THE KEY ROLE OF SUSTAINABLE URBAN MOBILITY TO BUILD BACK BETTER IN MEDITERRANEAN CITIES

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INTRODUCTION

The crisis generated by Covid-19 has had a major impact on public transport systems across many Mediterranean countries. Public and private sector stakeholders have adopted all the necessary measures to guarantee service continuity, ensuring the mobility of essential front-line workers.

Existing services have been kept running or new ones put in place so that people who cannot stay home and must travel have an adequate mobility alternative. Supply has been adapted to the newly required distancing measures, face masks have been mandated across most cities, and station and vehicle cleaning has been scaled up with no regard to the extra costs. All this has been done while protecting workers and customers.

However, the health situation has powered a widespread and unsustainable fall in public transport ridership and associated farebox revenues of close to 90% in some cities, despite supply far outstripping demand since the crisis began. With a progressive resumption of activities after lockdown, it is imperative to step in with exceptional measures or the system will collapse.

We are facing a global pandemic that is profoundly deepening inequalities and undoing progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the same time, we continue to face many global challenges with irreversible impacts for people. In the responses to these interconnected crises, we cannot afford to tackle just one or the other. Indeed, climate, health, social inclusion, road safety and the economy are all under attack and public transport, driven by innovation and service quality, is a vital part of the solution.

THE UNDISPUTED BENEFITS OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT TO OUR SOCIETIES

In the response, repair and recovery phases of this crisis, citizens and policymakers have reacted differently across regions. This time, we need to build back better. A key part of doing so will entail shoring up the role of public transport, the backbone of urban mobility, as an enabler to other economic, social and environmental city objectives.

The economic benefits of public transport are five times higher than the money invested in it[1]. Public transport unlocks positive effects in the wider economy by connecting people to their jobs, studies and leisure occupations, allowing for clustering of activities and business development, improving quality of life, supporting tourism, reducing traffic congestion, stabilising property values and helping to regenerate cities or deprived areas through transport connections. Studies report a significant increase in the value of property developments close to transport projects designed with a transit-oriented approach, reflected by nearby retail stores, quality pedestrian areas and open spaces.

Worldwide, over 13 million local jobs are linked to public transport services. For every direct job in public transport, 2.5 additional jobs exist in the supply chain and the local economy. A recent study[2] carried by United Nations and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) suggests that employment opportunities would indeed be opened up by the promotion of green and healthy transport. Stimulating the use of public transport by doubling investment could create at least 2.5 million additional jobs in the transport sector worldwide. This increases to at least 5 million jobs if the wider impact on other sectors of the economy is considered.

Public transport brings people together and equal opportunities to all citizens, as the accessible and affordable option to ensure access to public services. It plays a crucial role in local development, offering mobility to all and maintaining territorial and social cohesion, leaving no one and no place behind after the crisis.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), seven million premature deaths are due to air pollution. It accounts for one-third of deaths from the leading non-communicable diseases (stroke, lung cancer, heart attacks and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease). Over 90% of the world's population live in areas where air pollution exceeds safe levels. There must therefore be no 'back to normal' where it is dangerous just to breathe.

According to the European Environment Agency, public transport is four times more efficient per pax-km than private cars. Every kilometer travelled on public transport saves 95 grams of GHG emissions and 19 grams of NOx compared to motorised private transport.

Investing in health prevention by reducing air pollution would bring down the cost of treating non-communicable diseases in the 21st century. A significant part of the health solution would involve equipping cities and their inhabitants with integrated public transport, reducing risks from traffic injuries,

obesity, air pollution and noise. Those would benefit all and reduce the social inequalities in front of these hazards[3].

Decreased traffic resulting from the lockdown in many cities shows that nitrogen dioxide (NO_2) concentrations can rapidly be reduced by up to a third. While in the current crisis, several cities have decided to suspend existing car use and parking restriction policies or delay new ones to help healthcare workers and essential deliveries, it is vital that these proven instruments for cleaner air be fully reactivated as soon as possible. The main risk for catching Covid-19 is undoubtedly contact with an infected person, and healthcare quality is vital in determining outcomes. However, studies show that air pollution could matter in several ways. For example, higher death rates due to lungs and hearts weakened by dirty air. Pollutants also inflame the lungs, making inhabitants more susceptible to the virus. This raises concerns about rising pollution levels after lockdowns.

