

Sustainable and healthy transport can help boost economies

Tecnology

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The global financial crisis is challenging governments committed to implementing international agreements to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. At the High-level Meeting on Transport, Health and Environment in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, policy-makers from ministries of transport, health and the environment across Europe are examining how innovative transport policies can create employment and economic opportunities for a healthier society. Hosted by the Government of the Netherlands, the High-level Meeting is taking place on 22–23 January 2009 and was organized by the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

Transport contributes up to 10% of gross domestic product (GDP) and provides jobs and access to leisure activities and livelihoods. Its negative effects, however, include pollution, congestion, landscape degradation and contributions to climate change, as well as morbidity and mortality; the costs of these effects, estimated at about 8% of GDP, threaten to offset the gains. Cardiovascular diseases and obesity from physical inactivity, respiratory diseases from air pollution and premature deaths and life-long disabilities from road traffic crashes represent the largest part of the external costs of transport.

“Safe areas for walking and cycling and other forms of healthy transport must be high priorities for government investment,” says Dr Nata Menabde, Deputy Regional Director, WHO Regional Office for Europe. “The pay-offs from these investments include not only new employment opportunities but also improved health through increased physical activity and better air quality. WHO calls on the participants in the Meeting to create and construct more efficient transportation systems, conducive to better health, reduced emissions, energy efficiency and the highest level of safety.”

Work of the High-level Meeting

Innovative transport policies with an integrated approach can turn the challenges of the financial crisis into opportunities. The participants at the High-level Meeting are looking for concrete answers and solutions. They are expected to adopt action points for policy-makers that help address the key challenges to the economy, health and the environment. They are looking at the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme (THE PEP) as a platform for making proposals:

to advocate and stimulate economic investment in energy-efficient and low-emission vehicles and technology, and environmentally friendly transport modes and infrastructure, particularly in urban settings; and

to make health and environmental considerations a more explicit criterion for decision-making on transport.

“Many countries have yet to muster the political support for cooperation among the three sectors,” says Mr Paolo Garonna, Deputy Executive Secretary of UNECE. “And many countries still have to

set up institutional arrangements for integrated policy- and decision-making to achieve sustainable transport. THE PEP can provide a framework for an integrated policy approach as a tripartite forum across the three sectors, including industry and civil society and promoting good practice among all countries in western, eastern and south-eastern Europe, central Asia and the Caucasus.”

The participants are focusing on experiences from countries showing how sustainable transport can boost health, the environment and the economy. Studies show that investment in healthy and environmentally friendly transport – including clean and efficient public transport systems and transport infrastructure – can help reduce congestion, road traffic accidents and pollution, thereby contributing to healthier societies, sustainable mobility and wealth, and combating climate change.

Opening the Meeting, Mr Camiel Eurlings, the Dutch Minister of Transport, Public Works and Water Management, said, “There is a need for international cooperation on the development of the transport sector; however, while aiming for this development, we should never let down our guard on the impact of transport on our health and environment.”

The participants are expected to propose concrete action to include environment and health considerations in transport policies, particularly to support the achievement of four priority goals:

contributing to economic development and job creation by investing in environmentally friendly and healthy mobility;

promoting more efficient transport systems;

reducing emissions of transport-related greenhouse gases, air pollutants and noise; and

promoting policies and action conducive to healthy and safe transport.

Finally, the Meeting will launch innovative tools for transport and urban planners:

the THE PEP toolbox of good practice in sustainable urban transport;

the health economic assessment tool (HEAT) for cycling; and

guidance on how to quantify the health effects of cycling and walking.

These will help planners to take account of health effects when estimating costs and to integrate transport, environment and health considerations in policy-making.

Further information is available on the web sites of THE PEP (www.thepep.org/en/welcome.htm), the WHO Regional Office for Europe (<http://www.euro.who.int/transport>) and UNECE (<http://www.unece.org/trans/welcome.html>).