Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan on Urban Mobility’

COM(2009) 490 final
(2011/C 21/10)

Rapporteur: Mr HENCKS

On 30 September 2009, the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan on Urban Mobility


On 3 November 2009, the Committee Bureau instructed the Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society to prepare the Committee’s work on the subject.

Given the urgent nature of the work (Rule 59(1) of the Rules of Procedure), the European Economic and Social Committee decided to appoint Mr Hencks as rapporteur-general at its 463rd plenary session, held on 26 and 27 May 2010 (meeting of 27 May), and adopted the following opinion by 175 votes to 1, with 1 abstention.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 Urban areas are home to more than 60% of Europe’s population. Almost all such areas face the same problems caused by road traffic: congestion, adverse environmental effects, air and noise pollution, road accidents, health problems, bottlenecks in distribution chains, etc.

1.2 The EESC therefore warmly welcomes the European Commission’s proposal, in the form of an urban mobility plan, offering local, regional and national authorities ways of providing the best possible, most sustainable quality of life in urban areas.

1.3 The Committee firmly believes that in a number of areas relating to urban mobility, concerted action by the Community can provide clear added value and it thus calls for the EU’s powers and responsibilities to be more clearly defined, in line with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

1.4 It should be noted, however, that the Commission’s proposals in this action plan fall far short of the recommendations made by the EESC in previous opinions on urban mobility.

1.5 Furthermore, most of the measures advocated by the Commission represent nothing more than well-intentioned – albeit certainly quite praiseworthy – advice, and are far from being binding or revolutionary.

1.6 Furthermore, the fact that this communication covers many of the issues and proposals already set out in the 1998 communication entitled ‘Developing the citizens’ network’ gives the impression that the situation has barely improved since then. Against this backdrop, the EESC is disappointed that no assessment has been made of the initiatives provided for in that earlier communication.

1.7 The action plan under consideration should at least, on this occasion, be accompanied by measurable quantitative targets based on a set of indicators which cities and peri-urban areas should endeavour to achieve by means of sustainable mobility plans they have chosen themselves.

1.8 In the EESC’s view, the action plan needs to be complemented by another plan focusing more specifically on crime on public transport, non-motorised mobility and motorcycles, amongst other things.

1.9 The EESC welcomes the Spanish Presidency’s intention of creating a pan-European scheme/programme to promote the accessibility of European cities and towns, especially for people with reduced mobility, and would express interest in being closely involved in such an initiative, given its relevance to civil society.

1.10 Lastly, the EESC recommends more effectively targeting the EU’s structural and cohesion funds, in particular by establishing a specific financial instrument to promote urban mobility. It proposes making the allocation of funds conditional on the implementation of urban mobility plans and compliance with criteria on accessibility for people with reduced mobility.
2.2 The Commission is publishing this action plan in response to requests made by a number of players, above all the European Parliament, but also the EESC which has been calling for an initiative of this nature in its exploratory opinion entitled Transport in urban and metropolitan areas (1) and other opinions (2). In the EESC’s view, this type of plan should be accompanied by quantitative targets for improving quality of life, environmental protection and energy efficiency in towns and cities.

2.3 On 25 September 2007, the Commission launched public consultation in the form of its Green Paper entitled ‘Towards a new culture for urban mobility’. The outcome of this consultation broadly confirmed that the European Union has a key role to play in promoting sustainable urban mobility.

2.4 The publication of an action plan, however, (provided for in the European Commission’s 2008 legislative work programme) had been announced and then postponed a number of times in the face of opposition from some parties, who considered that any initiative in this area by the Commission would breach the principle of subsidiarity and the principle of the administrative freedom of local and regional authorities.

2.5 Because, for the reasons given above, the Commission was unable to publish its action plan before the end of 2008 as planned, the European Parliament, which was afraid that the initiative would be abandoned altogether, addressed the issue and voted in favour of a resolution on an Action Plan on Urban Mobility (3) in order to support the Commission, which was asked to translate a number of the ideas expressed in the Green Paper into a guide for regional authorities.

3. The EU’s role in urban mobility

3.1 Whilst there is no shortage of declarations of intent by politicians to achieve sustainable urban transport, a closer link must be established with practical solutions and the most appropriate bodies for implementing them.

3.2 Urban transport schemes form part of the European transport system and are based on the common transport policy. The informal meeting of EU transport ministers held on 16 February 2010 accepted the need to establish urban mobility plans in legislation coordinated between local, regional, national and EU authorities in order to promote more effective integration of transport infrastructure and services in regional, urban and rural strategies.

3.3 Numerous directives, regulations, communications and programmes for EU action have already had a considerable impact on urban transport, in terms of climate change, health and environmental protection, sustainable energy, road safety and even investment in public transport and the management thereof.

3.4 In order to adhere strictly to the subsidiarity principle, the Commission is confining its comments to encouraging towns and cities to implement measures to combat climate change and establish efficient, sustainable transport schemes, based on entirely voluntary commitments.

