

TOWARDS A GREEN EUROPE: TRENDS, CHALLENGES, AND THE POWER OF CITIES

RESEARCH PAPER

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Towards a Green Europe: Trends, challenges, and the power of cities

Summary

- Urban mobility in Europe remains hindered by severe structural problems – from environmental pollution to public health costs, insecurity, accidents, and limitations in transport accessibility, among others.
- The EU has positioned itself as a world leader in combating climate change and has set decarbonisation targets accordingly, framed within the 2019 European Green Deal.
- The disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic may actually present an unprecedented opportunity for Europe’s cities to push their strategic mobility plans forward.
- Policies ultimately seek to change the mobility mix of cities – that is, the distribution of trips made by each means of transport – to alter long-term mobility patterns.
- While higher-level governments may have more extensive resources, it is cities that are best positioned to ensure that the mobility ecosystem maximises value for its citizens – emphasising principles like sustainability, equity, and accessibility.

Introduction

Mobility has become Europe’s Achilles’ heel, persistently hindering its attempts to shift towards sustainable development. The externalities and limitations of our current mobility system are far-reaching, but nowhere are they more significant than in the continent’s cities. Over 70% of Europeans

reside in cities and, as such, it is urban mobility that serves to most notably condition quality of life and economic opportunity (European Commission, 2021). This is clear when we observe the number of premature deaths derived from pollution – a staggering 400,000 per year derived from air contamination alone (European Environmental Agency, 2020). Changing the way we move in cities has become one of the core goals of governments across the continent – but are we achieving it?

While we have made progress in recent decades, urban mobility in Europe remains hindered by severe structural problems – from environmental pollution to public health costs, insecurity, accidents, and limitations in transport accessibility, among others. However, the COVID-19 pandemic – for all its disruptions – may actually present an unprecedented opportunity: with social changes derived from the pandemic having significantly altered the way we travel, now may be the best time for Europe to push its strategic mobility plans forward (Schmidt et al., 2021).

Actually implementing this transition towards sustainable urban mobility will be dependent on the commitment of not just States, as we are often accustomed to assuming, but all levels of government – from municipalities to the European Union. Within this leadership of the public sector, local governments will have an especially important role – setting the pace at which cities progress and innovate towards more sustainable, equitable, and accessible mobility.

Racing towards the finish line: the implications of the European Green Deal

The EU has positioned itself as a world leader in combating climate change – and thus, has set decarbonisation targets accordingly. The guiding line of the continent’s efforts is anchored in the 2019 European Green Deal. This document defines the political framework within which the EU will seek to

address the challenges brought about by worsening climate change and define local mitigation strategies. Its core goal is incredibly ambitious: to make the EU climate-neutral – that is, make it have net-zero emissions – by 2050 (European Commission, 2019).

While a commendable goal, it may be exceedingly optimistic, as achieving it will require a 90% reduction in transport emissions across the EU. For now, it looks like we are far from making the progress needed to be on track (Smeds & Jones, 2020). In fact, the European Court of Auditors recently published a report stating that there is no clear indication that cities are significantly changing their mobility systems (European Court of Auditors, 2020). All in all, it's not looking good. So, how are we attempting to change this?

Trends in urban mobility: cities as implementers of mobility innovations

A new wave of trends is shaping the future of urban mobility across Europe. Local governments are leading the charge to promote more sustainable alternatives by enacting policies attempting to change the behaviour of urban residents – be it through innovations, incentives, subsidies, or limitations. These policies ultimately seek to change the mobility mix of cities – that is, the distribution of trips made by each means of transport – which is instrumental to alter long-term mobility patterns.

Common examples of measures taken by European cities are free parking for electric cars, subsidised bicycle sharing, low-emissions areas, and the promotion of public transport. Some limitations have attempted to discourage car use by making it less comfortable and affordable, with many cities introducing congestion pricing and low-emissions zones – as has been the case of Milan, Madrid, Rome, Paris, and London (Cornago et al., 2019). However, the cornerstone of most urban mobility strategies has been the encouragement of public transport or active mobility.