If we are to limit the rise in global temperature to 1.5°C as per the Paris Agreement, we must cut global emissions by 7.6% every year for the next decade. As outlined in the UITP Declaration on Climate Leadership[4], this requires more ambitious national commitments and tougher targets to reach carbon neutrality by 2050. Non-state actors like the public transport sector have shown increased determination and commitment to achieving a low-emissions future and harnessing related opportunities. The fastest and most cost-efficient way to decarbonize people's daily mobility and reduce the footprint of their mobility choices is to promote public transport, walking, and cycling.

Road traffic injuries are the 10th leading cause of death globally, responsible for more than 1.2 million deaths per year. 90% of these casualties happen in developing countries. Around 50 million people are also injured on the world's roads every year, costing governments up to 3% of GDP. The number of road traffic deaths continues to climb steadily and the rate of death relative to the size of the world's population has remained constant, meaning we are way off delivering on the goal set by SDG 3.6 to halve the number of global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents. Public transport has a critical role to play as access to a safe and sustainable urban transport system for all, which includes expanding public transport, is a recognised solution to achieve this objective[5].

CITIES NEED BETTER MOBILITY

Throughout history, the urban landscape of the Mediterranean cities has evolved in response to social, economic and environmental changes. Today, with more people moving to urban areas, cities are responsible for 75% of energy consumption and 70% of global carbon dioxide emissions. The way we plan

and build our cities defines our quality of life. Urban planners and decision-makers are being pushed to rethink how mobility is organised.

Cities across our Region have understood that with this crisis now is the time to move forward on sustainable urban mobility and many have already begun to remodel their urban space and review the allocation of road space disproportionately allocated to private cars during the last decades. The complementarity and integration of active, shared and collective modes of transport is key.

The digital revolution has brought radical changes to our economies, including freight and passenger mobility, and has encouraged new actors to enter the mobility market. If the new services affect city mobility management and impacts the urban streetscape, as part of a wider city strategy they also represent new opportunities to enrich the mobility options and facilitate a car free lifestyle. Cooperation, partnerships and dialogue are key to enable a redefined public transport system, integrating these new complementary services with mass public transport in an efficient and sustainable way. In the context of Mobility as a Service (MaaS), no shared or collective mode of transport should be left out of this dialogue.

This crisis represents a vital opportunity to definitively change things for the better, handing cities back to the people. The decisions taken in the coming weeks and months will define how healthy, resilient, and livable our cities will be going forward. But we can only do this by stepping up collaboration among stakeholders to support public transport. Public transit institutional frameworks and market regulations differ in line with local specificities, but the starting point to any city's strategic development plan should be to craft a common vision (both vertically and horizontally) in which urban mobility is posited to deliver on the city's strategic objectives and secure wider socioeconomic benefits. Twinning long-term strategies with tactical measures fosters a stream of consistency in the decision-making process, not subject to political terms. Current short term initiatives enabling walking and cycling should evolve in long term solutions associating public transport stakeholders.

Health is not only an indicator for monitoring progress, but an essential element to ensure sustainable development. Placing health and well-being at the centre of the planning process can foster good livelihoods, build resilient and vibrant communities, and give voice to vulnerable groups, while enabling progress to reduce inequalities in urban areas.

Some regulators might view the crisis as an inflection point to accelerate the transition toward sustainable mobility, while others could loosen regulatory mandates. By framing how our urban ecosystems operate,

regulations can have a major impact on the success or failure of an urban mobility strategy. Indeed, a flexible and conducive regulatory approach, adapted to an increasingly complex and competitive environment, supporting innovation and innovative itself, enables cities to thrive and reach their full potential[6].

Innovation, including the development of new technology solutions, has a major role to play to build a more resilient urban mobility system, with actors able to show greater agility and offering more flexibility in the provision of services than they have been able to do until now.

Some of the trends that appeared during the Covid-19 crisis might only be temporary but some shifts will be permanent. The more pervasive use of digital technologies, including the increase of virtual interactions (teleworking, etc.), is likely to impact the structure of the demand and the shape of cities. To ensure the continued relevance of public transport and its associated benefits in this future environment, the sector should adapt and embrace goaldriven innovation and digitalisation to build and deliver better quality, upgrading the level of personalised services and standards for public transport customers.

