

# On the road to sustainable mobility: How to ensure a just transition?

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If the EU is to achieve its 2050 climate neutrality goals, its future mobility and road transport systems will have to look drastically different from today. While the climate and environmental policies set at the EU, national and local levels; new technologies; and now the COVID-19 crisis are already changing Europe's transport and mobility landscape, the road to a sustainable mobility system will be a bumpy one. Ultimately, such a transition will only succeed if it considers the needs of the citizens most affected by it, and vulnerable to its various implications.

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Changing how people move and the vehicles they use, and building the necessary infrastructure for a renewed mobility system require significant investments and time. Furthermore, the carrots and sticks that are used to incentivise people to adopt more sustainable mobility options must be carefully studied. As long as the cost for new, low-emission and 'clean' road transport solutions is higher than smog-sputtering diesel or petrol vehicles, the uptake of the former will be hampered.

Moreover, process matters. Achieving buy-in for the transition requires considering the varying needs of people and placing special focus on vulnerable groups with limited mobility options (e.g. low-income households, people with

disabilities and existing health conditions, rural residents), who may end up carrying a disproportionate cost of the transition without seeing the immediate benefits.

The mobility transition will have broad socioeconomic implications. It will affect road transport users, as well as workers in the transport sector. This Policy Brief focuses specifically on the former group, including those who will be most affected and vulnerable in the face of the projected changes. Finally, it explores the EU's potential role in creating the conditions for a just pathway to sustainable mobility for all. The launch of the European Commission's Strategy for sustainable and smart mobility provides an occasion to carefully assess the prospects for a just transition to the desired mobility system.

## BACKGROUND: REMEMBERING THE MOST AFFECTED

*Transport and mobility* are two terms that are sometimes used interchangeably in policy discourses. However, whereas transportation refers to the act of moving people or goods, mobility refers to the *ability* to move freely, swiftly, safely and affordably. While EU and national actions are increasingly focused on transitioning to sustainable mobility, more efforts are needed to ensure that it also accounts for the needs of the most affected and vulnerable.

The green transition relies on changing how, when, and how much and often people move. It requires breaking the cycle of car dependency. This can be done by making public transport, walking and cycling more attractive and accessible. Reducing the need for physical travel by, for example, capitalising on information and communication technology can also support these

efforts. In parallel, the transition requires lowering the emissions of vehicles, especially via electrification, and ensuring that affordable and clean alternatives are available for those who depend on cars.

### Risks to be recognised

When discussing how to ensure a green transition towards sustainable mobility, two topics tend to stand out:

- 1) the need to reduce the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions of road transport by investing in electromobility; and
- 2) the enhancement of sustainable urban mobility.

However, as the reasons below show, simply advocating for these two topics is insufficient in achieving a *just* transition towards sustainable mobility.

- **Lack of inclusiveness:** If the process of planning and designing the transition to environmentally friendly mobility is not inclusive, buy-in for the planned measures could be hampered. Moreover, if, in the process, the needs of vulnerable groups are ignored, undesirable consequences could emerge, such as low-income groups bearing the costs for electromobility and the necessary infrastructure without having equal access to it. Additionally, vulnerable groups' access to basic needs could be disrupted if they do not have access to affordable mobility options in the widest sense. Failing to ensure a buy-in has the potential of leading to a repeat of the 2018 yellow vests movement.
- **Forgetting rural EU:** If discussions on the sustainable mobility transition fail to pay sufficient attention to rural populations, the needs of a significant part of the vulnerable European population will be overlooked. Around a quarter of Europeans live in rural areas, and many are already exposed to poverty.<sup>1</sup> The mobility of rural areas has historically been overshadowed by planning for urban areas, and the increasing level of urbanisation (i.e. close to 84% by 2050)<sup>2</sup> will likely worsen the situation. There is a risk that the urban-rural divide will only deepen if the ongoing mobility transition continues to neglect rural areas.