Public transport is a key service across Europe. Prior to the pandemic, European passengers averaged around 60 billion trips per year on public transport – generating between 130 and 150 billion euros of yearly income (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2021). While this is a notable benefit for the economy of local governments, costs may be prohibitive for some residents. As such, cities like Luxembourg, Tallinn, Dunkerque, and Heidelberg have made their public transport completely free, both to encourage its use and improve accessibility.

Some cities have instead opted to favour active mobility. The best success case is perhaps Copenhagen, which has become the world’s leading cycling city by undertaking strong investments in infrastructure and creating an identity and urban culture centred around cycling (Gössling, 2020). Their success has been unquestionable, saving over 220 million euros a year in health costs and now in the process of constructing Cycle superhighways to allow travellers to traverse municipal borders (Martin, 2021). These strategies reflect rising micro-mobility trends across Europe, hailed as a key element for a decarbonised future.

But substantially changing the way urban residents move isn’t easy – over the last century, European cities have evolved to facilitate the use of cars and moving away from this paradigm will necessitate more than behavioural nudges by local governments. As such, urban leaders have begun pioneering fundamental changes in urban design and our concept of the city.

Changing the way we think of the city: new ideas for a greener future

Cities are undertaking visible changes in their infrastructure and urban planning. Through the development of Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans, they are looking to implement innovative programs to recover urban space (Eltis,

2021). Two of the most prominent proposals have been the 15-minute city and the Superblocks.

The 15-minute city, popularised as part Anne Hidalgo's re-election campaign for Mayor of Paris, advocates for a decentralised city, where neighbourhoods become miniature cities in themselves, and no core services are more than 15 minutes away (Moreno et al., 2021). While the 15-minute city has been accused of being socially and economically inaccessible (Zivarts, 2021) – as well as potentially accelerating gentrification (O'Sullivan, 2021) – it seems like the idea is gaining traction, with multiple European metropolises attempting to implement similar projects.

On the other hand, the Superblocks were pioneered by the city of Barcelona, under the leadership of Mayor Ada Colau, seeking both to reduce car use inside the city and to recapture urban space for pedestrians and cyclists (Sisson, 2020). Traffic is redirected around a perimeter of streets, with the interior of the bloc turning into parks or pedestrian zones. This project has demonstrated to have notable health benefits for urban residents and is being replicated throughout Barcelona, as well as evaluated in other major metropolises (Mueller et al., 2020).

These new conceptualisations of the city are being combined with opportunities derived from new technologies, such as Mobility as a Service platforms – which connect the point of origin of the trip to its final destination using all available modes of transport – to facilitate the adoption of more dynamic systems of transport (Bellini et al., 2019; Mulley & Nelson, 2020).

As such, we see cities pushing for change at all levels – encouraging citizens to adopt new habits, changing urban planning to facilitate sustainable transport, and leveraging technology to make sure the system optimises accessibility and increases the diversity of options. These new mobility

ecosystems are being locally tailored by urban governments to help promote solutions to the great mobility challenges of the 21st century.

Conclusions: the case for local leadership with supranational support

As we have seen, to truly advance transitions towards sustainable mobility, cities will have to take on a leadership role. But, why choose to not recur to State governments or supra-national organisations? While higher-level governments may have more extensive resources, it is cities that are best positioned to ensure that the mobility ecosystem maximises value for its citizens – emphasising principles like sustainability, equity, and accessibility. Cities stand to take on a more dynamic role as coordinators of a complex urban mobility ecosystem in a way that is not viable or effective for States or the EU. As such, there is a need to embrace the localisation of sustainable development, moving the focus away from States toward cities.

However, this does not mean that State governments or the EU are excluded from sustainability efforts, as all the changes cities seek to put forth need to be facilitated through broader legal and regulatory approaches, as well as made possible with financial support. With this aim, the EU has created projects facilitating the training of local governments in mobility matters – under initiatives such as CIVITAS, Interreg, Urban Innovative Actions, and URBACT – and well as invested over 16 billion euros in urban mobility between 2014 and 2020 (Lozzi et al., 2020).

In the wake of the massive social and economic disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, we must look to local governments to define the future of sustainable mobility. The fight against climate change has become urban, and it's time for Europe to step up its efforts at driving real change – one city at a time.

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