

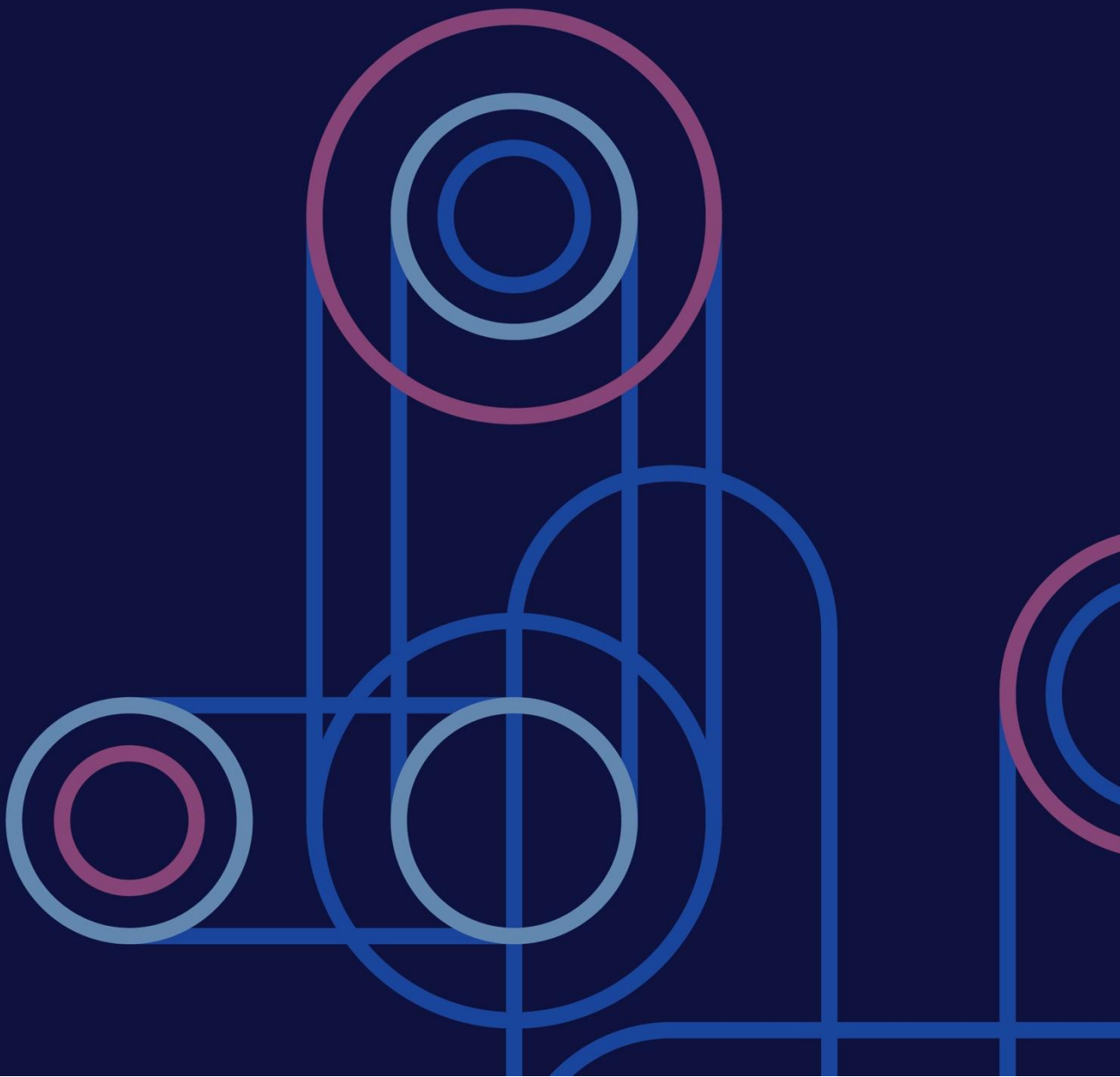


World Health  
Organization

CASE STUDY

# *Towards Healthier Child-friendly Public Spaces in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates*

2026



## Basic information

<b>WHO Region</b>	EMRO
<b>City or Country</b>	Sharjah, United Arab Emirates
<b>Timeline</b>	2017-2023
<b>Type of intervention</b>	Urban planning; public space
<b>Primary level of implementation</b>	City
<b>Primary sectors involved</b>	Urban planning; public space; youth and children; environment; transport
<b>Primary health outcomes or challenges</b>	Heat-health risks; safe play; child wellbeing; safety; access to green and open space

## Case description

Sharjah, one of the fastest growing cities in the United Arab Emirates, faces constraints on everyday outdoor life linked to the generally hot climate of the region, rapid urban expansion and uneven access to climate-adapted public spaces. For children and their caregivers, these conditions limit opportunities for safe play, social interaction and physical activity, and increase exposure to heat-related health risks. These challenges intersect with broader concerns around demographic change, urban liveability and long-term sustainability, creating both pressure and opportunity for institutional action.

In response to these challenges, the Sharjah Child Friendly Office (SCFO) under Sharjah Health Authority, in collaboration with the Sharjah Urban Planning Council (SUPC), UN-Habitat and UNICEF, initiated the Child Friendly Urban Planning (CFUP) project in Sharjah in November 2017, following initial brainstorming sessions with over 2000 children at the Sharjah International Book Fair. The initiative formed part of the Child Friendly Urban Planning programme, a multi-year effort to embed child rights, equity and health considerations into urban planning systems. The assessment phase, implemented between 2017 and 2022, was designed as an entry point to influence how public spaces are planned, designed and managed across the city.

