

For A Better Future, We Need to Learn from the Past



By Heather Thompson,
ITDP CEO

We know from our work that compact city planning and electrification policies are the foundation for more livable, inclusive, and sustainable cities.

Global events of the last year have been an urgent wake-up call.

From the ongoing pandemic to record-setting heat waves and natural disasters, it is clear that our environment is telling us that we are heading in the wrong direction. Now, on top of this, we are in the midst of yet another fuel and energy crisis. We clearly need to take stock of the flawed policies and practices that have brought us to this point. We need to recognize that we cannot continue with a business-as-usual approach to expanding infrastructure and transport systems that rely on harmful and unsustainable fossil fuels.

We need only look back to the oil shocks of the 1970s to see parallels to what many have experienced this year — lines at gas stations, threats of fuel rations, and ripple effects across economies. As it was then, today's global crisis was brought on by a fraught social and political landscape that continues to expose the dangers of our dependence on finite and costly gas and oil. To break this cycle of volatility, we need to recognize this moment as both a wake-up call and an opportunity for transformation. We in the transportation sector — as the largest consumer of fossil fuels and producer of energy-related emissions — have the power to make the most impact. We must start by taking a more holistic, avoid-and-shift approach to our relationship with our cars, our transit systems, and our cities.

For decades, governments and institutions — particularly in the United States — have chosen to plan and build cities that emphasize car use, road construction, and urban and suburban sprawl. As a result, energy use from the urban transport sector continues to steadily grow and is poised to double by 2050. We also know that these outdated urban planning policies continue to do harm to our most vulnerable communities, our public health, and all aspects of the environment. But it does not have to be this way — we can make the collective choice to reshape our cities for the better.

At ITDP, we know that a core strategy for making cities less fuel and car-dependent is to prioritize policy approaches that combine compact development with full-scale transport electrification. Last year, we released *The Compact City Scenario — Electrified* in collaboration with the University of California, Davis to make the case that only these two approaches implemented in unison can keep emissions from urban transportation in check, and help keep global warming under the critical 1.5°C threshold. These dual strategies have the potential to reduce cumulative emissions from the transport sector by a substantial 59 gigatonnes by 2050.

Beyond that, our research shows that compact, mixed-use cities that promote public transit, walking, cycling, and traffic control would save the world nearly \$5 trillion in direct public and private costs each year.

Models for such urban transformations already exist around the world. The crises of the 1970s drove many regional governments to transition to policies that prioritized people over cars and fossil fuels. In Europe, forward-thinking investments in cycling and walking in cities like Amsterdam and Copenhagen have made them synonymous with livability and efficiency, and their economies less susceptible to oil shocks. Today, we see these transitions continuing in many of the places where ITDP operates: from a national program to redesign streets for people in India, to a low-emission zone plan for Rio de Janeiro, to the electrification of the world's longest BRT system in Jakarta. While cities may continue to bear the biggest burden for resource consumption, they also hold the key to testing and implementing solutions that can set us on a different course for the future.

It is imperative that we recognize the many warning signs that the environment has given us over recent years. We cannot continue down the same path when it comes to how we manage our natural resources and how we operate our cities. To truly recognize the recent crises as an opportunity for progress, we need more global cities to rethink their relationship with fossil fuels and follow in the footsteps of those that committed to change following the 1970s.

As you will read in the following pages, the work that ITDP and our partners are doing around the world offers glimpses of the kind of future that is possible. From managing urban sprawl in Mexico, to rethinking parking in Beijing, to scaling BRT in Nairobi, we know that compact city planning and electrification policies are the foundation for a more livable, inclusive, and sustainable world. We only need to look at the progress already underway in these cities, and the examples set by those that took action after the 1970s, to see that necessary transformations *are* possible.

There is certainly no easy, encompassing solution to the many environmental and climate challenges we continue to face. One thing that is obvious, however, is that if we only take short-sighted steps to address the current energy crisis, we risk emerging from it even more locked into a cycle of dependency on fossil fuels and dangerous emissions. As the saying goes, those that do not learn from their history are only doomed to repeat it.



Top: Amsterdam is recognized as a hub for walking and cycling, due in large part to policies implemented after the 1970s energy crisis.

Photo: Ralph Rozema, Shutterstock

Bottom: Ahead of the UN General Assembly in April 2022, ITDP and partners held a bike ride to advocate for cycling as an essential transport mode.

Photo: ITDP