presents a real challenge in terms of costs, healthcare, and unrealized potential.

Active cities can help unlock benefits beyond NCDs. At the individual level, evidence from across the world suggests that engaging in SAPA promotes mental health, enhances life skills, and fosters social engagement.⁶ This permeates to community-level benefits where individuals get the opportunity to form stronger social connections and support networks, improving overall wellbeing. At the

city level, this means more integrated and close-knit communities, alongside positive economic outcomes and reduced healthcare expenses. The opportunities presented as a result of more engagement in SAPA can alter urban environments positively, further strengthening the case for active cities being crucial in creating healthier, happier and more prosperous urban environments. This is also recognised in the WHO Global Action Plan for Physical Activity 2018-30 (GAPPA), which recognises the creation of “Active Environments” and “Active People”, listing out actions in relation to urban spaces that are more conducive to partaking in physical activity, and its subsequent benefits going beyond physical to mental, social, and economic.

Moreover, investing in active cities represents a high return-on-investment (ROI) solution. The economic gains resulting from more SAPA engagement have already been highlighted in this section. However, the notion of an active city doesn't mean building it up from the ground. As the following sections will indicate, active city-practices around the world focus on design and cost-effectiveness, retrofitting existing infrastructure, and successfully engaging innovative solutions that have been proven to work, without an increased amount of funding and/or resources.

⁴ World Health Organization, 2022

⁵ Marco Hafner et al., *The Economic Benefits of a More Physically Active Population: An International Analysis* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), doi:10.7249/RR4291.

⁶ Chiara Fossati et al., “Physical Exercise and Mental Health: The Routes of a Reciprocal Relation,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 12364, 18, no. 23 (December 2021), doi:10.3390/ijerph182312364.

Why should we benchmark active cities?

Benchmarking active cities has emerged as a valuable tool to evaluate and compare the effectiveness of active city initiatives. This approach of measurement and evaluation, building from a comprehensive framework, allows cities around the world to assess their progress, learn from useful practices, and collaborate towards creating more active and vibrant urban environments that improve the health and wellbeing of all residents.⁷



Comparing and mapping

International benchmarking of active cities provides a framework for assessing and comparing the performance of various cities in fostering participation in SAPA among their populations. By measuring key indicators, such as walkability, cycling infrastructure, public transit accessibility, and the availability of recreational spaces, benchmarking enables cities to gauge their progress in creating environments that encourage active lifestyles.⁸

It offers a comprehensive evaluation of a city's policies, programs, and infrastructure related to SAPA, shedding light on areas that require improvement and identifying successful strategies employed by leading cities worldwide. This collaborative approach can foster a spirit of healthy competition, motivating cities to innovate and adopt evidence-based practices that have proven effective in other contexts.⁹



Knowledge sharing

Among other key benefits, international benchmarking has the potential to accelerate progress and knowledge-sharing among cities. Through the exchange of experiences, success stories, and lessons learned, active city initiatives can be strengthened and adapted to suit different cultural, geographical, and socio-economic contexts.¹⁰ Benchmarking allows cities to tap into a vast pool of expertise and draw inspiration from others facing similar challenges. This collaborative learning fosters a global network of active cities committed to advancing the well-being of their residents and creating environments that promote health and sustainability.¹¹

⁷ Evaleo and TAFISA, "Active Well-Being Initiative - Home," Active Well-being Initiative, 2023, <http://activewellbeing.org/>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sport and Citizenship, "Final Report and Recommendations - PACTE Project," February 2021, <https://www.pacteproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/recommandations-pacte.pdf>

¹⁰ Union Cycliste Internationale, "UCI Bike City Label | Guide" (Union Cycliste Internationale, 2022), https://downloads.ctfassets.net/76117gh5x5an/5eaUGztb1WIoFHYSRbpNQ9/2b39868825bf8054abed6d0502f38e55/2022_UCI_CITY-LABEL_BROCHURE.pdf.

¹¹ Evaleo and TAFISA, "Active Well-Being Initiative - Home."



