



United Nations  
Sustainable  
Transport  
Conference



**Second United Nations Global Sustainable Transport Conference**  
14 - 16 October 2021, Beijing, China

**Thematic session 1:**  
**Sustainable transport, poverty,  
livelihoods and growth**

**Concept note**

**I. Introduction**

The Secretary-General's High-level Advisory Group<sup>1</sup> defines sustainable transport as the "provision of services and infrastructure for the mobility of people and goods—advancing economic and social development to benefit today's and future generations—in a manner that is safe, affordable, accessible, efficient, and resilient, while minimizing carbon and other emissions and environmental impacts". The Sustainable Mobility for All initiative<sup>2</sup> identifies four main aspects of sustainable transport: universal access, efficiency, safety, and green mobility. Each of these aspects bolsters the commitment to leave no one behind, including vulnerable groups, such as the poor, women, children and youth, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. Sustainable transport can provide livelihoods, reduce poverty, and enhance economic growth while allowing for access to markets, economic opportunities, and basic services, such as health, education, and finance, goods as well as social and cultural experiences and interactions. The development of rural and urban infrastructure as well as rural-urban interlinkages can, for example, play an important role in reducing poverty, generating livelihoods, and supporting economic growth. Evidence has shown that, combined with other measures, such as reliable digital connectivity and improved rural health, education and other services, even providing basic road connectivity to rural villages can generate significant social and economic benefits.<sup>3</sup> Sustainable transport also underpins global supply chains, enhances their efficiency, and boosts resilience to economic shocks, protracted trends, climate change and extreme weather events, facilitates global trade and supports other main sectors, such as global tourism, contributing to overall global economic growth.

While both urban and rural areas are faced with different sets of transportation challenges, some are common, such as affordability and reliability of transport systems and services. Megatrends, such as predicted population growth and increased urbanization, will enhance these challenges and pose new ones, especially in Africa and Asia where 90 per cent of urbanization is forecasted to take place by 2050<sup>4</sup>. This will place new strains and demands on the overall transport sector and its systems, services, and infrastructure.

<sup>1</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2375Mobilizing%20Sustainable%20Transport.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Sustainable Mobility for All initiative (SuM4All): <https://www.sum4all.org/>

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Dercon, S. et al. *The Impact of Agricultural Extension and Roads on Poverty and Consumption Growth in Fifteen Ethiopian Villages*. 2009. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20616257>.

<sup>4</sup> UNDESA. *2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects*. 2018. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also amplified many of these challenges and created new ones, while having significant impacts across all SDGs. Inequalities have become more entrenched, deeper, and more complex. At the same time, the pandemic has brought the importance of transport to the fore and is a unique chance for all actors to rethink passenger and freight transport and come up with solutions which cannot only withstand possible future crises of this or other nature, but also support the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement and other relevant international agreements, such as the New Urban Agenda. Especially, as sustainable transport will be crucial to ensuring the smooth flow of global supply chains which will contribute greatly to global economic recovery and overall sustainable development.

This session will take a deep dive into the sustainable transport-poverty-livelihoods-economic development nexus, including in light of COVID-19 response and recovery, highlight best practice examples and identify suitable transport solutions. It will also elaborate on the role of sustainable transport with regard to COVID-19 global economic recovery.

## II. Stocktaking

Currently, the transport system is not realizing its potential, globally, to leave no one behind. While some populations are more mobile than ever before, many have very limited choices and lack even basic access to transport systems. Even where transport infrastructure and systems do exist, they may not provide safe, affordable, and convenient access for the poor and other vulnerable groups. In addition, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the vulnerability of global supply chains, supported by transport, to external shocks resulting in reduced economic growth.