3.5 The EESC wishes to point out in this regard that whilst cities and peri-urban areas differ considerably, they nevertheless face common sustainable development problems that do not stop at city limits and which can only be solved by adopting a consistent approach and a range of measures at the European level, along the same lines as Community provisions on ambient air quality and environmental noise management (4).

3.6 Furthermore, in its Communication entitled ‘A sustainable future for transport: Towards an integrated, technology-led and user friendly system’, (5) the Commission states the following, where transport policy is concerned: ‘More limited, however, have been the results with respect to the goals of the EU SDS: as indicated in the progress report of 2007, the European transport system is still not on a sustainable path on several aspects’.

3.7 In a recent exploratory opinion looking at the starting points for a post-2010 European transport policy (6), the EESC pointed out that, whilst transport provides access to many of our freedoms (freedom to work and live in different parts of the world, to enjoy different products and services, to trade and to establish personal contacts), a clear framework – even boundaries – must be set for the ‘freedoms’ in question, where they may affect, or even threaten, other freedoms or needs: for example, human health, the environment and/or the climate.

3.8 Although urban transport policies put in place by some towns and cities that are in the vanguard of sustainable transport measures do prove that committed decision-makers can - if they have the will - reverse damaging trends, the overarching need to limit CO₂ emissions globally makes a collective European commitment entirely necessary.

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(3) (2008/2217 (INL)), rapporteur: Mr Savary.
3.9 Urban traffic, in particular motor vehicle journeys, account for 40% of CO₂ emissions and 70% of emissions of other pollutants from road transport. The EU will only be able to reach its own climate change targets by modifying its urban transport policies. Challenges cannot be met in a sustainable manner through isolated ad hoc measures adopted at only local or regional level, however praiseworthy and essential these might be.

3.10 There is, therefore, a need to harness all of the EU's resources to support local and regional measures to ensure that the goals of the European Union's global strategy for combating climate change - improving energy efficiency, developing renewable energies and strengthening social cohesion - are all achieved.

4. The Action Plan

4.1 The action plan proposed by the Commission concerns both passenger and freight transport in urban and peri-urban areas and is broadly based on the results of public consultation launched on 25 September 2007.

4.2 The aim of the plan is to help local, regional and national authorities promote a culture of sustainable urban mobility, in particular by reducing traffic and congestion in towns and cities and consequently road accidents, air pollution and energy consumption, without however imposing ready-made solutions on these authorities.

4.3 The Commission's action plan thus in no way seeks to replace local, regional and national authorities in choosing solutions for addressing problems relating to urban mobility. The plan is intended to act as an incentive and proposes pooling, documenting and sharing experiences to promote good practice, help take advantage of EU funding or co-financing opportunities, support research projects and prepare guidance papers, in particular on freight and on intelligent transport systems.

4.4 The global action plan identifies 20 practical measures arranged into six main themes, summarised below, to be implemented according to a timetable set by 2012.

4.4.1 Promoting integrated policies

The aim is to develop an integrated approach that takes account of the interdependence between transport modes, space restrictions, and the role of urban systems in order to promote the interconnection of all modes of transport, specifically as part of urban mobility plans.

4.4.2 Focusing on the public

Attention should be drawn to

— levers - such as pricing, quality, accessibility for people with reduced mobility, travel information, passenger rights, green zones, etc. - to encourage people to become regular users of public transport or non-motorised forms of transport;

— education, information and awareness-raising campaigns to promote sustainable mobility behaviour; and

— energy-efficient driving for private and professional drivers.

4.4.3 Greening Urban Transport

The action plan aims to support research and development for lower- and zero-emission vehicles and 'soft' modes of transport. The Commission will update its Internet-based guide on clean vehicles and will help set up an exchange of information on urban pricing schemes. It also plans to study the efficiency of tolls and the internalisation of external costs.

4.4.4 Boosting funding

The Commission wishes to work on optimising existing European funding sources and study future needs. It will publish a guidance paper on sustainable urban mobility and social cohesion policy and study a variety of pricing formulas for urban transport. Its aim is to provide better information on current EU funding opportunities and to optimise existing funding by ensuring that instruments such as the Structural Funds and research funds work together more successfully in order to explore innovative public-private partnership schemes and examine the need for sustainable urban mobility to be self-financing.

4.4.5 Sharing experience and knowledge

Stakeholders should be able to capitalise on experience gained by others. To this end, the Commission will create a database containing information on the wide range of tried and tested solutions already in place. This database will also provide an overview of all European legislation and useful funding instruments, specifically through an urban mobility observatory in the form of a virtual platform.

4.4.6 Optimising urban mobility

To facilitate a modal shift towards more environmentally friendly modes of transport and more efficient logistics, the Commission proposes speeding up sustainable urban mobility plans in cities and regions. To achieve this, it will produce guidance papers on the key aspects of these plans, such as goods distribution in urban areas and intelligent transport systems.

