

Concept Note

Second Global Sustainable Transport Conference Convened by the United Nations Secretary-General

05-07 May 2020
Beijing, China

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.

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 be accompanied with increasing illicit flows related to smuggling.

Sustainable transport seeks to fully realize the benefits while avoiding or alleviating the negative effects. The UN Secretary-General launched in August 2014 a High-Level Advisory Group on Sustainable Transport (HLAG-ST), representing all modes of transport, including road, rail, aviation, marine, ferry and urban public transport providers. The policy recommendations of the HLAG-ST were submitted to the Secretary-General in its global sustainable transport outlook report entitled “Mobilizing sustainable transport for development”¹ (October 2016).

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

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

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 2019-20. At successive G-20 meetings, discussions around quality infrastructure, connectivity and resilience invariably encompass sustainable transport.

The continuing global attention to sustainable transport is also manifested in other ways. In the SDG context, explicit references are found in 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') and target 3.6 ('by 2020, halve the number of global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents'). As discussed earlier, it is also central to many other SDGs.

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.

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. Nine formal roundtables and a total of 16 side events were held. In addition, a treaty event took place. The report of the Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Group on Sustainable Transport (HLAG-ST) served as an input to the Conference.³

The Conference outcome consisted of: (1) "Ashgabat Statement on Commitments and Policy Recommendations"⁴; (2) a report of the Conference⁵; and (3) a compilation of partnerships, voluntary commitments and initiatives to support sustainable transport⁶.

² See also: General Assembly resolution 70/197 (A/RES/70/197)

³ The Conference programme is available at:

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/11883Programe_conference_rev1_27Nov.pdf

⁴ Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/11987Ashgabatstatement.pdf>

⁵ Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/12438Summary_Report_GSTC.pdf

⁶ Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/Global-Sustainable-Transport-Conference-2016>

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, including its impact on climate change.

a. 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.

b. 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. In consultation with the host government, the dates and venue have been decided as 5-7 May 2020 in Beijing.

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.

c. Organizational details

The Conference will be held over a period of three days, allowing for one opening and one closing session, three plenary sessions, and 15 parallel thematic sessions. Three forums, namely the Ministers’ Forum, the Business Forum and the Science, Engineering and Technology Forum, will also be part of the official programme. It is envisaged that the Conference would see the participation of a large number of delegates spread out over the entire duration, representing Governments and other stakeholders. The provisional programme is attached.

The official programme would be complemented by side events, field visits and an exhibition. Detailed information on participation will be made available separately.

d. Substantive inputs

An inter-agency report on sustainable transport will 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, will also be made available.

Individual sessions would be supported by brief background notes and other relevant materials.

e. Outcome

The outcome of the Conference would not be a negotiated text but rather a forward-looking, visionary statement calling for global action to further advance sustainable transport worldwide. This would be complemented by a 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 from 2019-20, including the Secretary-General's Climate Action Summit, the SDG Summit and others. It would also be an important input into other subsequent events, such as the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and the COP 26 on climate change.