BETTER ACCESS TO URBAN OPPORTUNITIES:
ACCESSIBILITY POLICY FOR CITIES IN THE 2020S

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Summary for policy-makers

The world has entered the 2020s facing three intertwined crises that demand immediate attention: the COVID-19 pandemic, a new rise in poverty and inequality, and the climate emergency. The urgency is particularly great in cities, where people and economic activities are concentrated, requiring a critical rethinking of whether urban areas are meeting people's needs – and how policies could help transform them for the better.

This paper focuses on **key near-term opportunities for national governments to improve urban accessibility** – to ensure that people can not only move around efficiently, but can access the resources, services and opportunities they need to thrive. Local governments will lead many of these efforts, but to succeed, they need strong national government support. National policies and budgets often define what is possible, through everything from building codes to infrastructure investments and can accelerate or stifle urban transformation.

This is a pivotal time, with the world's post-COVID trajectory still to be determined and trillions of dollars being invested in economic recovery packages. The pandemic has shown that people can quickly and dramatically change how they live and work, and in many cities, there are opportunities to rethink the use of space and further improve accessibility. Several measures included in COVID recovery packages have the potential to be transformative. However, the pandemic has also created significant new challenges, especially

for public transport systems, and many measures adopted by governments could further entrench carbon-intensive economic systems. The pandemic could also exacerbate inequality and make cities less resilient.

It is not too late for national governments to include measures that promote urban accessibility in COVID-19 recovery packages. They can also seize opportunities that arise in fiscal, economic and sectoral policies or in infrastructure budgets. Six policy areas merit particular attention:

1. Realigning national transport policies and budgets: National governments play a central role in shaping urban mobility patterns and are major funders of both high- and low-carbon transport infrastructure. Many COVID-19 stimulus and recovery packages have also included significant transport investments. Governments should seize these opportunities to promote transformative change. Priorities include expanding established sustainable travel, such as walking, cycling and public transport use; rapidly electrifying road transport; and, to the extent that cars are used, shifting away from individual ownership and towards sharing and pooling

2. Comprehensive housing and land use policy reform: Housing investments are critical to addressing the economic and social crisis brought about by COVID-19. To achieve this, they need to be part of a broader urban and social policy strategy. Governments should focus not only on housing construction, but on building communities and neighbourhoods where residents can access the opportunities, services and amenities they need to thrive. It is important to provide a wide array of options, including both homeownership and rentals, to suit people at different income levels and in different life situations. National policy-makers must also ensure that decisions on where to build homes are based on true costs to society, and stop providing direct or indirect subsidies for dispersed urban development.

3. Hyper-localisation and the 15-minute neighbourhood: From Paris to Seattle to Melbourne, a growing number of cities are embracing a model of radical accessibility that aims to bring as many land uses as possible into a single area. The goal is for all city residents to be able to meet most daily needs within a short walk or bike ride (and/or public transit trip) from home. This, in turn, requires ensuring that urban services and opportunities are available all across the city. Realising this vision is likely to require land use policy reforms to allow denser development, including multi-family housing and rentals, and a focus on ensuring that investment in improved services is not concentrated in already affluent areas. It will also require rethinking public and active transport planning, moving from a "hub and spoke" model to polycentric cities with connections across neighbourhoods.

4. New urban mobility and last-mile connectivity: Two trends are rapidly transforming urban mobility: micromobility solutions such as bike-sharing and e-scooters and ride- and car-sharing. Though micromobility growth slowed at the peak of the pandemic, it is expected to play a key role in enabling first- and last-mile connectivity in multimodal and car-free transport systems. Regulation

and engagement with service providers will be needed to maximise benefits to urban communities. Ride-sharing services in particular may compete with public transit and increase congestion in some areas, but they can still improve urban accessibility in places underserved by public transport and also make it easier to forgo car ownership. Integration with other transport modes will be key.

5. Reallocation of road space and tactical urbanism: The pandemic led to the rapid reorganisation of urban street space, as sidewalks were widened, roads were pedestrianised and pop-up cycling lanes emerged almost overnight to accommodate the urgent need for social distancing. This huge global experiment in "tactical urbanism" proved to be a powerful tool for governments to push back against the dominance of cars. There is now a window of opportunity to make these physical and behavioural changes permanent and ensure that they are integrated into strategies for more sustainable urban and transport planning. Support from national governments will be critical in scaling up these early successes.

6. New finance for metropolitan-wide transport: Public transport plays a particularly critical role in large metropolitan areas, ensuring accessibility and reducing the need to drive. Investing in metropolitan-wide public transport is an urgent priority given the drop in ridership and revenues caused by the pandemic. It is also essential from an equity perspective, as in many cities it is the main mode through which lower-income residents are able to access jobs, education and core services. In addition, high-quality public transport can help mitigate the negative effects of urban sprawl by facilitating movement within and between peripheral neighbourhoods and into core employment centres.

Along with these policy priorities, national policy-makers need to recognise two "blind spots" in urban accessibility debates and leverage their transformative potential:

7. Digital connectivity: Digital technologies can be major enablers of social and economic development, enhancing access to urban resources while reducing the need to travel – which, in turn, can reduce GHG emissions from transport. However, digital connectivity in much of the world remains deeply inequitable. National governments need to treat digital connectivity as an integrated component of urban accessibility policy. This means putting equitable virtualisation requirements and opportunities on par with physical transport infrastructure, so they can truly be alternatives to physical mobility. Policy priorities include incorporating digital connectivity requirements as part of urban planning and building regulations, incentives to bridge the digital divide, direct investments in and delivery of digital connectivity through the public sector and enabling new finance such as universal service funds.

8. Urban freight and logistics: Urban freight transport has been growing at an exponential rate across the world, with demand for last-mile deliveries expected to grow by 78% over the next decade. Yet few cities have dedicated expertise to help them manage urban freight's impacts on sustainability and liveability. The

issue also gets little attention in national policy-making, leading to a fragmented regulatory environment both within and across countries. Promoting sustainable freight solutions suited to dense urban environments should be a critical aspect of urban transport planning – a task for national and local governments to tackle together. Priorities include integrating freight and logistics planning into transport and land use plans; investing in and incentivising the use of urban consolidation centres; facilitating the sharing of data and best practices; and providing preferential access for low-emission freight vehicles.

The confluence of COVID-19, the poverty and inequality crisis and the climate emergency poses enormous challenges. Though some countries have made important investments in urban accessibility, some investments and policy choices could actually set countries back. But it is not too late to act: By the opportunities laid out above, helping steer market forces in the right direction and supporting the transformative work being done by local governments, national leaders can make a significant contribution both to climate action and to urban accessibility.

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