Letter from the CEO

A Moment for Change

It is hard to imagine that a year ago most of us had never used the word coronavirus; now it has upended almost every aspect of our lives. The impacts are deeply devastating and even a year later, still uncertain, but there are great reasons for hope, too.

Where I live in San Francisco, we are still scarred by the raging forest fires that once again filled our skies with apocalyptic ash, and have now become an annual event that we fear all year. As we reflect on a year of dramatic global change and challenges, we have to ask ourselves—how many more catastrophes do we need before we see real change and action? The pandemic has laid bare the deep fragility and inequities of our systems.

It is a rare occasion when big shifts in culture and policy are possible, and the time is now.

The pandemic has created openings for solutions. We know just how essential public transportation is to so many, yet how completely under-supported it is in most countries. Some countries are moving in the right direction with scaled financing, like China’s commitment to commuter rail. Our team is helping key cities, like Guangzhou and Tianjin, leverage these investments for smarter transit-oriented design, with transit stations that can serve as neighborhood hubs. Other countries, like Brazil and Uganda, are revisiting the structure of their public transportation concessions to find more sustainable funding opportunities and smarter cashless fare collection systems.

We saw streets go quiet during lockdown. With fewer cars on the roads, skies cleared, and many more people opted for cycling and walking as safer modes of transport. The slowdown gave us a glimpse of how much space is wasted on cars and should be repurposed for public use. It is exciting to see cities adopt temporary and permanent measures to lock-in these benefits. Our teams have been working around the world to realize these visions.

In Jakarta, we have helped put in place 200 kilometers of bike lanes by year-end, then an additional 300 kilometers, and 2,000 bike-share bikes by 2022. In Mexico City, we have envisioned how the “emergency bike lane” along Insurgentes, one of the city’s main BRT corridors, could become one of the longest bike lanes in the world. In India, we have worked together with the government of India’s Smart Cities Mission to roll out the Cycles4Change Challenge to inspire nearly 100 cities to implement quick, cycling-friendly interventions in response to COVID-19.

The pandemic has also underscored the importance of having neighborhoods with walkable services and opportunities. With this, cities are looking to the Paris model of “15-minute neighborhoods” for greater resilience in the future. This goal is to make everything necessary accessible within a 15-minute walk. ITDP’s new Pedestrians First tool uses open data from over 1,000 cities to help people understand how walkable cities are and offers specific policy suggestions for each city to improve walkability.

By Heather Thompson, ITDP CEO
Fewer people in polluting cars and more people walking and cycling helps to stave off climate change. Yet, despite all the openings, we still see cities discouraging transit and pointing to private vehicles as the “safer” option, ignoring the obvious air quality detriment and soaring road deaths that have resulted from driving at higher speeds. The worst-case scenario is that we learn nothing from this pandemic, and we continue the pre-COVID-19 status quo of making cities hostile to pedestrians and catering to expensive, polluting cars—by building more roads and parking, and taking more space away from people.

Around the world, nearly 230,000 people walking will be killed this year by cars, and millions more will die from air pollution. Streets are already bursting with congestion. To add more cars will just make them grind to a halt as even more people choke on pollution. (Literally choke: studies show that air pollution from cars makes the coronavirus up to 15 times more deadly.) We urgently need car control measures—like paid parking, congestion charging, and zero emission areas—to help limit driving. The timing is especially attractive for these win-win solutions that can also generate revenue, which now, more than before, cities desperately need.

The conditions are ripe for this to become a pivotal moment. Seizing this moment depends on social mobilization and leadership to realize a new vision. ITDP is full of visionary leaders, who advocate that people of all races, ages, genders, and incomes have access to healthy, sustainable transportation that allows them mobility in life. This pandemic will end, and when it does, if we are focused and strategic, we can shift to a new normal; this moment of crisis can lead to radical change for a sustainable future. ITDP will continue to help cities move in new, healthy directions, and we look forward to a year of building back better.