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A new approach to mobility

Mobility is an essential determinant of quality of life, thrown into chaos by the pandemic. The need to press ahead with developing sustainable, inclusive means of mobility is more urgent than ever

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One hundred years after the introduction of automobility, policymakers and users are recognising that for countries to develop and for cities to prosper, citizens must be connected and mobile. As the influential architect and urban designer Jan Gehl explains: “Well-designed neighbourhoods inspire the people who live in them, whilst poorly designed cities [and systems of transport] brutalise their citizens.”

Reducing the need for motorised travel

The global population is on the move. The World Bank predicts that by 2050, the total number of vehicles on the road will double from current figures to about two billion. The International Transport Forum, meanwhile, estimates that demand for both passenger and freight transport will triple worldwide between 2015 and 2050. Emissions and noise are increasing, and the demand for modern infrastructure and the space in which to build it are growing, impacting quality of life for millions of city dwellers.

At the same time, resilience and sustainability are climbing up the global agenda as governments imagine their urban futures in different ways. In 2019, the SLOCAT Partnership, which works to promote low-carbon land transport, stated that current transport-sector mitigation commitments and actions are not enough to limit global warming to below 2°C. Transportation is responsible for 23 per cent of energy-related GHG emissions, indicating the need for accelerated action and for ambitious adaptation efforts. In September 2020, the EU sharpened its policies,

◀ **Copenhagen waterfront, viewed from outside the Royal Danish Library extension. Over the course of several decades, Copenhagen has been transformed from a car-dominated to a pedestrian-orientated city**

announcing a new target to cut emissions by 60 per cent by 2030.

Fighting climate change in a world characterised by mass motorisation is already an enormous challenge. Now the world faces the immediate issue of tackling coronavirus. Immobility and marginalisation, both functions of national lockdowns, are the counterparts of development progress, access and connectivity. How do we make future mobility work, given the conditions and experiences that may become the ‘new normal’ of the 21st century? Insights from the past and from the current pandemic underline the crucial role that sustainable transport must play in achieving Agenda 2030.

Look more closely at the shape of current transport systems, however, and it’s evident that the exclusion of important citizen groups contributes to both spatial and social immobility, and inequality. Yet the links between spatial and social mobility have been poorly understood in the transport sector. In modern communities, people need to reach markets, workplaces and educational and social services safely. Redesigning systems of transport to make them sustainable and inclusive is therefore a win-win strategy.

Shifting to sustainable transport

In designing an approach to global mobility, we can successfully build on the legacy of both Jan Gehl (mentioned above) and the hugely influential scholar, urbanist and activist, the late Jane Jacobs. Both champion taking a people-centred approach to urban development.

Taking their pioneering insights as our lead, we should think of mobility primarily at the human, rather than the city or country, scale. We need to develop mobility solutions that are modern, inclusive and ecological if we are to both achieve Agenda 2030 and confront climate change. We must ensure that everyone has access to safe, healthy and low or zero-emission transport options, including non-motorised, active modes of

transport like walking or cycling. This vision is the antithesis of the ‘car city’ of the 20th century, with Los Angeles as perhaps its ultimate archetype.

The heart of future urban transportation is therefore the nexus of public space and mobility. Sustainable transport will play a key role in achieving this. Several countries are redesigning policy and planning towards the transition to liveable streets and clean mobility, recognising that these will be essential to achieving many of the other Global Goals and targets, such as SDG 1 (end poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (ensure healthy lives and well-being), target 3.6 (halve global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents) and target 3.9 (cut deaths and illness from pollution).

As Gehl writes: “The street, the footpath, the square, and the park are the grammar

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of the city; they provide the structure that enables cities to come to life, and encourage and accommodate diverse activities from the quiet and contemplative to the noisy and busy.” Jacobs adds that we must, “...encourage pedestrian traffic, that uses streets for a variety of reasons at all hours”. She also finds that streets and buildings with heterogeneous designs and uses encourage a socio-economic mix of activities and stakeholders. She notes that short blocks work better for walkers than long ‘superblocks’, and that a certain amount of urban density is needed for people to thrive in cities (countering planning theory of the early 20th century that often viewed urban density as undesirable).

Gehl urges us to think about how cities work at eye level, in harmony with the human scale. Both Jacobs and Gehl dismiss walls, closed spaces and long distances in cities. Enabling people to travel at high

speeds on different height levels impedes people’s ability to hear and see well while walking or cycling, which in turn negatively impact on people’s enjoyment of streets and public spaces. The cities they espouse favour short distances, low traffic speed and a single street level (rather than elevated streets or subways), making it possible for people to gather, integrate and interact with other travellers. Prior to lockdown such exchanges were also taking place in public transport and among commuting cyclists and walkers in densely populated cities.

Improving energy efficiency

When critically assessing transport systems and their modus operandi, a few observations are made. For instance, in accordance with SDG target 11.2, transport systems must meet the travel needs of all, including low-income citizens in urban and rural areas. Women must be able to safely use transport without harassment. Vulnerable groups such as the elderly and children must be able to move around safely. We need to prioritise pedestrians and cyclists over cars.

Several cities, including Seoul, Hong Kong, Melbourne, Copenhagen, New York, Mexico City and Bogota, have already introduced many of Gehl’s ideas. They have provided more space for green areas, walking and cycling, and have introduced appropriate signalling for all modes of transport. As safety in these cities increases, so does the active mobility modes and life in the streets.

Creating a more inclusive transport system will also help to reduce carbon emissions, and by doing so contribute to achieving the SDG targets on energy efficiency, sustainable infrastructure, social and gender equality and urban access. Encouragingly, more and more cities are favouring low-carbon mobility and are finding ways to incorporate energy efficiency and environmental measures on a massive scale.

The 2020 pandemic, with its lockdowns, has shown what isolation, transport exclusion and spatial immobility implies. Facilitating access to workplaces, parks, hospitals and other services is a prerequisite for progress in modern societies. It is also essential if we are to confront the growing problems related to inequalities and developmental progress. ●