

Concept Note

Second Global Sustainable Transport Conference

Convened by the United Nations Secretary-General

Theme: Sustainable transport, sustainable development

14-16 October 2021

Beijing, China (hybrid format)

1. Background: transport and sustainable development

The role of transport in sustainable development was first recognized at the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and reinforced in its outcome document – Agenda 21. Further, at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, the role of transport was once again captured in the outcome document - the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI).

World leaders at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio +20) unanimously agreed that transportation and mobility are central to sustainable development. This is also reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development - while there is no single dedicated Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) for transport, it is recognized as an enabler and necessary condition for achieving many SDGs. Explicit references are, for example, found in target 3.6 ('by 2020, halve the number of global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents'), target 9.1 ('develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, including regional and transborder infrastructure, to support economic development and human well-being, with a focus on affordable and equitable access for all') and target 11.2 ('by 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport while paying special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons'). Different dimensions of transport have also been discussed at various high-level Conferences, such as the 3rd Ministerial Conference on Road Safety in February 2020 and the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III).

Transport enables the mobility of people and goods, enhancing economic growth and livelihoods while improving access to quality services, such as health, education and finance. It strengthens connectivity at all levels, helping integrate economies, improving social equity, enhancing rural-urban linkages and building resilience. At the same time, there is also recognition of negative environmental, social and health impacts. Close to a quarter of global greenhouse gas emissions come from transport and these emissions are projected to grow substantially in the years to come, contributing to climate change. Other pollutants, most evidently in many urban centres, directly impact health; casualties and deaths from transport-related accidents are also on the rise. Increasing connectivity can also be accompanied with increasing illicit flows of people, wildlife and goods.

Sustainable transport seeks to fully realize the benefits while avoiding or alleviating the negative effects. At the global level, the subject gained prominence through the report of the UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Advisory Group on Sustainable Transport entitled “Mobilizing sustainable transport for development”¹ (October 2016). The report defined 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 importance of sustainable transport, especially for countries in special situations, is also recognized by the international community through the Istanbul Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), the Vienna Programme of Action for the Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), the SAMOA Pathway for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the New Urban Agenda. Sustainable transport will also be key to meeting the targets of the Paris Agreement on climate change.

Implementation actions under several of these global agreements are under review over 2021-22. At G-20 meetings, discussions around quality infrastructure, connectivity and resilience invariably encompass sustainable transport. In addition, other stakeholders are organizing numerous transport-related Conferences, such as the annual OECD-ITF International Transport Forum meetings and the World Bank’s annual Transforming Transportation Conferences.

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrust to the fore the central role of sustainable transport in modern economies and societies. Sustainable transport has, for example, been critical for the delivery of essential goods (e.g., food and medical supplies) and services during the pandemic and will be essential throughout the recovery period. Among others, sustainable transport with cold-chain storage remains critical for the distribution of vaccines, a critical priority for global recovery and well-being. The pandemic has also significantly impacted work and travel patterns and global supply chains and may be prompting longer-term changes in both demand and supply for transport services potentially causing the transport sector to have to change and adapt accordingly. As during earlier crises marked by global economic slowdowns, there have been short-term reductions in the emission of green-house gases and other pollutants, but prior experience shows that these are rapidly reversed as the situation return to normal. Therefore, the continuous involvement of the transport sector in climate action will be crucial.

Recovering from the pandemic will also be a chance for all actors to rethink passenger and freight transport and come up with solutions which can not only withstand possible future crises, but also support the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement. Such a re-thinking is essential in view of current megatrends, such as population growth, urbanization, and digitalization. While technological advances can provide new opportunities for realizing sustainable transport, they may also come with new risks and challenges that need to be addressed.

¹ Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/sustainabletransport/highleveladvisorygroup>

All of this underscores the importance of sustainable transport towards achieving the overarching aspirations of the 2030 Agenda – ‘leaving no one behind’, while achieving prosperity for all people on a thriving planet through reaching the SDGs and fostering climate action.

2. First Global Sustainable Transport Conference

The global commitment to sustainable transport was spotlighted in the first ever Global Sustainable Transport Conference², convened by the UN Secretary-General on 26-27 November 2016 in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. The Conference attracted broad participation from senior Government officials, business and civil society representatives and UN and other inter-governmental entities. The Conference addressed all modes of transport - road, rail, air and waterborne, including both passengers and freight - and accorded priority attention to the concerns of developing countries. The report of the Secretary-General’s High-Level Advisory Group on Sustainable Transport (HLAG-ST) served as an input to the Conference. Outcomes included the Ashgabat Statement on Commitments and Policy Recommendations; a report of the Conference; and a compilation of partnerships, voluntary commitments and initiatives to support sustainable transport.

3. Second Global Sustainable Transport Conference

The United Nations Second Global Sustainable Transport Conference comes at an opportune time, given the importance of sustainable transport for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

UN General Assembly

The General Assembly, in its resolution 72/212 of 20 December 2017, entitled “Strengthening the links between all modes of transport to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals”, noted with appreciation the Ashgabat Statement. Among other actions, the General Assembly invited the Secretary-General to consider convening another Global Sustainable Transport Conference and encouraged Member States to indicate their interest in hosting it.

Initial steps

The UN Secretary-General accepted the offer of the Chinese Government to host the Conference. Subsequently, the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, Mr. Liu Zhenmin, was designated as the Conference Secretary-General to lead preparations on behalf of the United Nations. The Conference was originally scheduled to take place in Beijing from 5-7 May 2020 but was postponed to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The dates have now been decided as 14-16 October 2021.

The Division for Sustainable Development Goals within the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs will serve as the substantive Secretariat for the Conference and will support preparations, conduct and outcomes, in cooperation with the host country and other Secretariat departments. In addition, it will also coordinate inter-agency activities and selected multi-stakeholder contributions.

² See also: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/Global-Sustainable-Transport-Conference-2016>.

Organizational details

The Conference will take place in hybrid format with limited in-person presence in Beijing and virtual events and participation from global stakeholders. It will be held over a period of three days, allowing for one opening and one closing session, three sessions with statements by Heads of State and Government/Ministers/Heads of Delegations, and six consecutive thematic sessions, all in plenary. Three forums, namely the Ministers' Forum, the Business Forum and the Science, Engineering and Technology Forum, will also be part of the official programme. The provisional programme is attached. The official programme would be complemented by virtual side events. Detailed information on participation will be made available separately.

Substantive inputs

An inter-agency report on sustainable transport would be prepared as substantive background for the Conference. In addition, other reports and papers by individual Member States, groups of Member States and other stakeholders, would also be made available. Individual sessions would be supported by brief background notes with guiding questions and other relevant materials.

Outcome

The outcome of the Conference would not be a negotiated text but rather a forward-looking, visionary statement ("Beijing Declaration") calling for global action to further advance sustainable transport worldwide. This would be complemented by a summary report of the Conference and a compilation of partnerships, voluntary commitments, and initiatives to support sustainable transport (both pre-registered prior to the Conference and announced during the Conference).

The outcome of the Conference would also serve as a follow-up to other important Summits/Conferences/Meetings, including the Secretary-General's Climate Action Summit in 2019, the High-level Dialogue on Energy in 2021 and others. It would also be an important input into other subsequent events, such as the COP 26 on climate change and the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2022.

Participation

Details on participation and other relevant information would be made available on the dedicated Conference website: <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/transport2021>.