The project undertook a citywide public space assessment, drawing on standards and tools by UN-Habitat. Urban residents, including children, were engaged through participatory processes to document how public spaces were accessed, used and perceived – including through a Block-by-Block design workshop to reimagine public spaces using the Minecraft digital game. Localized spatial and social data were collected



Field survey of green spaces with university students.  
Sharjah, United Arab Emirates: 2020. © Sharjah Child Friendly Office.

to examine the distribution of open public spaces, as well as their safety, functionality and environmental performance across neighbourhoods. This evidence base allowed the city to identify where public spaces were least accessible, least climate-responsive and least supportive of children's everyday needs.

The assessment and the subsequent planning response considered 10 key principles that would become the formal Sharjah Principles for Child-Friendly Urban Planning: equitable distribution and quantity of child-friendly spaces; universal design; promotion of participatory approaches for children; integration of culture, history and heritage; active living; safety; planning for play; climate response; access to nature; and planning for long-term maintenance. Together, these principles created a shared framework across sectors and institutions, helping translate health, equity and climate considerations into operational planning criteria.

Assessment findings were used in two ways. First, they informed design improvements in selected public spaces. Second, they supported the development of city-level guidance to shape future projects, including standards for climate adaptation, safety, accessibility and maintenance. By embedding these requirements within municipal planning

processes, the initiative transcended isolated site-level actions, contributing to a more systemic approach to how new developments and retrofits are conceived across Sharjah.

A combination of institutional arrangements and capabilities were essential to programme implementation. Under the directives of His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Sharjah, and Her Highness Sheikha Jawaher bint Mohammed Al Qasimi, Chairperson of the Sharjah Family and Community Council (SFCC), SCFO was established in 2016 to lead strategies for children's wellbeing. Under the leadership of Executive Director Dr. Hessa Khalfan Al Ghazal, it acted as a convening authority across planning, social and international partners. This facilitated the translation of assessment evidence into technical guidance and policy-relevant design standards, reinforcing accountability and continuity. Collaboration with SUPC and international partners provided both institutional leverage and access to global tools, while participatory methods ensured that local needs were reflected within formal planning processes.

Key barriers included Sharjah's hot climatic conditions, which constrain outdoor usability for much of the year, and the need to align health, planning and social objectives across institutional mandates. In contrast, the availability of standardized assessment tools, effective cross-sector partnerships, and a strong political commitment to child-focused initiatives all supported project implementation.

The planning guidance developed through the assessment culminated in the formal Sharjah Planning Principles Guidance for Child-Friendly Open Public Spaces, which was officially issued by the Sharjah Executive Council during its weekly meeting chaired by His Highness Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed bin Sultan Al Qasimi, Crown Prince and Deputy Ruler of Sharjah and Chairman of the Sharjah Executive Council, in 2022. The Sharjah Principles for Child-Friendly Urban Planning were publicly launched at Expo 2020 Dubai on October 31 (i.e., World Cities Day), 2021, establishing Sharjah as the first city globally to have Executive Council-mandated child-friendly urban planning guidance. This achievement contributed to SCFO receiving the UNICEF Inspire Award in November 2021 for excellence in child-friendly city initiatives. The principles are now used to inform new public space projects and retrofits across the city, thus embedding climate adaptation, safety and accessibility requirements within Sharjah's ongoing urban development processes.

## Strategic Highlight

Sharjah's experience illustrates how politically salient, cross-cutting concerns can be used as entry points to mobilize intersectoral action for urban health. Here, the city anchored the programme in two issues that already carried institutional weight: demographic change and climate stress. Demographic pressures linked to a large child and youth population, together with hot climatic conditions, created cross-sector

challenges that provided a basis for cooperation across urban planning, social development and environmental management.

The public space assessment translated these abstract pressures into concrete, localized evidence. Patterns of uneven access, limited climate responsiveness and safety concerns were documented at the neighbourhood level, making the implications of climate and demographic trends visible within planning processes. This evidence allowed decision-makers to justify new design standards and planning guidance not only as child-centred solutions, but as necessary adaptations of urban space to emerging risks. In this way, health and equity objectives were embedded within broader agendas that already commanded political attention.

The initiative also highlights the importance of institutional readiness. SCFO's convening role, combined with an existing mandate to advance child wellbeing, made it easier for the city to align multiple actors around a common framework. The Sharjah Principles for Child-Friendly Urban Planning functioned as a bridge between sectors, facilitating the development of operational planning criteria responsive to health, equity and climate concerns that could be rapidly adopted by urban authorities.

Strategic action on urban health should, where possible, avoid burdening actors in other sectors with additional requirements, rather reframing existing priorities through a health and equity lens. In positioning healthy public spaces as responsive to climate risk, demographic change and urban resilience, the city created a policy space in which intersectoral collaboration became both legitimate and necessary. Thus, strategic action often begins not with new mandates, but with recognizing how existing political and policy drivers can be aligned to advance urban health as a shared societal goal.

## Further Information

- [Sharjah Child Friendly Office](#)
- [Towards a Child Friendly Open Public Space: Public Space Assessment in Sharjah using global standards](#)
- [Sharjah Planning Principles: Guidance for Child-friendly Open Public Spaces](#)
- [Towards a child site-specific assessment: the case of Muwaileh, Sharjah - UAE](#)
- [Block by Block Workshop, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates: Designing Child-Friendly Cities](#)
- [The Block by Block Playbook: Using Minecraft as a participatory design tool in urban design and governance](#)
- [Sharjah - United Arab Emirates: Child Friendly City](#)
- [Towards Child-friendly Open Public Spaces in Sharjah, UAE](#)