### STATE OF PLAY: A FAIR TRANSITION TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY?

The rationale and urgency for improving road transport are given. Road transportation accounts for around 22% of the EU's domestic GHG emissions and, contrary to many other sectors, its emissions have increased since 1990.<sup>3</sup> Road transport is not only a significant source of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) but also nitrogen oxide (NO<sub>x</sub>) and particulate matter (PM), and, as such, of air pollution.<sup>4</sup> While air quality across the EU has been improving over the years, it still leads to hundreds of thousands of premature deaths every year.<sup>5</sup> Air pollution is also costing Europeans hundreds of billions annually, not

only as direct health costs but also economic damages (e.g. labour productivity losses).<sup>6</sup>

A fair transition to sustainable mobility is important for two reasons especially:

1. **Vulnerable groups**, including people with existing health conditions, the elderly, children and people with lower socioeconomic status, **suffer the most from the harmful impacts of air pollution.**<sup>7</sup>
2. **Lower-income groups already spend a relatively large proportion of their income on mobility.** Mobility costs represent the second-largest household expenditure in Europe (13.2%).<sup>8</sup> As a result, lower-income groups may be directly susceptible to any change in mobility price. Furthermore, given their dependency on mobility, price increases are likely to occur at the expense of other household costs.

#### *Impact of the pandemic*

The crisis sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic has led to changes in the way millions of people work and travel. However, while workers possessing higher levels of skills have found it easier to telework, many workers without tertiary education and with lower levels of literacy and numeracy skills continue to depend on accessible mobility for income.<sup>9</sup>

Cities across the EU are trying to ensure the functioning of their public mobility systems amidst the health concerns. Many are using the crisis to accelerate a transition to more sustainable mobility by promoting the development and usage of walking paths and cycling lanes.

#### *Overview of the current policy framework*

Promoting environmentally friendly mobility is nothing new for the EU. The 2011 White Paper on Transport, the 2016 EU Strategy for Low-Emission Mobility, and the latest, 2017 Europe on the Move document have contributed to these efforts. The latter policy package set tightened rules on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from certain modes of transport, in alignment with the EU's climate neutrality ambitions, and also recognised the role of cleaner and smarter urban mobility.

Furthermore, the EU runs several multi-stakeholder initiatives that are relevant to the development of smart cities, including on smart and sustainable mobility. The EU's financial support, R&I and smart city projects are worth mentioning, including the Urban Mobility Package, Urban Agenda for the EU, CIVITAS, European Innovation Partnership on Smart Cities and Communities, and European Institute of Innovation & Technology's (EIT) Urban Mobility programme. Several measures have been implemented across the continent to encourage the use of public transport and cycling over driving.

As part of the European Green Deal, the EU should aim to reduce transport-related emissions by 90% by 2050. The Commission's proposal to raise the GHG emission target to at least 55% for 2030 will also have significant impacts

on mobility.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the European Commission’s Strategy for sustainable and smart mobility – which aims to increase the uptake of zero-emission vehicles; make sustainable, alternative solutions available to the public and businesses; support digitalisation and automation; and improve connectivity and better accessibility to mobility – is very much needed. However, going ahead, remembering people and their needs should be at the heart of the transition.

## PROSPECTS: ENSURING JUSTICE IN TRANSPORT AND MOBILITY

A successful transition to a sustainable mobility system will require societal buy-in as well as economic support. It will only succeed if it is designed to consider the needs of those it affects the most. A transition to sustainable mobility that is fair for all should:<sup>11</sup>

- ensure that the benefits, ills, burdens, costs and risks associated with particular policy decisions and actions are distributed fairly, reflecting solidarity between all parts of society (**distributional justice**);
- guarantee that the participatory processes in decision-making and governance of the transition are inclusive and fair and that participants can actually wield influence (**procedural justice**); and
- acknowledge and respect the rights, needs, values, understandings and customs of the groups involved in or affected by the transition (**recognition justice**).

The recommendations below address these concerns by ensuring that these three basic dimensions are taken into account.

