Presidential Roundtable Summary: Decarbonising Transport: how do we design effective policies?

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There is no plausible path to net-zero without significant transport emissions reductions – reductions that need to start being delivered soon. Governments globally face difficult policy choices around constraining demand for unsustainable passenger and freight transport services without disadvantaging certain geographies, industries or populations.

At an ICE-hosted Presidential Roundtable, attendees from around the world discussed how cities and regions are tackling the challenge of decarbonising their transport systems ahead of COP27.

This event followed a roundtable ICE hosted last year on what should be included in a strategy to decarbonise transport, which took place ahead of the release of the UK Government's Transport Decarbonisation Plan.

This latest roundtable built on many of the points raised last year, with participants particularly emphasising the opportunities for subnational and place-based action to be drivers of change. There was also discussion of the importance of behaviour change in reaching net zero, funding and governance challenges facing the transport sector, and a reminder of the need for greater consideration of the freight sector.

Local action, behaviour change and public support

There is broad agreement about many of the actions needed to decarbonise transportation. However, there is less consensus about how to deliver them. While action at international and national level often seems stuck in a political log jam, there may be more opportunities to drive change through pragmatic local action.

Achieving that change will depend on the choices people make about how they travel. Those choices will be made based on local circumstances, which means policy and decision-makers need to incentivise and frame transport options in a way that encourages desirable behaviours.

For instance, cycling is so popular in Copenhagen because decades of policy choices, such as the allocation of road space and the cost of car parking, make it the easiest option for many journeys.

However, in many places economic signals still tend to encourage the more polluting option. Often rail travel is more expensive than flying. Low and zero carbon options must be made affordable and accessible.

While changing the fabric of a city can take generations, there are many practical steps that can happen quickly to encourage behaviour change at a local level. These could include speed limits, on-street priority,

closing certain roads to traffic and promoting the wider benefits of active travel and public transport. Authorities can also use their planning powers to enable more local provision of goods and services.

Recently the International Energy Agency released a [10-point plan](#) for reducing Europe's dependency on oil. Nine of the measures involve behavioural changes linked to transport that could be implemented quickly.

Strong-leadership delivering bold, evidence-based action

Changing how people and cities operate is difficult. Politicians must balance multiple concerns, including the rising cost of living, the availability of public investment and the wider international context. Change can be perceived as long-term and slow while some options, such as congestion charges and low emissions zones, can be controversial and face political or public resistance.

Empowering leaders, including local governments and bodies, with the confidence, knowledge and resources to act is vital. Strong governance is needed to build consensus and coordinate action across the public and private sectors, between national and subnational authorities and with related infrastructure sectors such energy and digital.

A strong evidence base can help leaders draw on experience and best practice to develop plans and make the case for action. The International Travel Forum's [Transport Climate Action Directory](#) is one example of a living library of measures leaders can deploy and how much emissions they could cut.

Micro mobility and mobility as a service

Many places are looking at micro-mobility to encourage modal shift from private vehicles. In Hong Kong e-scooter usage is growing, but the government appears uncertain about how to regulate it. Beijing has seen a market-driven rise in shared bike schemes. Tactics such as linking bike usage to users' health apps appear to have encouraged uptake among younger generations.

Enabling the micro-mobility sector and new technologies to develop will mean finding the right economic models and regulatory frameworks to make them safe, accessible and sustainable.

Don't forget freight and the supply chain

Freight is often a secondary priority in transport planning after the movement of people. However, decarbonising transport will mean addressing the movement of goods across the entire supply chain.

Where the emissions from freight are currently considered, the focus is often on the delivery stage. There is also little examination of the role of behaviour change in decarbonising freight. The vision set out in the UK's Transport Decarbonisation Plan, for example, largely relies on technology to reach net zero.

To develop effective strategies, we need more understanding of the entire supply chain and the impact of individual purchasing decisions and prevailing business models on carbon emissions from freight.

Future migration trends and rethinking established mantra

Evidence from some countries suggests that people are moving out of cities in growing numbers. Australia, for example, is experiencing record internal migration from its capital cities to regional areas.

If the trend continues agglomeration and densification may cease to be key drivers of transport policy. Instead, planners will have to give more consideration to regional infrastructure gaps and providing the right infrastructure to incentivise low carbon options in places with a lower population density.

Affordability and making the right choices

Decarbonising transport will require significant investment. However, governments and commercial transport operators have had their finances squeezed by the ongoing impact of the Covid-pandemic. There is a need to be clear about the costs, risks and constraints operators and governments face in order to develop viable solutions.

It also important to be open about failures and use them to learn and adapt future practices. In some places, for example, converting bus fleets to low carbon technologies has negatively impacted service levels prompting their operators to return to diesel fleets.

Responding to these challenges could mean deploying short-term options, such as fitting buses with catalytic convertors, that allow more time for industry to develop viable zero emission models that work without compromising service levels and turning people away from public transport.

Once again, focusing on behaviour change as well as the deployment of low carbon technologies is essential. In Hong Kong, for example, it is estimated that the potential impact of mode shift is greater than from zero emission public transport. A 5% mode shift from private vehicles to public transport could have the same impact as converting the entire bus fleet to zero emission technology.

Questions to take away

- Do subnational authorities currently have the powers, resources and capacity to take effective action to decarbonise transportation? With so many opportunities and 'quick wins' existing at the local level, ensuring those authorities have the means to deliver them is vital for reaching national targets.

- Are we doing enough to tackle the difficult questions and learn from experience? One unanswered question for authorities around the world is how to ensure sustainable funding that keeps public transport affordable and attractive in the context of post-Covid revenue shortfalls and uncertainty around future travel patterns.

- Which sectors, opportunities and trends need more attention? Freight needs to be considered holistically, including the role of behaviour change in reducing emissions. Fast-developing sectors such as micro-mobility have a role to play but are also posing challenges for regulators.