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Welcome Remarks

UN DESA Webinar Series: Sustainable Transport and COVID-19: Response and Recovery

24 June 2020, New York

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to this important webinar on sustainable transport and COVID-19.

Sustainable transport is well recognized as one of the key enablers of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change. It is in recognition of such importance, that the Second Global Sustainable Transport Conference was scheduled to be held in Beijing this year by the Secretary-General.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced a temporary postponement. But it has also brought to the forefront just how vital this subject is for poverty eradication, economic growth, human development and sustainability. By allowing for the mobility of people and goods, it improves lives and livelihoods, and enables access to basic services such as health, education and finance.

There are many challenges too. Nearly a quarter of global greenhouse gas emissions come from transport, and these emissions are projected to grow significantly in the years to come.

Other pollutants, most obviously in cities, directly impact health. In remoter areas, lack of access is a challenge, and a rising number of accidents contributes to increasing numbers of deaths.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to take a terrible human toll.

At the same time, as governments and individuals take unprecedented steps to control the spread, we are seeing impacts across multiple Sustainable Development Goals. Many of these steps have involved travel or movement restrictions of one kind or another.

We must recognize that in the absence of vaccines or other effective treatments, these measures – when properly implemented – have managed to reduce the spread and cut the toll of deaths.

But they have also had very significant adverse effects. Current assessments are for global GDP to shrink by over 5 percent, and for tens of millions to fall into extreme poverty.

Impacts are magnified in the transport sector. For example, it is estimated that there will be about 2.5 billion fewer air travelers in 2020. The global economic downturn is also reflected in dropping freight shipments, with international shipping rates in some countries down by as much as 70 percent.

In many cities, revenues from public transit are so low that there are concerns about their continuing financial health. Job losses in all transport-related sectors, including those such as tourism, are evident. This is especially difficult as many of these jobs and livelihoods are ways out of poverty for many, including women.

Disrupted supply chains and labour movement also hamper production and endanger food security. As during earlier crises marked by global economic slowdowns, there are short-term reductions in greenhouse gases and other pollutants. However, prior experience shows that these might be rapidly reversed when the situation returns to normal.

At the same time, the pandemic could increase the impetus towards implementing shared solutions for other universal challenges, such as climate change. There could be longer-term changes in both demand and supply for transport services as well.

Alternate modes of working and learning, such as telecommuting and e-learning, and a rise in walking and bicycling, can all transform transport services. In addition, planned reductions in passenger density to diminish the risks of community transmission of diseases, could significantly change how many travel services are offered.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In order to meet the increasing and changing transport demands while preserving the planet for current and future generations, we will have to change the way we plan, develop and use transport modes and systems.

The recovery period from the pandemic offers a unique opportunity to do this. We know what transitions to sustainable transport would look like. This is the time to make them happen. I consider this to be an important aspect of our discussions today and next week.

The pandemic is a chance for all actors to rethink the transport of passengers and goods, and come up with solutions. We need to think of solutions that can not only withstand possible future crises of this nature. We also need to support the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement.

I am happy to see that the programme for the webinar creates space for such a discussion.

The UN system stands ready to support Member States and other stakeholders in these trying times. The Secretary-General has advanced several initiatives in this regard.

My department has been undertaking analytical work with regards to the impact of COVID-19 on sustainable development. We have published several policy briefs, including on the impact on countries in special situations.

A policy brief on sustainable transport, which will also touch on the impact of COVID-19 and related response and recovery, is planned for later this year.

Our capacity building exercises also accommodate responses to COVID-19. And I expect our discussions here, even in virtual format, will strengthen the foundation for the Second Global Sustainable Transport Conference.

New dates for the Conference are currently being considered and will be announced through the Conference website.

Dear Colleagues,

The need for sustainable transport systems that leave no one behind and are inclusive, affordable, efficient, environment-friendly and safe, is more apparent than ever.

Let us use this moment to find concrete solutions to enhancing sustainable transport worldwide – as a crucial enabler of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement.

I wish this webinar a great success!

Thank you.