

Reflections on the 2019 International Transport Forum Summit

12 June 2019

LSE Cities launches new paper at International Transport Forum Summit in Leipzig – but urban accessibility and bigger challenges of environmental sustainability remain largely absent from the high-level discussions.

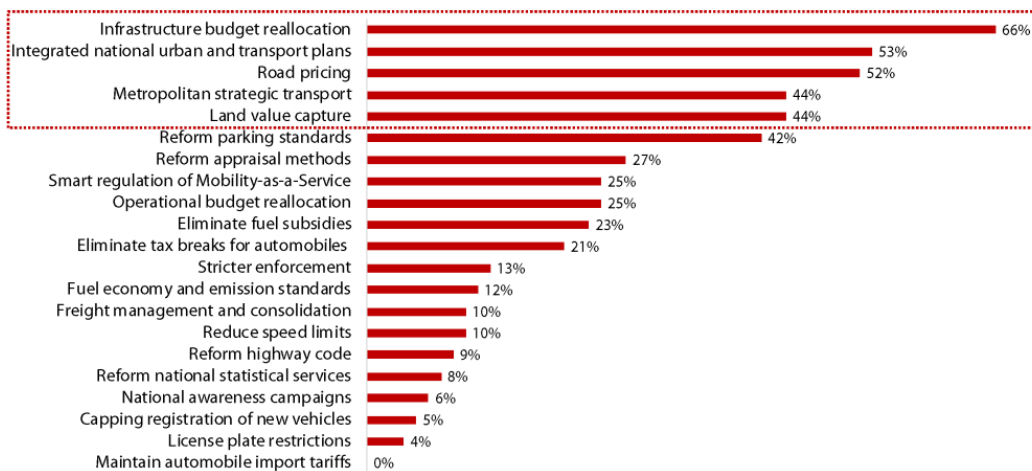
By Catarina Heeckt, Policy Fellow at LSE Cities



Last month we formally launched our new paper, 'National Transport Policy and Cities: Key policy interventions to drive compact and connected urban growth' (https://lsecities.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CUT2019_transport_050819.pdf) at the International Transport Forum Summit in Leipzig, Germany. The paper, written for the Coalition for Urban Transitions (<http://newclimateeconomy.net/urban-transitions/urban-transitions-homepage>), highlights the five priority transport policy interventions that national governments can implement to make cities more accessible – either by leapfrogging car-centric development pathways, or by transitioning towards a more compact and connected future. While the event provided us with a fantastic platform to discuss our research on the key actions national governments should take to foster more low-carbon, compact and connected cities, it also highlighted that accessibility as an indispensable precondition for sustainable urban development has still not arrived in the 'mainstream' of national transport policy-making.

FLAGSHIP POLICY INTERVENTIONS

SURVEY OF 77 TRANSPORT EXPERTS FROM 26 COUNTRIES



Overview of the most important national transport policy instruments and reforms for promoting compact and connected urban growth.

The International Transport Forum (ITF) Summit brings together government ministers from around the world to share policy perspectives with the private sector, the media, heads of international organisations, and thought leaders from civil society and academia. While calling it “the Davos of Transport” (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tanyamohn/2019/05/23/davos-of-transport-convenes-in-leipzig-germany/#209885fd1cbf>) may be slightly hyperbolic, the event is nevertheless one of the largest gatherings of transport ministers globally. This year, around forty ministers along with more than 1000 delegates from 70 countries gathered in Leipzig to discuss how better transport connectivity can help integrate regions while enabling the achievement of economic, social, and environmental goals.

Creating dialogue between academia and policy-makers



Catarina Heeckt (Policy Fellow, LSE Cities) speaks about “Better Cities: The Role of National Transport Policy”, hosted by the LSE, at the Open Stage Café taking place

during the International Transport Forums 2019 Summit in Leipzig, Germany, on 23 May 2019.

Ahead of the formal launch event, I was invited to discuss the findings of our new paper at the ITF Pre-Summit Research Day (<https://2019.itf-oecd.org/event/pre-summit-research-day>) during a panel on Sustainable Transport Solutions. The objective of the Pre-Summit Research Day is to create dialogue between researchers and practitioners and ensure that important new findings in academia shape the policy debates taking place at the Summit. Researchers from around the world presented work ranging from the economic viability of electrifying old diesel buses in Latvia to the use of blockchain technology in new Mobility-as-a-Service offerings in Korea.

