

## **Topic Background<sup>1</sup>**

Transport is not an end in itself, but rather a means allowing people to access what they need: jobs, markets, social interaction, education, and a full range of other services and amenities contributing to healthy and fulfilled lives. Through sustainable transport, we can make significant progress on the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Climate Agreement, improving the lives of billions of people around the world. Sustainable transport drives sustainable development, fundamental to meeting the needs of people in their personal and economic lives, while respecting the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

There is an urgent need for action to address the staggering social, environmental, and economic costs associated with ‘business as usual’: every year 1.24 million people die in road accidents and a further 3.5 million people die prematurely due to outdoor pollution, including from transport sources; 23% of energy-related greenhouse gas emissions come from transport; and road congestion is a tremendous burden on the economy, as high as 10% of GDP in some cities of emerging economies, including Beijing, São Paulo and Lima.

Owing to urban sprawl – the horizontal, low-density growth of cities over vast areas – distances between destinations have become longer, leading to a growing dependency on car-centered mobility. Consequently, widespread congestion and traffic gridlock have now become the norm in many cities, impacting urban life through negative externalities such as pollution, noise stress, and accidents. The growth of urban sprawl has led many urban residents to spend increasing amounts of time, and as much as a third of their income, on transportation. Contributing to a car-centric culture is the lack of adequate public transit in many cities. Despite its environmental and (in many cases) economic benefits, public transit often faces a negative stigma caused by high costs, poor reliability and coordination, and lack of security. Nevertheless, for millions of people around the world, quality public transportation is essential for access to employment and services.

So far, the standard response to addressing urban mobility issues typically has been to increase infrastructure, mostly for cars. However, this shortsighted approach only furthers the growth of urban sprawl and increases congestion and pollution. Sustainable mobility must be addressed in a holistic way that takes into account social, economic, and environmental factors.

## **Past and Current Actions<sup>2</sup>**

The role of transport in sustainable development was first recognized at the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit and reinforced in its outcome document – Agenda 21. Several chapters, for example Chapter 9 on Atmosphere and Chapter 7 on Human Settlements, recognize transport as a key development issue. In undertaking the five-year review of the implementation of Agenda 21 during its nineteenth Special Session in 1997, the General Assembly noted that, over the next twenty years, transportation is expected to be the major driving force behind a growing

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<sup>1</sup> High Level Advisory Group on Sustainable Transport (HLAG-ST), “Mobilizing Sustainable Transport for Development”; UN-Habitat, “Mobility.”

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Sustainable Transport”; SLoCaT, “About SLoCaT”; United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), “Mission”; International Council on Clean Transportation, “Mission // History”; UN-Habitat, “Mobility.”

world demand for energy. It is the largest end-use of energy in developed countries and the fastest growing one in most developing countries.

Further, in 2002, the role of transport was captured in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. The outcome document of the 10th Anniversary of the World Summit on Sustainable Development provided different anchor points for a mobility policy from which environmental and health could benefit, in the context of consumption and production, natural resources as a support of the Kyoto and Montreal Protocol as well as in the context of health, recognizing the importance of preventative, promotive and curative programs on traffic pollution related diseases.

World leaders recognized at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio +20) outcome document: “The Future We Want” that transportation and mobility are central to sustainable development and emphasized the important role of municipal governments in setting a vision for sustainable cities.

Moreover, as part of his Five-Year Action Agenda, pronounced in January 2012, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon identified transport as a major component of sustainable development. This was a significant step forward in promoting sustainable transport worldwide. In this light, the Secretary General established and launched in August 2014 a High Level Advisory Group on Sustainable Transport (HLAG-ST), representing all modes of transport including road, rail, aviation, marine, ferry, and urban public transport providers, along with Governments and investors, to develop concrete recommendations for more sustainable transport systems that can address rising congestion and pollution worldwide, particularly in urban areas, and are actionable at global, national, local and sector levels. The HLAG-ST published its report in late 2016.

The primary UN organ in charge of transportation related issues is the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, known more commonly as UN-Habitat, headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya. However, it is not alone. The Partnership on Sustainable, Low Carbon Transport (SLoCaT), a collaboration between the UN, NGOs, businesses, and universities headquartered in Shanghai, focuses on land transport in developing countries, especially Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Economic bodies like the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) help promote sustainable transportation in the developed world. Key NGOs include the International Council on Clean Transportation, which provides technical and scientific support around the world. However, as transportation is a highly localized issue, it is imperative that international bodies recognize the needs and abilities of the cities, regions, and countries that manage the implementation and operation of transport systems. For example, as part of its “Promoting Sustainable Transport Solutions for East African Cities” project, which aims to reduce private vehicle growth in three East African capitals, UN-Habitat worked closely with the government and local authorities of the three countries.

