

## **Concept note for THE PEP Seminar: Reflections on urban transport in the new context emerging from the COVID-19 crisis**

*Prepared by THE PEP Secretariat*

### ***Background***

The extraordinary meeting of the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme (THE PEP) convened by THE PEP Bureau on 22 April 2020 considered the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on transport, health and environment issues and emphasized the important role of THE PEP as a platform to support countries in recovering the mobility systems.

At the same meeting, member States expressed the urgent need for a guidance that will support countries through the transition phase to limit exposure to COVID-19 while re-gaining access to goods, services, jobs, education and amenities, and keeping transport operators, travellers and the general public safe and healthy.

At its thirty-seventh meeting held on 29 June 2020, THE PEP Bureau decided to organize a seminar in the margins of the 18th session of THE PEP Steering Committee to discuss the lessons learned from the pandemic and to stimulate a broader re-thinking of transport systems to open up a future possibility for healthier and more effective transport means, which is also more flexible, equitable and resilient to possible future shocks.

This concept note was prepared by the secretariat to provide the background on the content and stimulate discussion at the seminar.

The seminar will take place on Wednesday, 25 November at 14:00-15:30 and it will be open for all partners and friends of THE PEP. It will also be advertised more broadly and open to an external audience of interested participants.

### **I. Introduction**

1. Countries around the world have been and are continuing to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. In just a few months the world has been transformed. Globally, as of 15 November 2020, there have been nearly 54 million (53,766,728) confirmed cases and over 1,3 million (1,308,975) deaths reported to WHO<sup>1</sup>. The pandemic has also shown that even when good results are obtained in reducing and containing the spreading of the infection, as it was observed in several European countries at the beginning of summer 2020, reoccurrence remains possible, requiring maintenance and/or strengthening of precautionary and public health measures.

2. The COVID-19 pandemic is having a major impact on all segments of the economy. The impact on transport and transportation was tremendous across all

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<sup>1</sup> <https://covid19.who.int/>

countries. This has been due to both lockdown measures, which have resulted in a very significant reduction in economic activities and a massive shift to teleworking and distant learning, and to the challenge of providing the necessary physical distance, particularly to users and operators of crowded public transport, which in turn has resulted in a decrease in the use of public transport.

3. When restrictions are ended or eased, and activities resume, partially or totally (e.g. more people return to work from offices and schools re-open) the transport sector could already look very different. It is highly likely that the pandemic will have longer-term impacts on the transport sector as well as on our individual behaviour and lifestyle, the way we work, consume and travel.

4. How will the crisis affect future urban mobility and transport systems, along with urban planning? What are the risks and opportunities? What will be the “old” and “new” problems in the post-pandemic period? How will urban transport and mobility be redesigned and adapted to accommodate new emerging trends?

5. For example, on the one side, there is an emerging notion that a city where citizens can meet their basic needs within a walking and cycling distance would be more resilient and sustainable. On the other side, there is a growing interest to relocate to peri-urban or country-side areas, where bigger housing and access to green space may be more affordable to those who are shifting permanently to teleworking.

6. What are the immediate actions that governments at a different level and across different sectors need to take at the nexus between housing, urban planning and transport and mobility, if we want to move towards achieving the SDGs and protect the Planet? What can be the role of THE PEP in supporting countries to shape and promote more resilient yet healthy and sustainable transport and mobility?

7. Answering these questions will help us to reinforce our understanding of the reality, the challenges and also opportunities that may emerge from the transition towards a “new normal”.

## **II. Key discussion areas**

8. Even before the current crisis, many countries of the region had challenges in developing sustainable transport and mobility systems. The situation became more difficult during the pandemic when public transport, actively promoted earlier as one of the sustainable means of transportation, turned out to be unsafe as physical distancing requirement and mass transit could not be fulfilled at the same time.

9. As a result, public transport has been facing an unprecedented challenge. The loss of revenue from lower rates of usage and additional operating costs resulting from new sanitation measures such as more frequent cleaning and disinfection of vehicles and protective equipment for transport operators became a serious financial burden for the public transport sector and created new challenges in terms of ensuring occupational safety of transport operators.