### *How to ensure distributional justice?*

- The follow-up actions to EU Strategy for sustainable and smart mobility should **ensure accessible, affordable and safe mobility for all** and the right of *access to essential services*, as set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Commission should, in all its impact assessments on existing or future legislative proposals regarding transportation and mobility, include an evaluation of their impact on vulnerable groups’ mobility options.
- Electric cars could be an important part of the toolkit on sustainable mobility, including for rural residents, as long as challenges like pricing and access to charging infrastructure are tackled.<sup>12</sup> While reducing car dependency should be at the core of EU efforts to build a sustainable mobility future, the Union should **contribute to improving access to individual electromobility for those who have no other option but to use a private vehicle**. The Alternative Fuels Infrastructure Directive (2014/94/EU), expected to be revised and republished by the end of 2021, should include a binding target for member states to build charging points in rural areas and low-income areas.

- More public support is needed for **innovation, new technologies and pilots**, to test mobility projects that improve the linkage between rural, peri-urban and urban areas. Projects could include bus rapid transit systems, hydrogen buses and collective transport systems (i.e. local and long-distance public transport services which are supplemented by shared mobility and electric mobility options for the last kilometres of the journey).
- Although legislation to **reduce air pollution** is in place, its implementation remains a major issue. Breaches of the Ambient Air Quality Directives’ standards remain “widespread in EU cities”.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, while the links between social vulnerability and environmental health hazards are acknowledged in the air quality and noise directives, the EU should ask member states to take action to reduce existing inequalities in exposure and vulnerability and monitor progress. This should lead to enhanced efforts to improve mobility, including possibilities for walking and cycling, especially in areas where air pollution and environmental health hazards are the highest.
- EU-level recovery efforts and funding under the **Recovery and Resilience Facility**, of which 37% will need to be dedicated to climate-friendly investments, should ensure sufficient financial aid for improving sustainable mobility, including public transport. COVID-19 national recovery and resilience plans should reflect these objectives. The pandemic has put many cities under pressure, not least because teleworking and lockdown measures have caused a massive drop in transport usage. European cities should be allocated sufficient support for creating more sustainable mobility systems.

### *How to ensure procedural justice?*

- At the EU level, there are also many examples of networks and platforms that enable the **sharing of knowledge and best practices** on sustainable urban mobility, such as the Eltis observatory and CIVITAS initiative. The EU should support such sharing of information to also improve rural mobility. As regions and cities are usually responsible for local public transport, including and supporting them in mobility planning are crucial. The specific mobility challenges of peri-urban and rural areas should not be forgotten, either. Tools like public consultations can also be useful in ensuring fair decision-making.
- Much more needs to be done for **people with reduced mobility and people with disabilities** at the EU level. The 2019 European Accessibility Act establishes common European requirements for accessibility. However, it fails to address the accessibility of transport and the built environment. Moreover, the 2011 Regulation 181/2011 on the rights of passengers in bus and coach transport establishes rules for non-discriminatory and mandatory assistance for people with reduced mobility and/or disabilities. And yet, it exempts vehicles or infrastructure that “makes it physically impossible to take on board, alight or carry

the disabled person or person with reduced mobility in a safe and operationally feasible manner.”<sup>14</sup> Hence, the EU should ensure that its transport and mobility initiatives are accessible (including a separate budget for accessibility when needed). Ensuring the accessibility of people with disabilities is all the more important now that the current crisis has led to social distancing measures and limited services of public transport.<sup>15</sup>