While the intention of linking research findings into high-level policy dialogues is laudable, I am not sure to what extent the conversations from that first day carried over into the main Summit. There were certainly some interested policy-makers that attended the event but I didn't hear the more interesting or controversial debates from the pre-Summit Research Day resurface in a meaningful way during the events I attended during the main Summit.

Connectivity for economic prosperity – but at what cost?



Philipp Rode (Executive Director of LSE Cities) makes a speech on 'Better Cities: The Role of National Transport Policy', hosted by the LSE, at the Open Stage Café during the International Transport Forum 2019 Summit in Leipzig, Germany, on 23 May 2019.

The three days of the official Summit consisted of more than 80 events around a wide range of topics linking to the official theme 'Transport Connectivity for Regional Integration'. Alongside the public programme of panel discussions and presentations there were also many closed-door ministerial meetings and roundtables. Most of the more high-level public events, where transport ministers and other national officials took to the stage, were unsurprisingly dominated by soundbites and pre-prepared statements, although even these can at times be very

telling. During the opening Plenary, for example, China's Transport Minister Xiaopeng Li concluded that, "if you want to get rich, you need to build roads, and other types of infrastructure first."




Closed Ministerial meeting of ITF member country ministers on Thursday, 23 May 2019

Throughout the Summit, the idea of connectivity as a key driver of economic prosperity was very much at the forefront of discussions, with wider questions of environmental sustainability often seemingly an afterthought. Even in dedicated sessions on decarbonising the transport sector, which accounts for a staggering 23% of global energy-related greenhouse gas emissions, techno-optimism prevailed. This contrasted starkly with the findings in the new ITF Transport Outlook Report (<http://wx.oecdcode.org/TlidWpLC>) launched at the Summit, which warned that transport CO₂ emissions are projected to increase 60% by 2050 and only a dramatic shift to shared mobility will be able to curb this trend in urban areas.

Nevertheless, electrification, fleet optimisation, automation and other 'tech-fixes' dominated the conversation, with only occasional acknowledgements that these advances may be too little too late. In this context it was refreshing to hear voices such as Chilean Transport Minister Gloria Hutt Hesse reminding the audience and her fellow panellists that on a planet soon approaching 10 billion people, we have no choice but to reduce our use of space and learn to share – in transport and beyond.

Watch the Launch of “Better Cities: The Role of National Transport Policy”

 International Transport Forum at the OECD was live · [Follow](#)

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Urban mobility still not a clear national priority