Advocacy and decision-making

Moreover, international benchmarking helps to raise awareness about the importance of active cities and encourages policymakers, city officials, and community leaders to prioritize SAPA within their urban planning strategies. As cities strive to tackle pressing issues like sedentary lifestyles, obesity, and environmental degradation, benchmarking serves as a powerful tool for advocacy and evidence-based policymaking.¹² The

availability of benchmarking data and research findings enables stakeholders to make informed decisions and allocate resources effectively. It also empowers citizens to engage in conversation, advocating for the implementation of active city policies and holding their leaders accountable. Through international benchmarking, cities can drive positive change, transforming urban environments into vibrant, active, and inclusive spaces that enhance the well-being of all residents.

¹² Peter Walker, "Cities with Physically Active Residents More Productive as Well as Healthier," *The Guardian*, June 2015, sec. Cities, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/jun/09/cities-physically-active-residents-more-productive-healthier-walking-cycling-economic-benefits>.

What’s already out there?

Several initiatives and projects have been developed to facilitate benchmarking and provide recognition to cities that excel in this domain. This section explores some prominent examples of current practices in benchmarking active cities, including the Global Active City Label, UCI's Bike City label, and the PACTE project, as well as active city practices in Colombia, Ireland, and Sweden.

These examples demonstrate the diverse range of benchmarking practices employed to evaluate and promote active cities worldwide. By establishing criteria, assessing performance, and providing recognition, these initiatives inspire cities to invest in infrastructure, policies, and programs that prioritize SAPA, thereby fostering healthier and more sustainable urban environments.

Table 1: Summary of major global initiatives on Active Cities

Initiative	Description	Insight
Global Active City	TAFISA (The Association For International Sport for All) in collaboration with Evaleo, and with support from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) have developed Global Active City Labels as part of the Active Well-being Initiative (AWI) which aims to recognize and promote cities that prioritize physical activity and provide opportunities for their residents to engage in sports and active recreation. ¹³ The program assesses cities based on a set of criteria, including sports participation rates, sports infrastructure, policies, programs, and initiatives to promote physical activity. The Global Active City Label serves as an international benchmark for cities striving to create active communities and highlight best practices that can be shared and replicated globally. Currently, under the AWI, the organizations are working on creating a Global Well-being City Label that will be suited for more	<p>The AWI presents an interesting model for learning, sharing information, as well as integrating a potential Active City framework for India.</p> <p>The city of Bokaro is an existing AWI partner city, and learnings from their experience with the initiative can be extracted further.</p>

¹³ Evaleo and TAFISA, “Active Well-Being Initiative - Home.”

Initiative	Description	Insight
	adaptive and innovative solutions around physical activity and health. ¹⁴	
UCI Bike City Label	The Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), the international governing body for cycling, has established the Bike City label to acknowledge cities that demonstrate a strong commitment to promoting cycling as a sustainable mode of transportation. ¹⁵ The label assesses cities based on criteria such as cycling infrastructure, safety measures, bike-sharing programs, and efforts to encourage cycling culture among residents. The UCI Bike City Label serves as a benchmark for cities to improve their cycling infrastructure and policies, enhancing their appeal as bike-friendly destinations. ¹⁶	There is already an existing culture of cycles in India. Combined with the biking initiatives under the Smart Cities Mission of the Government of India, the UCI Bike City label can be utilized within the framework to create a Bike City label for India, which may be in partnership with UCI.
PACTE project	The PACTE (Promoting Active Cities Throughout Europe) project was a European initiative that focused on benchmarking and knowledge sharing among cities to promote physical activity. ¹⁷ The project facilitated the exchange of experiences and good practices among participating cities, allowing them to learn from each other and collectively work towards creating more active and inclusive urban environments. It involved collaboration between several European cities and aimed to develop a framework for assessing and monitoring active city policies, initiatives, and outcomes,	The PACTE project can have a two-fold benefit. One, connecting Active Indian cities with those that were a part of PACTE to share learnings and practices. Secondly, now that PACTE has finished, a framework for India should have a platform like PACTE.

¹⁴ Evaleo and TAFISA, “Global Well-Being City,” Active Well-being Initiative, 2023, <http://activewellbeing.org/global-well-being-city/>.

