

Utrecht Heart of Health: a health and well-being economy

Sharon Dijksma

Mayor of Utrecht, Kingdom of the Netherlands

Healthy urban living has been key to the identity of the Utrecht city and region, with meaning and positive associations for people living in the area and for attracting and shaping business practices and public policies.

Centrally located in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Utrecht has always been an attractive place to many. The city and our neighbouring municipalities are growing rapidly. In early 2023, our region was named the most competitive in the EU. However, the economic challenges that we are facing, such as the scarcity in space for innovative businesses, finding skilled employees on the labour market and the problem of housing, are becoming apparent. The idea that these can only be tackled in cooperation with our regional partner organizations is widely shared.

A common vision of Utrecht as the Heart of Health, initiated by the Economic Board of the Utrecht Region, has helped us in aligning all principal actors and has created common and fertile ground for innovation and entrepreneurship to achieve our region's potential and overcome its challenges (2). For example, the Utrecht Science Park, with its knowledge institutions, companies and research centre, is a driving force to the well-being economy we envision. Here we offer space to more than 50 000 students, 35 000 employees and 150 businesses. Utrecht Heart of Health represents three major economic ecosystems that boost innovation: life sciences and health, smart sustainability, and new digital society. The Regional Development Agency of Utrecht Region is one of our main partners (3). This organization supports the growth of startups, scale-ups, and innovative small and medium-sized enterprises by assisting them to expand their business activities and enter foreign markets. Additionally, it invests in startups in sectors such as health care, sustainable mobility and circular construction.

The economic action plan of the city of Utrecht is also aligned with this overarching vision. This means that we centralize the objective of building a city of healthy residents in a healthy environment – interconnected with a flourishing economy – where everyone can participate and all citizens feel at home, regardless of their income or origin. In building a future-proof economy, we prioritize circular and sustainable innovation. This also entails making radical choices in the kind of businesses and organizations we actively support as a city. We foster a culture of innovation by supporting start-up and scale-up programmes. Additionally, we provide funding for start-up incubators that cultivate innovative businesses, thus contributing to the ongoing transformation of our society. We also actively engage in international networks dedicated to innovation and entrepreneurship.

A particular case that is worth dedicating a few words to is the neighbourhood of Cartesius that we are currently developing within walking distance of the city centre on a former railway manufacturing site. It represents a new neighbourhood with the aim of enabling people to live longer, healthier and happier lives. Its realization is also the result of regional collaboration with railway companies and developers, in collaboration with whom we placed health requirements on the agenda at the very start of the project. Together with our knowledge

institutions, we will also set up a research project to gain insights into the interrelationship between a healthy environment and healthy people.

In summary, a regional approach with a central vision embraced by all principal actors in the region is key to how we promote innovation. As a city, we have an important role to play as a facilitator that includes setting up the preconditions for innovative actors that help us in tackling societal challenges. Utrecht is delighted to participate in the WHO European Region's Well-being Economy Cities pilot (4) – a project that will show how cities across the Region can further accelerate action towards this important goal.

References¹

1. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. New York: United Nations; 2015 (A/RES/70/1; <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>).
2. Utrecht, Heart and Health [website]. Utecht: Economic Board Utrecht; 2024 (<https://heartofhealth.com/#:~:text=Utrecht%2C%20Heart%20of%20Health%20is,environment%20that%20contributes%20to%20it.>).
3. ROM Utrecht Region [website]. Utecht: Dutch Regional Development Agency; 2024 ([https://doingbusiness.utrechtregion.com/over-ons/#:~:text=Dutch%20Regional%20Development%20Agency%20\(ROM,specific%20region%20in%20the%20Netherlands.\)](https://doingbusiness.utrechtregion.com/over-ons/#:~:text=Dutch%20Regional%20Development%20Agency%20(ROM,specific%20region%20in%20the%20Netherlands.))).
4. Healthy and thriving cities demand social, economic, human and planetary well-being [press release]. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (<https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/23-11-2023-healthy-and-thriving-cities-demand-social--economic--human-and-planetary-well-being>).

¹ All references were accessed 7 March 2024.

© World Health Organization 2024

Some rights reserved. This work is available under the CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO licence.

The named authors alone are responsible for the views expressed in this document.

This piece is part of a compilation of pieces from leading experts, nongovernmental organizations, politicians and practitioners on signposting ways to steer a new direction for our economy to deliver better lives and healthier societies for all. This compilation was developed by the WHO European Office for Investment for Health and Development (WHO Venice Office) as background to the WHO event “Reimagining an economy for resilient and healthier societies that leave no one behind”, Venice, Italy, 9 April 2024.