**Expanding access to urban opportunities**

*National policy priorities for a pivotal decade*

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**UMBRELLA MESSAGE**

Opportunity for national governments to help cities recover from the global pandemic, build resilience to the climate emergency, and reduce inequalities by making cities more accessible, sustainable and inclusive.

**KEY MESSAGES**

Transforming cities to be more compact, connected, clean and inclusive is a crucial contribution to the triple challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, global climate emergency and new rise in poverty and inequality. Reshaping cities in this way will make them more accessible, liveable, sustainable, and resilient to future shocks.

The pandemic has created opportunities to rethink urban spaces and improve people’s ability to move around cities and thrive. Cities – as places to connect people with opportunities, resources, goods, and services – can be used to define the pathway to a successful recovery and move away from business-as-usual urban development.

This new paper by researchers at the OECD and LSE Cities, produced for the Coalition for Urban Transitions, analyses COVID-19 recovery spending across nine countries and makes recommendations to national governments to boost recovery and accelerate progress towards low-carbon, accessible and inclusive cities.

The analysis highlights the potential for rapid transformation within cities. Many promising measures have been implemented by the spending, across the countries studied, including support for rail networks, urban public transport systems, electric vehicles, walking and cycling infrastructure and low traffic neighbourhoods. But some of the measures risk entrenching fossil fuel dependency for many years and could set countries back in terms of decarbonisation and urban accessibility.

**IN DETAIL**

**Compact, Connected, Clean and Inclusive cities as a solution to 2020s crises**

* Cities are at the forefront of the triple crisis facing the current decade: the COVID-19 pandemic; a new rise in poverty and inequality; and the climate emergency.
* The intertwined challenges are reshaping our cities and providing new opportunities to rethink how we live, move and work within urban spaces.
* As concentrated hubs to connect people with employment, resources and services, cities are disproportionally impacted by the triple crisis, and will have to make a central contribution to the responses. Government choices and recovery strategies will affect how cities emerge in a post-pandemic world.
* The adoption of compact, connected, clean and inclusive (3C+) cities is a model of best practice that is gaining increased traction across the world. Reshaping cities in this way will make them more accessible – allowing people to travel more easily, reach opportunities and thrive in their cities.

**Opportunity to seize the moment to improve urban accessibility**

* The pandemic has put a spotlight on how the future of cities can be different, more sustainable, and follow a new growth pathway. Many people liked the glimpse of an alternative urban future and are loath to return to business-as-usual.
* By forcing large populations to stay close to home, the pandemic has acted as a reminder of the value of physical proximity and mixed-use urban districts. It has provided an opportunity to shift urban policy debates from their focus on improving mobility towards enhancing accessibility, by revisiting how land is used and planned, and the digital infrastructure that connects urban residents to the things they need to thrive.
* Analysis of COVID-19 stimulus spending across nine countries – China, Colombia, Germany, Japan, Mexico, South Africa, South Korea, and the United Kingdom – has shown how effective and rapid the urban changes could be and offered a useful testing ground for government policies. Using a ‘traffic-light’ rating system, the study classified the actions made by the nine countries in response to the pandemic in terms of their contribution to 3C+ cities, across transport and infrastructure; housing and land-use; and urban governance sectors.
* Promising measures to enhance 3C+ cities were implemented across the transport sector in many countries, including support for rail networks, urban public transport systems, electric vehicles, walking and cycling infrastructure and low-traffic neighbourhoods.
* In Seattle (USA), for example, 30km of roads have been made permanently vehicle free, following a successful trial to help with social distancing, encourage exercise and reduce pollution during the pandemic. In Seoul (Korea), plans for a new bike lane system have been fast-tracked following the pandemic, to help grow cycling’s modal share to 15% by 2030.
* Major investments were also made in housing constructions and upgrades with measures that prioritise vulnerable people and neighbourhoods likely to have positive impacts on inclusion. For example, Liverpool’s (UK) £1.4 billion recovery plan includes the development of 200 new homes and renovations for 4,000 vulnerable households.
* Pandemic recovery packages will reshape economies and cities in fundamental ways and could provide key opportunities for governments to accelerate the transition to low-carbon, inclusive accessibility. Office buildings may never return to full occupancy and could be repurposed to provide alternative public amenities, for example. But many opportunities are yet to be seized.

**The new risk: losing important gains in urban accessibility**

* Across the countries analysed, recovery strategies often focused on responding to the short term social and economic problems that emerged. Government bailouts to avoid housing evictions, or the collapse of public transport and aviation industries were among the most common stimulus measures adopted.
* Some of these short-term investments and policy choices could set countries back. For example, financial incentives for purchasing clean fuel vehicles, used in Germany and China, could result in a long-term shift away from public transport usage; or massive house construction programmes, like those adopted in Mexico and South Africa, could exacerbate urban sprawl if they are not guided by careful land use planning.
* There are immediate risks for the future of public transport, as ridership still remains lower than pre-pandemic levels, with more people choosing to drive. This is driven by a combination of reduced demand during ‘stay at home’ mandates, fear of infection risk in public places, and tax incentives for private electric vehicles. If governments do not address these trends during this policy window, and spending is not prioritised, they risk embedding new behaviours which don’t promote urban accessibility but exacerbate inequalities and increase fossil fuel dependency.

**Taking action: policy recommendations for national governments**

* It is not too late to act: The pandemic has created a desire to ‘build back better’ and take bold ambitious action for urban accessibility. National governments should seize the opportunity to put the inclusive, compact, connected, and clean urban vision into national COVID-19 recovery strategies.
* The report offers policy recommendations for national governments:

1. Realign national transport policies and budgets
2. Reform housing and land use policy
3. Support the trend towards hyper-localisation and the 15-minute neighbourhood
4. Facilitate the growth of new urban mobility options and last-mile connectivity
5. Encourage cities to reallocate road space and engage in tactical urbanism
6. Provide new finance for metropolitan-wide transport systems.

In addition to these policy priorities, national policymakers need to address digital connectivity and urban freight as two policy blind spots in urban accessibility debates and take prompt action to leverage their transformative potential.