On the rural front, current estimates suggest that over a billion people still lack access to an all-weather road and adequate transport services<sup>5</sup>, which represents a major barrier to social and economic development. This isolation results in higher mortality rates and lower health, education, and poverty outcomes, with disproportionately large effects for vulnerable groups. Rural isolation is also associated with low agricultural productivity due to low input and technology adoption.<sup>6</sup> Transport decisions, like good road infrastructure reaching far into remote rural areas, can increase livelihoods and economic growth by facilitating moving excess produce to markets in urban centers where higher prices can be obtained. It can also facilitate access to agricultural inputs as well allow access to education for children and youth. In Ethiopia, for example, improved road access (all-season, motorable rural roads compared to paths and trails) reduced poverty by 6.9 percentage points and increased consumption growth by 16.3 percentage points, according to longitudinal household data for 15 villages.<sup>7</sup>

In urban areas, affordable and safe public transport is particularly important (and feasible), but often lacking. In 2021, only 49 per cent of urban residents worldwide have convenient

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<sup>5</sup> World Bank website. *Transport*. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/transport/overview>.

<sup>6</sup> Starkey, P. and Hines, J. *Poverty and sustainable transport: How transport affects poor people with policy implications for poverty reduction. A literature review*. 2014. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1767Poverty%20and%20sustainable%20transport.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Dercon, S. et al. *The Impact of Agricultural Extension and Roads on Poverty and Consumption Growth in Fifteen Ethiopian Villages*. 2009. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/ajae/article/91/4/1007/48507https://www.jstor.org/stable/20616257>.

access to public transport<sup>8</sup> and poor communities oftentimes cannot afford using available public transport options. In addition, traditionally, transport development has been focused on ensuring access for higher income groups, often with an emphasis on roads and convenience for individual, private automobile travel. Car-centered cities and towns, especially those with poor public transport, disadvantage those who cannot afford a car, or who are living with disabilities that prevent them from driving. If on top of that they facilitate the importation of used unsustainable vehicles, this contributes to local air and noise pollution and unsafe roads, often disproportionately affecting poorer segments of the population, often residing in the most deprived areas (i.e., informal settlements in the outskirts of cities). The lack of sustainable, affordable and safe transport options for vulnerable groups may, in turn, hinder their access to services and paid employment.

Many rural–urban transport links are being governed by informal or private sector groups. Women are often excluded from employment in these informal or private sector groups, resulting in a lack of opportunity to access income and build livelihoods. Often, governments focus on large capital-intensive mass transit systems in cities and seldom approach transport solutions in an integrated manner, which results in sub optimal impacts on inter- and intra-city movements, including mobility between rural and urban settlements. One aspect of this is evident in the last-mile connectivity challenges faced in many cities of developing countries, which led to a startling increase in private alternatives. This includes rapid growth of the share of private modes of transport as well as reliance on pooled services options that gradually extend from urban to rural areas but at higher costs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified many of these challenges and created new ones while having significant impacts across all SDGs. Among others, about 120 million additional people were pushed into extreme poverty. Global real GDP per capita was estimated to have declined by 5.3% in 2020<sup>9</sup>, with 1.6 billion informal economy workers significantly impacted.<sup>10</sup> The global economic downturn was also reflected in disrupted supply chains, falling freight shipments and international shipping rates in some countries down by as much as 70 percent.<sup>11</sup> The loss of livelihoods was significant in many sectors, including the transport sector. While recovery is starting to happen, the long-term effects of the pandemic remain unknown and changes in both demand and supply for transport services might occur, in both rural and urban areas, calling for innovative and forward-looking solutions. Re-starting global supply chains and transport in an orderly and sustainable way is expected to be one of the challenges to support economic recovery from the crisis. The need to build increased resilience may also lead to changes in how supply chains and transport systems are set up. Stimulus packages and investment plans, too, may spur a transition towards sustainable transport systems.

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<sup>8</sup> UN-Habitat. *SDG 11.2 Data Set*. Available at: <https://data.unhabitat.org/datasets/11-2-1-percentage-access-to-public-transport/explore>.