¹⁵ Union Cycliste Internationale, “UCI Bike City Label,” 2023, <https://www.uci.org/bike-city-label/1LNlr3tV8qojqvAMcGJ2Hh>.

¹⁶ Union Cycliste Internationale, “UCI Bike City Label | Guide.”

¹⁷ Sport and Citizenship, “Presentation | PACTE Project,” Pacte Project, 2023, <https://www.pacteproject.com/presentation/>.

Initiative	Description	Insight
	resulting in the Matrix of Change, a customized Active City Action Plan for cities to use now, and in the future. ¹⁸	
Smart Cities and Sport	The Smart Cities and Sport project is a platform for former and future Olympic host cities, as well as cities interested in using sport for development. It has projects like the Active Citizens Initiative (ACW), which is a global initiative established to help cities address challenges to physical activity worldwide. ACW provides proof of concept using data and insights to policymakers. Additionally, they are also a key part of the Global Active City (GAC) Label program.	Similar to PACTE, Smart Cities and Sport provides an insight into how city-level forums/platforms can be used in a potential framework.
Active City Practices of Colombia, Ireland, and Sweden	Colombia has gained international recognition for its active city practices, particularly through initiatives like Ciclovía, where major roads are closed to vehicular traffic on Sundays, encouraging active transportation and recreational activities. ¹⁹ Sport Ireland has implemented the Active Cities project, which focuses on promoting physical activity, and promoting healthier lifestyles. ²⁰ As part of the Smart City Sweden initiative, there is an increased focus on making cities more conducive to physical activity. ²¹	All of Colombia, Ireland, and Sweden, while vastly different from India, included government stakeholders right from the start. Additionally, it gives lessons to build on the platform provided by the Smart Cities Mission in India.

¹⁸ Sport and Citizenship, “Matrix for Change,” Pacte Project, 2023, <https://www.pacteproject.com/matrix/>.

¹⁹ Andrea Torres et al., “The Ciclovía and Cicloruta Programs: Promising Interventions to Promote Physical Activity and Social Capital in Bogotá, Colombia,” *American Journal of Public Health* 103, no. 2 (February 2013): e23–e30, doi:10.2105/AJPH.2012.301142.

²⁰ Sport Ireland, “Active Cities.”

²¹ Swedish Environmental Research Institute, “Healthy Cities & Physical Activity - Smart City Sweden,” 2023, <https://smartcitysweden.com/focus-areas/social-sustainability/healthy-cities-physical-activity/>.

What exists in India today?

Across India, there are key elements of these frameworks that are coming to the fore through policy and research. With the launch of the Smart Cities Mission in 2015, there was a recognition to make Indian cities ‘smarter’ by retrofitting, redeveloping and reimagining urban spaces. Within the Mission’s guidelines, when discussing what makes up a ‘smart city’ in the Indian context, highlights included walkable localities, preserving open spaces for recreation, and promoting various means of transportation, including cycling (by developing cycle-friendly infrastructure and roads).²² Under the ambit of the Mission, the Cycles4Change initiative stands out in the realm of making urban spaces more physical activity-friendly.

Launched in 2020, the initiative aimed to “inspire cities to make cycling safe and fun for everyone.” More than 100 cities signed up for it, in an effort to generate demand for cycling and develop ways to make their governed spaces cycle-friendly. Research as part of the initiative also highlighted the economic benefits of adopting cycling as a regular

method of transportation can potentially benefit the Indian economy to the tune of \$1.8 trillion a year.²³ However, while the Smart Cities Mission ends in June 2024, it has provided a promising platform to explore future avenues.

Within the context of a growing recognition of the importance of SAPA, the Fit India movement, first launched in 2019, aims to promote the take up of sport and physical activity. With a view to an increased take up, they certify active schools within the country under a set of parameters that schools can apply for, with progressive levels to certify the level of opportunities and infrastructure.²⁴

This is supplemented at a non-governmental level by initiatives like the India Fit Report, an annual endeavor aimed at measuring general levels of physical activity among the population, as well as measuring health levels by city.²⁵ This is one of the many increasing surveys of SAPA and fitness levels within the country, pointing to existing data and demand for benchmarking across different criteria.