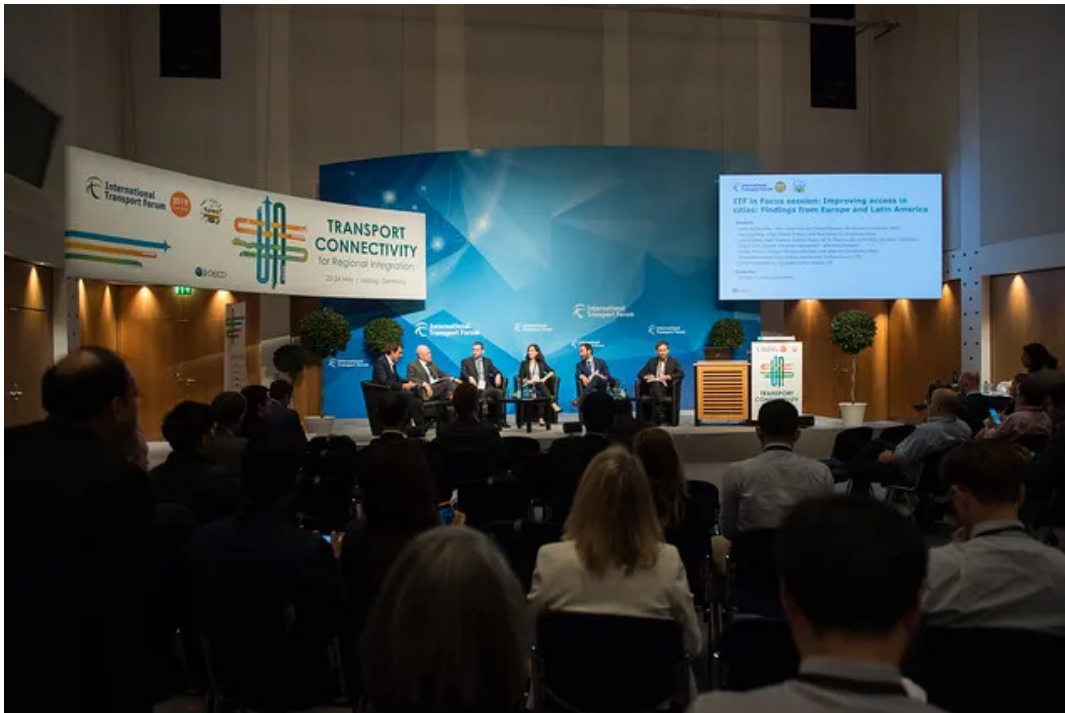


Philipp Rode (Executive Director of LSE Cities and Associate Professorial Research Fellow, The London School of Economics and Political Science) at the ITF in Focus session on [Improving access in cities: Findings from Europe and Latin America](#).

The other theme that was conspicuously underrepresented in the main programme was a focus on issues around urban mobility, which was only tackled centrally in a handful of sessions. Tellingly, the official Ministerial Declaration (<https://www.itf-oecd.org/sites/default/files/docs/2019-ministerial-declaration-transport-connectivity-regional-integration.pdf>) published at the end of the Summit, does not explicitly mention urban mobility and in fact the word ‘city’ and ‘urban’ only appear once in the entire document, even though the negative consequences of excessive movement are felt most acutely in urban areas. This aligns with a finding from our paper which shows that of the 189 transport policy interventions reviewed more than half are merely ‘urban-influencing’, meaning they do not specifically consider the unique context and needs of urban areas (e.g. fuel subsidies, national highway

codes etc.). It also confirms yet again that despite much talk about the importance of integrated decision-making and a focus on national urban policies, the remit of most transport ministries remains very narrow and may inadvertently lead to policy choices that actually reduce accessibility in cities.

One session that did very concretely tackle the challenges of urban mobility was 'Improving Access in Cities: findings from Europe and Latin America' (<https://2019.itf-oecd.org/event/improving-access-cities-findings-europe-and-latin-america>) where Philipp Rode, Executive Director of LSE Cities, joined a panel to discuss the importance of establishing accessibility metrics as a central criterion in the decision-making processes around urban transport.



Improving access in cities: Findings from Europe and Latin America panel at the International Transport Forum 2019 Summit.

Urban mobility challenges were also enthusiastically discussed during a range of engaging presentations at the Open Stage Café, which ran alongside the official programme and provided an opportunity for slightly more informal and innovative discussion and presentation formats. It was in this space that Philipp Rode and I formally launched our new paper on Thursday, 23 May (https://lsecities.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CUT2019_transport_050819.pdf).

Improving access in cities Findings from Europe and Latin Ame...



Confronting an inconvenient truth

What remained untouched throughout the Summit were the increasingly urgent questions around the viability of our prevailing economic model of endless growth; excessive resource consumption on a finite planet; and the glamorising of hypermobility as the ultimate symbol of advanced societies, all of which are fuelling the dramatic increase in freight and passenger transport demand we are witnessing around the world. Perhaps these tough conversations were inevitably going to be a tall order for the 'Davos of Transport'. Nevertheless, a much stronger acknowledgment that the climate and ecological crisis we are confronting requires a complete rethink of transport policy and a frank acknowledgement of the price we pay for connectivity would have been welcome and timely.

As informative and engaging as the ITF Summit was in many respects, it still feels demoralising to attend an event of this calibre, and discover that the most pressing challenges are routinely sidestepped by global transport leaders. During the opening plenary, Young Tae Kim, Secretary-General of the ITF, stressed that "connecting people with each other is important for prosperity and peace." It's a basic premise that is hard to argue with, and yet such statements ring a bit hollow given the existential threat climate change poses to both of these desirable global goods.

Online #ITF19 Conversations