Public transport is a lucrative investment and important driver of wealth. Ensuring long-term funding stability, enabling CAPEX and OPEX planning in the context of rigorous SUMPs, is critical to supporting city strategies and achieving targeted mobility results. Dedicated legislation and funding should be ring-fenced. The governance model has to be enhanced to better include the various beneficiaries of public transport infrastructures and services, including businesses[7].

The coronavirus crisis is also hitting public transport finances and urgent extraordinary measures in the form of clear conditions for using recovery funds in favour of a modal shift are needed. This timing might be perfect to implement alternative funding schemes, such as congestion charging or road pricing, leading to a virtuous cycle in which private cars fund public transport.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Mediterranean cities and countries should invest in recovery and resilience for a systemic socioeconomic transformation, where public transport and active mobility play a key role to build back better. For that purpose:

1) Strengthening public transport should be a priority for decision-makers in all countries across the Region. Governments, currently deciding how to allocate some of the biggest public funds in history, should include the sector in the financial recovery measures and maintain and even step up

planned investments in public transport infrastructures and services, due to their various positive multiplier factors.

2) The public sector must step in to guarantee a certain level of stability through dedicated mobility funds, acting as a driver. The EU Recovery Plan and the next Multiannual Financial Framework will be key in some countries of the Mediterranean ecosystem. We need to move forward with concrete figures allocated to public transport on the next long-term budget and Next Generation EU by the end of the year. Alternative funding schemes, such as congestion charging or road pricing, should be considered. Clear rules and a coherent approach at regional/ global level by competent authorities are key, while providing agile regulatory frameworks and financial incentives to build and deliver urban transport systems that have the levels of capacity and increased quality of environment people desire.
3) The current crisis is setting the scene for doing what so many cities wanted but lacked the opportunity to do. Through transport-oriented development, the need for motorised travel and the trip length can be reduced. Residential, work and leisure districts must become more closely connected and intermixed. Cities must prioritise accessible, safe, breathable, and walkable streets through urban planning, putting people at the heart, by implementing the careful coordination of land use and long term mobility planning with the engagement of all stakeholders from project start. There is now a golden opportunity for policymakers to integrate and strengthen these policies.
4) Public transport should be the backbone of urban mobility across all exit strategies that aim to shift individual motorised transport in cities towards more sustainable modes as part of an integrated public transport system (administrative, modal, fare,…) that combines mobility services, provides door-to-door seamless journeys and eliminates the need for the private car.

5) Travel demand management plays a key role to decongest the peak. Public authorities and private actors should collaborate to monitor and realign strategies affecting the short and, especially, long term impacts of the current crisis on the dynamics of cities and mobility. Supported by technological solutions and flexibility, efficient responses to optimise and adapt the network will influence smart travel.
6) Grounded in data and the science, positive communication measures are key to restoring people's trust in the public transport sector. All the tools are already in place, be a combination of policy decisions, active measures and reassurance of clients. Public transport authorities and operators must strengthen their interaction with the media to explain the important sector pillars (customer focus, cleaning and sanitary measures and efficiency) and to accelerate levers (innovation, digital transformation and strategic partnerships).

CONCLUSION

Cities and countries have been responding to short term emergencies, but now we must move beyond, ensure the survival of the public transport and seize a historical unique opportunity to start over and shape the future of our cities.

Our urban mobility sector is strongly inter-linked with many other challenges (climate, health, social inclusion, road safety, etc.) that will not be met without a clear priority given to public transport as a vital pillar for economic, social and environmental recovery, both in the short and long-term.

Public transport stakeholders have demonstrated that although they didn't have the experience to deal with such sanitary crisis, they have reacted extremely rapidly to the situation and demonstrated their great sense of responsibility towards their staff and the communities they serve.

Numerous scientific studies and empirical analysis show that public transport is much less risk than other public places or private gatherings. Unfortunately, it has been too often stigmatised without any solid arguments. Based on scientific findings and practical experience available today[9], public transport is taking the appropriate measures to reduce those risks to a level that is manageable and acceptable by users.

Nevertheless, additional efforts should be made to strongly communicate public transport benefits to society and restore citizens´ trust.

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