²² Government of India, “Smart Cities - Mission Statement and Guidelines” (Government of India, June 2015), 7, <https://smartcities.gov.in/themes/habikon/files/SmartCityGuidelines.pdf>.

²³ Government of India, “India Cycles4Change Challenge - The Dawn of a Cycling Revolution” (Government of India, 2022), 6, <https://smarnet.niua.org/indiacyclechallenge/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/A-Dawn-of-a-Cycling-Revolution-Publication.pdf>

²⁴ Government of India, “Fit India - Be Fit,” 2023, <https://fitindia.gov.in/>

²⁵ GOQii, “India Fit Report 2023” (New Delhi: GOQii, 2023), <https://goqii-website.s3.amazonaws.com/images/fitIndia/India-Fit-Report-2022-23.pdf>.

The India Active Cities framework – a starting point

It is evident that India can greatly benefit from incorporating insights and experiences from around the world to establish benchmarks for active cities. This process involves leveraging available data, tailoring benchmarks to suit India's unique cultural and socioeconomic diversity and adopting innovative approaches.²⁶ In this regard, it is crucial to consider the elements that constitute a good framework, and the World Health Organization's Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030 (GAPPA) offers a comprehensive starting point - as shown in Table 2.

While global benchmarks offer valuable references, it is imperative to refine and tailor these to the Indian context. An India-specific active cities framework must consider and incorporate our cultural, geographical, and socioeconomic features in identifying relevant

solutions, indicators, and metrics. It must address the unique needs and challenges faced by Indian cities, considering variations in climate, population density, and infrastructure availability. For example, globally common criteria for evaluating active city initiatives, such as walkability, access to outdoor parks and recreational facilities, and integration of active public transportation, may be harder to design and implement in many Indian cities where harsh weather conditions (extreme heat and/ or rainfall) or environmental conditions (air pollution) prevail for several months of the year.

Regular evaluation based on these customized benchmarks will enable cities to set targets, measure progress, and foster healthy competition among urban centres. Table 2 shows an example of what can make up an active city framework.

²⁶ World Health Organization, *Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018 - 2030* (Switzerland: World Health Organization, 2018), <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/272722/9789241514187-eng.pdf>.

Table 2: Essential components of a comprehensive Active Cities framework

Components of framework	Key actions	Example indicators for benchmarking
Active Policies	Develop and implement comprehensive SAPA-based policies. Ensure integration of physical activity considerations into urban planning, transportation, and health policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of comprehensive policies/initiatives on SAPA. ● Clear and established targets aimed at reducing inactivity and sedentary behaviours in urban settings. ● Emphasis on mandating active workplaces and transit policies. ● Policies include an explicit focus on historically excluded segments: women and girls, elderly, and PWDs.
Active Neighborhoods	Develop and enhance public spaces, parks, and green areas to promote SAPA.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Publicly available data on parks and recreational spaces. ● % of people living close to (within a 10-minute walking distance) green areas/parks. ● Availability of free/ low-cost facilities. ● Clustering of essential services: medical, food/ groceries, schools, etc. within 3-4 km in residential areas. ● Implementation of ‘urban gardening’ programs that encourage residents in community gardening initiatives in shared spaces like parks, vacant plots - which helps citizens be active and improves air quality etc.

Components of framework	Key actions	Example indicators for benchmarking
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Existence of neighbour-led exercise groups - e.g. yoga in the park, dance classes, walking and cycling clubs, etc.
Active Educational Institutions	<p>Incorporating SAPA into educational curricula and daily routines, alongside promoting active transport among schools and diverse opportunities for sports and physical activity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● %age of institutions with diverse facilities/ opportunities for SAPA in lieu of a lack of space. ● %age of institutions with active commuting options. ● Availability of spaces/ facilities beyond institution hours. ● Availability of dedicated and well-trained PE teachers and coaches. ● Implementation of ‘walking school bus’ programs - adults supervise children walking to school in groups, picking up kids along a route, just like a bus ● Number of options for active transit to the higher educational institutions
Active Workspaces	<p>Collaborate with offices/employers to promote PA in workplaces. Work with them on establishing wellness programs and policies like facilities/time for SAPA and active commuting.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of workspaces with active policies and incentives for employees. ● Percentage of employees that are active for 15-30 minutes at work. ● Availability of dedicated time and space for SAPA within the workplace.