10. In parallel, however, the following main developments have occurred:

- a. Many cities around the world have recorded positive shifts in active mobility and bike traffic increased very steeply, partly reflecting a shift towards a higher number of shorter trips within neighbourhoods to meet essential needs and a reduction in longer distance commuting trips. Some cities temporarily closed major streets to cars and/or enlarged pavements to allow more physical distancing between pedestrians. In other urban areas, 30km/hour speed limits have been introduced to reduce the risk of road traffic injuries affecting cyclists or pedestrians. Many cities are discussing the possibility of reallocating street space from cars to cycling and walking even after the pandemic is over. For many people, there have been unprecedented opportunities to experience cycling and walking under safer and more attractive conditions, expanding the base of political support for policies and interventions that would allow maintaining these new habits. These developments have been supported by government investments into better infrastructure, and support to the purchase of new bicycles, including electric ones.
  - b. There is a rethinking/revival of private transportation, which is perceived as attractive and safer, as many people feel more protected in their own vehicle than in public transport. If left unmanaged, this could result in unsustainable increases in the use of private cars. However, there are also important emerging trends, also facilitated by technological advances in electric mobility, the most evident of which is very fast growth in so-called “micro-mobility” (electric scooters, mini-cars, electric bikes, mini-electric cargo vehicles, etc.), and services related to them (e.g. rental schemes in cities).
  - c. There is a growing demand for connectivity between peri-urban and rural areas and cities, with more people moving to these areas to afford better housing (more space to cater for the new needs of teleworking; distant learning; nursing family members who need to self-isolate) and commuting longer distances, but fewer days per week. This goes hand in hand with a growing demand for services and amenities in these areas.
11. One more important issue that existed before but emerged even more evidently during the pandemic is socio-economic, including, inequality in access to jobs, education, health care, services and amenities. Transport inequality is often associated with the way people are distributed geographically and across social classes (also according to the jobs and education opportunities). Availability of safe, reliable and affordable transport can provide access to different opportunities for social inclusion and well-being.
12. While people are experiencing various challenges due to the pandemic, the inequality issues should not be neglected. Equity interventions should ensure that all city quarters as well as rural areas are well connected by healthy, inclusive, and environmentally friendly public transport. It is also important that infrastructure for safe and comfortable active mobility is developed.
13. In light of the COVID-19 crisis, today the major tasks of transport authorities are:
- a. to guarantee the health and safety of travellers and transport workers;

- b. to ensure that public transport can maintain its essential role and regain users' trust;
- c. to retain the active mobility at a high level in a long term;
- d. to manage the risk of increasing the use of private cars and to govern the emergence of micro-mobility options;
- e. to integrate transport and land-use planning so that essential living needs are accessible by walking and cycling.

### **III. Organization and format of the Seminar**

14. The Seminar will bring together speakers of the academic world as well as policy makers in the front line of the response to the challenges posed by COVID-19 to urban transport and mobility. They will look into the nexus in the trends that are currently emerging with respect to:

- a. reduced use of public transport and increased attractiveness of private mobility (perceived as “safer”);
- b. boom in active mobility as well as in “micro-mobility”, mostly electrified (micro-cars, mopeds, e-bikes, scooters)
- c. changes to urban planning/land use (the city of proximity) to attain greater urban resilience and quality of urban life (meeting needs within a walking/cycling distance);
- d. the movement of people towards peri-urban/rural areas (the issue of equality issues)
- e. equitable transport and health during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

15. The last part of the seminar will highlight the new technical guidance “Supporting healthy urban transport and mobility in the context of COVID-19” developed within THE PEP framework. Participants will be encouraged to disseminate the new publication.

### **IV. Conclusion**

16. COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated our fragility in every sector. It has been said numerous times that the pandemic must be a wake-up call. The recovery from the crisis must lead to more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies that are stronger and more resilient.

17. THE PEP has always served as an unique multisectoral knowledge-sharing platform. It should position itself at the forefront of gaining a good understanding of the recent developments so that governments can “govern” them in the best interest of health and sustainability, rather than “reacting” to them.

18. THE PEP should further strengthen this role and become a reference actor in the context of the new international policy framework that has emerged globally and regionally to achieve the longer-term ambition to “build back better”, including the WHO Manifesto for a Healthy and Green Recovery from COVID-19 and in the EU the Green Deal.