#### How to ensure recognition justice?

- The EU and member states should ensure the rights of people with reduced mobility (e.g. elderly, people with disabilities) to free movement, the freedom to choose the mode of transport, and non-discrimination in their access to transport. In other words, it should **guarantee universal accessibility**. In practice, this means, *inter alia*, ensuring that they have full access to multimodal journeys and that walking and cycling infrastructures are not only restricted to people with two legs or two wheels.
- **Surveys on citizens’ attitudes and feelings towards the EU’s climate and energy policies** can help policymakers better understand the feasibility of and improve the buy-in for different measures. The EU should, therefore, continue to enhance its efforts to understand citizens’ attitudes and the associated drivers and hurdles to achieving sustainable mobility.<sup>16</sup>
- The EU’s future mobility and transport planning should carefully **consider the needs of all vulnerable groups, including rural populations; people with disabilities; the elderly; and gender, ethnic or socioeconomic minorities**. The EU should support member states and local authorities to study and collect data on the mobility patterns and needs of different groups, to ensure people’s right to travel safely and create awareness of various mobility challenges. The Commission’s plan to establish a ‘common European mobility data space’ should support these efforts.
- **A massive cultural change** is needed if emissions are to be reduced. This cannot be done without strong leadership, citizen participation, the building of agency, the empowerment of communities, and the deployment of financial and regulatory incentives. Regional and local authorities are particularly well-placed to involve citizens in the conceptualisation of mobility and transport policies and their consequent implementation phase. The EU must exhibit strong leadership. The follow-up to the Strategy for sustainable and smart mobility should, at their heart, also have social justice considerations.

The European Green Deal and Strategy for sustainable and smart mobility provide an opportunity for the EU to rethink its future mobility. It is time to accelerate the transition towards a climate-neutral economy

and society with mobility systems that are both environmentally friendly and socially just.

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- <sup>1</sup> Eurostat, [Urban and rural living in the EU](#), 07 February 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> European Commission, [“Urbanisation in Europe”](#) (accessed 02 December 2020).
- <sup>3</sup> European Environment Agency, [“Greenhouse gas emissions from transport in Europe”](#) (accessed 02 December 2020).
- <sup>4</sup> European Environment Agency, [“Emissions of air pollutants from transport”](#) (accessed 02 December 2020).
- <sup>5</sup> European Environment Agency (2020), [Air Quality in Europe – 2020 report](#), No 09/2020, Copenhagen.
- <sup>6</sup> According to the European Commission, the total 2010 costs of air pollution may have reached €940 billion. See European Commission (2013), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A Clean Air Programme for Europe](#), COM(2013) 918 final, Brussels, p.5.
- <sup>7</sup> See e.g. European Environment Agency (2018), [Unequal exposure and unequal impacts: social vulnerability to air pollution, noise and extreme temperatures](#), No 22/2018, Copenhagen.
- <sup>8</sup> Eurostat, [Household expenditure by consumption purpose in the EU](#), 27 November 2019.
- <sup>9</sup> Espinoza, Ricard and Laura Reznikova (2020), [“Who can log in? The importance of skills for the feasibility of teleworking arrangements across OECD countries”](#), Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- <sup>10</sup> See European Commission (2014), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A policy framework for climate and energy in the period from 2020 up to 2030. Impact assessment](#), SWD(2014) 15 final, Brussels.
- <sup>11</sup> Williams, Stephen and Andréanne Doyon (2019), [“Justice in energy transitions”](#), *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, Volume 31, pp. 144-153; Schwanen, Tim (2020), [“Low-carbon mobility in London: A just transition?”](#), *One Earth*, Volume 2, Issue 2, pp.132-134.
- <sup>12</sup> Tovar Reanos, Miguel Angel and Katrin Sommerfeld (2018), [“Fuel for Inequality: Distributional Effects of Environmental Reforms on Private Transport”](#), *Resource and Energy Economics*, Volume 51, pp.28-43.
- <sup>13</sup> European Court of Auditors (2020), [Sustainable Urban Mobility in the EU: No substantial improvement possible without Member States’ commitment](#), Special Report 06/2020, Luxembourg, p.15.
- <sup>14</sup> European Union (2011), [Regulation \(EU\) No 181/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the rights of passengers in bus and coach transport and amending Regulation \(EC\) No 2006/2004](#), Art.10(1b).
- <sup>15</sup> See European Disability Forum, [“EDF recommendations on exit measures for transport services in light of COVID-19”](#), 19 May 2020.
- <sup>16</sup> See e.g. Enzmann, Johannes and Marc Ringel (2020), [“Reducing Road Transport Emissions in Europe: Investigating A Demand Side Driven Approach”](#), *Sustainability*, Volume 12, Issue 18.