KEEPING THINGS ON THE MOVE: MAKING CITIES MORE LIVEABLE

By Lesley Brown

© gerarddm

According to the World Bank, the majority of the world's population today lives in an urban area. This is a significant fact as urban areas currently generate 80% of the world's GDP. In fact, cities have already become the heart of our global economy and increasingly interconnected society. As such, this October, the United Nations will hold its Habitat III conference, entirely focused on how to accommodate global urbanisation. However, one thing is true: as cities continue to grow, national governments will need to make cities more attractive by focusing on increasing their economic competitiveness, improving the health and well-being of citizens, and minimising their carbon footprint. Essentially, all these tasks can be achieved more easily and effectively through the development of good, quality public transport.

Moving the economy

Because the development of public transport helps drive up job density and productivity gains, it is certainly an advantage for local businesses. Attracting firms and skills greatly depends on the transport offer. According to Greg Clark and Tim Moonen's paper, The Business of Cities 2013, a majority of senior executives from leading European companies say that the quality of transport links is one of the most important factors when weighing up office/plant locations in Europe. This is because when local existing infrastructure and people are well connected by urban transport, business activities become more efficient. This is due to a better use of limited urban space, and the ability of companies to be within reach of a denser and more varied section of the existing labour force.

Good public transport also plays a central role in reducing traffic – especially excessive congestion, which can decrease the efficiency of the movement of goods. In fact, the overall savings and the economic stimulus caused by public transport is up to four times greater than the initial financial investment.

In Australia, an assessment of Melbourne's plan for an underground metro system (twin nine-kilometre rail tunnels and five underground stations), titled, "Agglomeration Benefits of Melbourne Metro, 2012", conducted by Public Transport Victoria, reveals that the system should not only support the overall development of human capital in the city, but also help address significant imbalances between different districts, contributing to improving equality across the whole metropolitan area.

Employment opportunities clearly exist within the fold of public transport itself, which offers diverse and qualifying jobs for urban dwellers. Indeed by mobilising a range of different skills from engineering to IT and customer care, coupled with the current drive to develop multiple skills for employees, the public transport sector is among the largest employers in cities such as Brussels, Barcelona, Paris, and Amsterdam.

- An economic appraisal of the Grand Paris Express, the automatic metro system designed to link up the city suburbs, highlights the significant impact it is likely to make on the density of employment, and thus the productivity of workers.
- In London, one of the major advocates for the soon-to-be completed Crossrail project was the business sector, which realised that investment in public transport is key to matching employers with appropriately skilled employees and retailers with customers.
- About 1 to 1.2% of the annual European Union economy, as well as providing 1.2 million direct and 2 to 2.5 million indirect jobs, public transport is a significant motor for economic development in itself

Providing for healthier living

Healthy cities are mobile cities. While diverse factors obviously contribute towards the general well-being of

inhabitants, one only has to look at Copenhagen, Melbourne and Vancouver, cities that regularly feature on lists of the world's healthiest cities, to see that mobility – public transport, walking, cycling – is one of the success factors they all have in common. As well as being considered good places to live, all three cities are considered good places to work too.

The health benefits of combining active mobility (walking and cycling) with public transport, as highlighted in UITP's health policy brief, indeed play a part in the city's overall liveability. Public transport users walk about three times more than people who rely on private vehicles, so are more likely to complete the minimum 30 minutes of daily physical activity as recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO). This exercise is judged to have a positive impact on reducing the risks of coronary heart disease, obesity, and hypertension. Of course such a positive is only possible if the adequate infrastructure for walking and cycling is available, and joined up with public transport.

Higher shares of public transport are also correlated to lower traffic fatality rates. The "Future for Urban Mobility 2.0, 2014" report by Arthur D. Little and UITP, reveals that Copenhagen has the safest urban mobility system in the world, with 4.1 traffic deaths per million citizens. Note the city has a dense cycle lane network, the lowest penetration rate of cars in Western Europe at 0.24 per capita, and the use of individual transport is on the decrease. Taken together, such health and road safety gains can be translated into savings in terms of public health expenditure, thus relieving the burden on city resources.

Downsizing the urban carbon footprint

Post COP21, cities that respond to the challenges of energy production and emissions reduction by involving public transport (as part of the overall solution) are likely to become heroes in the fight against global climate change.

Travelling by public transport uses less energy and produces less pollution than by private vehicles. Yet it is no means a standalone solution. As part of the 'new urban agenda' – a plan many national governments are currently working on to enable sustainable urban living – the sector needs support from other measures aimed at mitigating CO_2 emissions from urban transport, e.g. access restriction, including road and access charging, the promotion of active travel and combined mobility.

"In rapidly growing and urbanising regions, [climate] mitigation strategies based on spatial planning and efficient infrastructure supply can avoid the lock-in of high-emission patterns," says Prof. Jean-Pascal Van Ypersele, climate scientist and vice-chair, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). "Mixed-use zoning, transport-oriented development, increased density, and co-located jobs and homes can reduce direct and indirect energy use across sectors," he adds.

A 2014 study by M. Replogle at the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), which looked at a high-shift scenario to public transport, provides insight on future figures: 'If the world expands public transport, walking and cycling in cities, more than $100 trillion [€90 trillion] in cumulative public and private spending could be saved, and 1,700 mega-tonnes of annual CO_2 – a 40% reduction of urban passenger transport emissions – could be eliminated by 2050.'

Value across the board

Says Philippe Yvin, president, directoire de la Société du Grand Paris: "Encircling the city, this ultra-modern and 'connected' automatic metro network [Paris Grand Express] will leverage the metropolitan area of Paris and give it the means to develop a future, a more inclusive region, anchored in sustainable development and in tune with new lifestyles and technologies."

Public transport has a valuable contribution to make to cities' abilities to function in their role as the centres of our economies and collective societies. As part of the 'new urban agenda' the sector has the potential to generate value across the board for urban citizens, businesses, local authorities and national governments. A win-win for all if action is taken sooner, rather than later... ●

The UITP Health Policy Brief is available for UITP members to download at www.mobi-uitp.org.