Components of framework	Key actions	Example indicators for benchmarking
Active Transit	Implement measures to increase active transportation. Promote active commuting and provide infrastructure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Coverage of pedestrian and cycling-friendly paths. ● Availability of parking infrastructure and pedestrian/cycle only-zones. ● Disincentives (e.g., congestion tax, pollution tax) for vehicular use in certain areas. ● Availability of 'active stations' - Turning transit hubs into "active stations" that feature amenities such as exercise equipment, yoga spaces, or walking circuits can enable passengers to engage in physical activity while they wait. ● Implementation of 'park-and-walk-and-bike' systems
Active campaigns	Implement communication campaigns to raise awareness about the benefits of physical activity and promote active lifestyles. Encourage community-led programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of communication campaigns promoting physical activity. ● %age of schools/colleges and offices adopting SAPA initiatives. ● Number of community-led local SAPA initiatives.
Monitoring and Evaluation	Establish a system to assess the implementation and impact of physical activity interventions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● %age of population (and segments) meeting physical activity guidelines. ● Data on infrastructure, policies, and health outcomes.
Knowledge creation	Encourage research collaborations between academia, government, and community partners to generate evidence on effective physical activity interventions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of research studies on SAPA interventions.

What's the way forward?

Most critical to the way forward is a framework that can effectively understand and measure urban spaces across India. More importantly, it needs to be a living document that needs to be refined and tweaked over time. Within that scenario, the following elements present a platform for implementing such a framework.



Refining and testing the framework

To ensure the utility of the framework, it is crucial to refine, test, and pilot the framework first with a group of select cities in India. This will help in identifying more India-specific issues and metrics, helping create a benchmark that is relevant and can more accurately assess the cities, given the context. These cities can be diverse along a host of metrics. The process will allow for a comprehensive evaluation of its applicability and impact in differing urban settings. By conducting these pilots, cities can effectively identify strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improving the framework.

This iterative process has the potential to contribute to the development of India's first active cities index, serving as a more suitable benchmark for evaluation. This benchmarking can further take the shape of a scoring system, which will allow for objective evaluations of the resulting framework.



Integrating into city policies

Integrating active city practices into policy frameworks at all levels is essential for creating a sustainable impact. Benchmarking has the potential to highlight efforts and play a crucial role in raising awareness among policymakers, urban planners, and community leaders about the significance of SAPA and its positive impacts on public health and well-being. Incorporating active city principles into policy documents, guidelines, and urban planning frameworks will help create an enabling environment for cities to thrive as active, healthy, and vibrant spaces.



Data collection

The creation of benchmarks can also bank on available data. The increasing popularity of wearables, such as fitness trackers, and activity-based mobile apps presents an opportunity for us to collect and analyze data on SAPA levels. By partnering with wearable device manufacturers and fitness application platforms or mapping companies and incorporating their data into city-level analyses, policymakers and urban planners can gain valuable insights into the activity patterns, walking and cycling habits, and other relevant metrics of residents. This data can be utilized to quantify and rank activity levels across different cities, identify areas that require intervention and monitor progress over time.²⁷

²⁷ Devika Singh, "Bengaluru, Gurugram the Most Fitness Conscious Cities; Delhi Least Fit - BusinessToday," January 2019, <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/economy-politics/story/bengaluru-gurugram-the-most-fitness-conscious-cities-delhi-least-fit-156322-2019-01-09>.



Stakeholder engagement and partnerships

Further, to drive the active city agenda, benchmarking should foster collaborative partnerships among various stakeholders, including government bodies, academia, non-profit organizations, and community groups. Collaboration can take the form of knowledge sharing, capacity building, and joint initiatives aimed at promoting SAPA.

By customizing benchmarks, utilizing existing data, fostering collaborative partnerships, and integrating active city principles into policy frameworks, India can embark on a transformative journey towards promoting SAPA and creating healthier and more active urban environments.



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