

AFRICAN ROAD SAFETY OBSERVATORY: GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Virtual opening remarks of the UN SG's Special Envoy for Road Safety, Mr. Jean Todt

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African cities will gain over 900 million new residents by 2050, making Africa the most rapidly urbanizing region in the world. The rapid growth brings an ever-increasing demand for transport and access to essential services and opportunities. The unfortunate reality is that infrastructure and service provision often cannot keep pace with the state of flux and often fails to meet the urgent needs of vulnerable road users, particularly children.

Africa is the worst-performing continent in terms of road safety, with a fatality rate of 26.6 per 100.000 inhabitants, compared to the global average of 18.2, with numbers steadily rising. According to the World Health Organization, it also accounts for the highest mortality rate in terms of pedestrians and cyclists, with 44% of the overall deaths reported for this category of road users.

Many cities on the continent are faced with traffic-choked roads, urban inaccessibility, valuable time wasted, road accidents, air pollution, harmful emissions and unsafe streets for children. Car-oriented transportation policies, which are prevalent, also raise inequity, as those who do not have the privilege of a car must still walk and are at even greater risk in car-oriented streets.

In this context the promotion of walking and cycling and the protection of people that walk and cycle as a mode of transport would produce significant social and environmental benefits. 30km/h speed limits where people can walk, live and play; safe footpaths on urban streets that lead us to places of work, education and opportunity – and then back home again; protected crossings and bicycle lanes – this is a reality within reach.

Low-carbon recovery measures in the transport sector, like walking and cycling infrastructure need to be centralized we begin to find our feet in a rapidly expanding and changing world. The COVID-19 pandemic has showed us how important resilience and inclusivity is in urban spaces. It has showed us that no matter what happens – we will always need to move and we will always need a safe and accessible means to do so. Mobility constitutes a rare and exceptional case where Covid can entail unprecedented gains, stimulating physical activity, clean air, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, better urban planning and meeting the SDGs with a particular focus on those most vulnerable.

The good news is that cost-effective, locally appropriate and often innovative transport solutions for improving the conditions for pedestrians and cyclists are increasingly available and promoted. We need to invest in these solutions. Particularly in African cities where low carbon action does not necessarily mean large scale behavioural shifts towards public transport, cycling and walking but instead modal retention of those already walking and cycling through a focus on the safety, accessibility and comfort of active travel.

Good examples include the national Non-Motorised Transport Strategy launched in 2020 in Ethiopia, the Street Design Manual for Urban Areas in Kenya and the systematic and deliberate inclusion of walking and cycling in Rwanda's National Transport Policy. Not to mention the strong political willingness and support to work on better streets for pedestrians and cyclists from governments in Mozambique and Guinea. This shows us that safe and healthy streets where space is shared equitably

are possible. It shows us that the financing challenges can be overcome with robust frameworks, good street designs, data and coordination.

The Reclaiming Streets project comes at an opportune time. Not only because COVID-19 has emphasized the importance of non-motorized transport and created some momentum for people that walk and cycle, but also because the policies we see in countries like Ethiopia, Rwanda and Kenya are slowly being implemented. Through pilot projects on active mobility, such as Nairobi's pedestrian street, Luthuli Avenue, Kigali's efforts to build sidewalks and cycle paths along new roads and the increasing number of car free days and pedestrian centred initiatives we see across the continent – we can see the “Safe System Approach” in action. We see steps being taken to deliver concrete outcomes to enhance road safety and lower traffic injuries and fatalities in African cities. We can also see learning opportunities and platforms of engagement and innovation arising from these actions and the opportunity to both initiate next steps and scale-up those already taken. The time to invest in walking and cycling is now.

I am particularly keen to see the progress of this initiative as it shows us that we must at all times be mindful of the lessons learnt and good practices coming from African cities. I am confident that the efforts led by UN-Habitat, ITDP, UNICEF and others supported by the UN Road Safety Fund will be achieved. Specifically, as it links policy advice, technical assistance, advocacy and regional learning on safer street designs in and between African countries. It links policy with financing and action on the ground in locally appropriate formats and is sensitive to the unique needs of people that walk and cycle. Ultimately, I believe, it will ensure that children's voices and rights specifically, are at the heart of urban mobility planning and action from hereon out.

Thank you