### **Possible Solutions<sup>3</sup>**

Sustainable transportation is a highly complex issue, involving technical, social, economic, and environmental elements. However, there are many useful frameworks and case studies from around the world that can help moving forward. In its 2016 report, the HLAG-ST advocated for an ‘Avoid-Shift-Improve’ model. This means a) avoiding inefficient or unnecessary travel or transport by improving city and transportation planning measures, b) shifting the times and modes used for travel to meet transportation and environmental needs, and c) improving the sustainability of transport modes through advances in technology, infrastructure, and regulation. The report emphasizes that such a framework must be adapted to local contexts as appropriate. It emphasizes the role of governments in “enabling” sustainable transportation; while many developed countries have such institutions in place, much of the developing world does not.

There is great potential to be found in recent transportation innovations. Tremendous improvements in batteries and hydrogen production over the past ten years have made full-electric, hybrid-electric, or hydrogen fuel cell-electric vehicles increasingly accessible to the general population. However, it is important to remember that the environmental benefits of an electric car are only as good as the source of electricity – in parts of the world with coal-based electricity such cars may actually be less sustainable overall. Although still in the early stages of development, driverless cars, generally referred to as autonomous vehicles (AVs), have great promise for improving safety, efficiency, and congestion, as well as revolutionizing public transport and freight transport through autonomous buses and trucks. The dramatic growth in smartphone use has enabled the development of the sharing economy; ridesharing services, like Uber and Lyft, and urban carsharing and bikesharing services are reducing auto use and increasing mobility. Bus rapid transit, which combines the low cost and flexibility of buses with the speed and reliability of rail, has expanded across the globe since its introduction in South American cities in the 1990s. The transit-oriented development (TOD) movement is advocating the potential for sustainable development around transit stations to reduce the social and environmental burden of transportation, although there are significant concerns that such efforts will result in the displacement of lower-income individuals. Lastly, the field of transportation planning and engineering is increasingly supportive of street design that emphasizes non-automobile travel, including transit and bike lanes and safer pedestrian crossings. All of these technological and design innovations have the potential to drastically change the world’s transportation system and urban form over coming decades.

### **Purpose of the Committee<sup>4</sup>**

UN-Habitat is not directly involved in implementing these strategies. However, it plays a key role in assisting countries, especially in the developing world, in establishing policies, and in sharing information and best practices. Among the current focuses of UN-Habitat’s mobility program are integrating different modes of transportation to improve network performance, especially in addressing the so-called “last mile” problem, whereby public transportation can only get you so close to your destination. Another focus is increasing the use of, and safety of,

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<sup>3</sup> High Level Advisory Group on Sustainable Transport (HLAG-ST), “Mobilizing Sustainable Transport for Development.”

<sup>4</sup> UN-Habitat, “Mobility.”

non-motorized transport like walking and biking. Lastly, UN-Habitat emphasizes the need for coordination and cooperation across governmental entities to achieve long-term improvements to transportation systems around the globe.

However, disagreements remain. Some advocate for more public transit, while others assert that improving the sustainability of automobiles is a more appropriate strategy. Many of the historical auto-oriented trends of transportation development are deeply engrained, including the construction of more roads and parking areas. Many questions still remain as to how shared, driverless, and electric vehicles will change the nature of mobility. Technological advances often clash with concerns about personal privacy. Transit-oriented development results in the displacement of low-income communities. Transportation improvements are incredibly expensive and often do not meet projections for use. Transportation development can be highly corrupt and has historically served those in power, excluding marginalized groups. An example of this is continued investment in rail service when bus service has been shown to be much more effective. Lastly, much of the control over the transportation system is fragmented between parts and levels of government, if such institutions exist at all. Sustainable transportation is essential for the continued prosperity, safety, and security of the human race, but the path forward is anything but clear. UN-Habitat has an important mandate in establishing international consensus on this path forward and enabling cities, regions, and nations to implement key policies to improve their transportation systems.

## **Further Research**

### Guiding Questions

- What are the dominant transportation modes in your assigned country? How have they helped shape its development? How have economic and political realities shaped transportation?
- What role do technological advances have in achieving sustainable transportation? How can they be implemented in an equitable way?
- Who should be given priority when it comes to transportation? Can cars, public transit, bikes, and pedestrians all be accommodated?

### Research Sources

For more information about this topic, please refer to the following sources:

- Final report from the HLAG-ST:  
<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2375Mobilizing%20Sustainable%20Transport.pdf>
- Sustainable development knowledge platform:  
<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/sustainabletransport>
- UN-Habitat on mobility: <https://unhabitat.org/urban-themes/mobility/>
- Sustainable Urban Transport Project: <http://www.sutp.org/en/>
- Regional sources:
  - European Commission on sustainable transport:  
[https://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/sustainable\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/sustainable_en)

- Sustainable transport in the Middle East:  
<http://www.carboun.com/energy/road-to-doha-sustainable-transportation-in-the-middle-east/>
- UK Department of Transport paper on sustainable, local transport:  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/3890/making-sustainable-local-transport-happen-whitepaper.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/3890/making-sustainable-local-transport-happen-whitepaper.pdf)
- National Center for Sustainable Transportation – UC Davis (US):  
<https://ncst.ucdavis.edu/>

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- International Council on Clean Transportation. “Mission // History.” International Council on Clean Transportation. Accessed April 28, 2018. <https://www.theicct.org/mission-history>.
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