<sup>9</sup> World Trade Organization. *World trade primed for strong but uneven recovery after COVID-19 pandemic shock*. Press release. 2021. Available at: [https://www.wto.org/english/news\\_e/pres21\\_e/pr876\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/pres21_e/pr876_e.htm).

<sup>10</sup> ILO. *Impact of lockdown measures on the informal economy. A summary*. 2020. Available at: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_743534.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/briefingnote/wcms_743534.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> UNCTAD. *Review of maritime transport 2020*. Available at: [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/rmt2020ch1\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/rmt2020ch1_en.pdf).

### III. Proposals for advancing progress in context of SDG Acceleration and Climate Action

Going forward, progress can only be accelerated with substantially increased and targeted investments in affordable, reliable, safe, low-carbon, sustainable transport infrastructure and services, including expanded, upgraded, and integrated public transport systems in the fast-growing cities of the world together with increased attention to non-motorized transport as well investments in sustainable transport systems in rural areas, especially in developing countries.

Sustainable transport solutions, including regarding freight and multi-modal transport, exist and should be adapted to local context and possible changes in demand and supply caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Passenger and freight transport as well as supply chains should be reviewed and revamped in order to withstand possible future crises and support global economic recovery. Upcoming high-level meetings, such as the second Global Sustainable Transport Conference, COP26 and the 2022 high-level meeting on road safety, can be used to further elaborate on and feature such solutions. Accessible, safe, affordable, reliable, and effective transport systems should be planned and developed using all available technology and data. The design and development of urban and rural transport infrastructure should be done with vulnerable population groups in mind. Rural and urban transport infrastructure development should ideally be accompanied by other infrastructure development (e.g., renewable energy, IT) and the provision of basic services as well as involve local communities in the design, implementation, and maintenance. The transport sector as an enabler and important source of stable and quality employment should be further explored, including in the context of innovative and green transport solutions.<sup>12</sup>

Means of implementation will have to be provided to support developing countries in the development and implementation of sustainable rural and urban transport infrastructure and rural-urban connections. In addition, public-private partnerships should be promoted, for example regarding innovative transport solutions, such as intelligent transport systems (ITS), electric mobility and Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS).

### IV. Guiding questions

1. What evidence do we have on how sustainable transport solutions can contribute to poverty eradication, provision of livelihoods and economic growth in both rural and urban contexts?
2. What are current main obstacles that prevent transport systems from fulfilling their role in ensuring that no one is left behind? How can the global community—governments, the UN system, civil society, the private sector, local communities, and others—contribute to overcoming these obstacles?
3. What are some good practices or “bright spots” that showcase successful examples of sustainable transport systems in rural and urban areas, which foster poverty reduction, livelihoods, economic growth and inclusion of vulnerable groups?
4. How can sustainable transport support global economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic?

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<sup>12</sup> E.g., employment creation related to public transport for informal transport workers.

## Programme

### Co-Chairs:

- H.E. Mr. Ma Junsheng, Director General, State Post Bureau, China
- Mr. Haoliang Xu, Assistant Secretary-General, United Nations Development Programme

### Moderator:

- Mr. Aniruddha Dasgupta, President and CEO, World Resources Institute

### Panelists:

- Mr. Bambang Susantono, Vice President, Knowledge Management and Sustainable Development, Asian Development Bank
- Ms. Esenam Nyador, Founder and Head, Miss Taxi Ghana
- Mr. Bill M. Halkias, President, International Road Federation
- Ms. Rohey Malick Lowe, Mayor of Banjul, Gambia (tbc)
- Mr. Li Xuesong, Director, Institute of Quantitative & Technological Economics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

### UN agencies:

- Mr. Binyam Reja, Acting Global Director, Transport Global Practice, World Bank
- Ms. Ismahane Elouafi, Chief Scientist, Food and Agriculture Organization
- Mr. Robert Lisinge, Chief, Energy, Infrastructure and Services Section, Private Sector Development and Finance Division, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

### Other stakeholders:

- Mr. Wang Jian, Vice President, China Post Group