

# Urban Transport and Public Health

*How about low-emission vehicles and more active travel like walking and cycling?*

It is no longer in doubt that the state of a city's transport has a direct bearing on the safety and health of its residents. For well over a decade now, health professionals in developing countries have been urging policymakers to ensure the efficiency of and access to the public transport system so as to decrease dependence on private vehicles. This would not only result in decongestion of roads but also reduction in air pollution and risk of accidents. There have been arguments for what might seem too ambitious given the socio-economic make-up of Indian cities and existing public amenities: privileging pedestrians and cyclists over motorists. Now, studies published in *The Lancet* with the intention of informing discussions at the Copenhagen Convention on Climate Change show that efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in major sectors like urban land transport can lead to immense improvements in public health.

Researchers looked at four alternative 2030 futures for London and Delhi: business as usual with the possibility of a 5% rise in emission from 1990 levels; use of lower carbon emission vehicles leading to a two-fifth cut in emissions; increased active travel like walking and cycling allowing for a two-fifth cut in emissions, and a combination of active travel and low emission vehicles which would cut CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by three-fifths. In London more active travel would bring about a reduction in heart disease and stroke by 10-20%, in breast cancer by 12-13%, in dementia by 8% and depression by 5%. Coupling active travel with low emission vehicles would mean further reduction of air pollution and thus, greater health benefits. In Delhi, more active travel is estimated to ensure a 10-25% reduction in heart disease and stroke, and a 6-17% cut in diabetes. Policies that combine reduced motor vehicle use, more walking and cycling and low carbon emission motor vehicles would render the greatest health benefit results. *The Lancet* says that "bigger benefits" are expected in Delhi taking the air pollution aspect into account and that decreased car travel and increased active travel could cut road traffic injuries up to a third (1,14,590 people died due to road accidents in India in 2007, the highest number in the world according to the World Health Organisation).

The union urban development and environment ministries have announced plans and projects that seem to focus on improving public transport and reducing private transport and air pollution. These include financing metro rail projects in big cities, low-floor air conditioned (AC) and non-AC buses in smaller towns, mandating preparation of comprehensive mobility plans by state governments (this will get central financial assistance up to 80%) and compulsory fuel efficiency labels on cars. However, the reality on the roads indicates that all this may be woefully short of what is really required. Ironically, while the government says that it has reduced excise duty on buses to boost public bus services, the lower tax on automobile manufacturing – meant to be part of a "stimulus package" during recession – has led to car sales shooting upwards.

Coming to the public health implications, the *State of Environment Report – India 2009* says that the estimated economic cost of damage to public health due to rising air pollution touched Rs 15,000 crore in 2004. It is based on the "respirable" suspended particulate matter (RSPM) measurement of 50 cities; increase in RSPM is related to vehicular emissions and industrial pollution. In such a situation, the urban development minister's insistence that roads must be made safe for pedestrians and cyclists sounds like an impossible dream.

The mostly unplanned nature of Indian cities and towns means that residential and commercial complexes are permitted to come up haphazardly without the necessary infrastructural amenities. This means that residents have to travel over large distances for long hours to access these facilities. Even in a city like Mumbai where the public bus service and suburban railways handle over 80% of the commuting demand, unplanned and low quality infrastructure coupled with increasing number of cars have led to massive congestion and pollution. In Indian cities and towns, the poor are forced to walk or cycle regardless of the health benefits and need the roads and streets to be made safe for them. Urban land transport planning needs to be according to the socio-economic composition of urban areas rather than grandiose ideas of "world class cities" or the building of flyovers and superfluous skywalks.