4.5 In 2012, the Commission will review the implementation of the global plan and assess the need for further action.
5. **General comments**

5.1 Public transport is a matter of general interest and must therefore meet criteria for universality, accessibility, continuity, quality and affordability. To this end, the EESC welcomes all of the measures set out in the communication in hand, each of which represents a step in the right direction.

5.2 Nevertheless, while the Committee is pleased to note that the Commission document refers to the EESC opinion on the Green Paper on Urban Mobility in the references underpinning its communication, it feels that it should make it clear that the Commission’s proposals fall far short of the recommendations made by the EESC in that and other opinions on the matter (7).

5.3 Whilst not questioning the principle of subsidiarity and the EU’s limited powers in this field, the EESC regrets the fact that the recommendations to strengthen the EU’s role, set out in its exploratory opinion (8) entitled Integrating Transport and Land-use Policies for More Sustainable City Transport, have not been taken on board.

5.4 Keen not to challenge the subsidiarity principle, the Commission is assigning itself the role of facilitator or assistant rather than regulator or service provider. Most of the measures put forward by the Commission represent nothing more than well-intentioned – and certainly quite praiseworthy – advice, but are far from being binding or revolutionary.

5.5 Furthermore, any reader of the communication under consideration is bound to conclude that it is actually a copy, if not word for word, at least in terms of content, of the communication entitled ‘Developing the citizens’ network’ COM(1998) 431 final.

5.6 Eleven years after the 1998 communication, known by its ‘push and pull’ slogan (pushing people to leave private cars at home and pulling them on to public transport), the same issues remain relevant today, in particular, stimulating information exchange, benchmarking service performance, creating the right political climate and using the European Union’s financial instruments effectively.

5.7 The EESC is disappointed that no assessment has been made of the initiatives envisaged in the 1998 communication, such as: a European Local Transport Information Service (ELTIS); the agreement concluded with the network of cities and regions (POLIS); steps to link up national cycle route networks; the development of a self-assessment system for performance quality; the pilot project for benchmarking the performance of local passenger transport systems; the handbook on mobility management and barrier analysis; electronic ticketing; training for professional drivers; the communication on mobility management planned for 2000; and the numerous research projects that were announced.

5.8 The EESC would have at least preferred the action plan to be accompanied on this occasion by measurable quantitative targets based on a set of indicators (see opinion 1196/2009) which cities and peri-urban areas should endeavour to achieve by means of sustainable mobility plans they have chosen themselves.

5.9 This is all the more unfortunate because in its communication entitled A sustainable future for transport: towards an integrated, technology-led and user-friendly system, COM(2009) 279 final, the Commission expresses regret at the fact that the targets set for transport sustainability are far from being reached and that fundamental changes of direction are required.

5.10 Social issues, environmental pressures exerted by the consumer society, non-motorised mobility, motorcycles and measures to avoid motorised journeys from the outset have largely been ignored. The same goes for cross-border cooperation and land-use planning-, town planning- and urban sprawl-related problems, all of which increase transport infrastructure needs.

5.11 The EESC therefore considers that this action plan needs to be complemented by another plan that addresses the issues of non-motorised mobility and motorcycles in greater detail.

5.12 The action plan’s main concern is to ‘optimise’ and manage individual motorised mobility rather than to prevent it. Restrictive management of the demand for car use, either through positive approaches such as the promotion of car-pooling schemes or dissuasive measures such as deterrent parking policies, tolls and fines, is confined to the announcement of a study on regulations governing access to the different types of green zones.

5.13 The studies provided for in the action plan, specifically on public acceptance of urban tolls, the introduction of energy-efficient driving, internalisation of external costs and the availability of technologies and the means of recovering these costs will certainly provide added value, although the practical measures that will then be needed must not be sacrificed for the sake of a discussion on the subsidiarity principle.

5.14 Lastly, the action plan fails to address how civil society could be more closely involved in measures to promote sustainable mobility, despite the fact that civil society is able to bring stakeholders and policymakers together and raise the awareness of everyone in society in such a way that they reconsider and change the way they usually travel.

6. **Specific comments**

Building on the general comments made above, the EESC wishes to offer a number of observations on some of the 20 specific actions.
Action 1 - Accelerating the take-up of sustainable urban mobility plans

Action 6 - Improving travel information

6.1 The EESC welcomes the Commission's proposal to provide local authorities in the future with logistical support for implementing sustainable urban mobility plans for freight and passenger transport.

6.2 The action plan states that in the longer term the Commission could take further steps, for example through incentives and recommendations.

6.3 The EESC wishes to reiterate its proposal to make any financial aid to local authorities from EU funds dependent on mobility plans being drawn up, it being understood that cities should remain free to adapt these plans to specific local conditions.

6.4 These plans should, however, include a binding target of shifting towards environmentally friendly means of transport in line with EU minimum requirements, in order to:

— ensure that everyone in the local population, including visitors and professionals, benefits from sustainable modes of transport and eliminate social disparities in relation to mobility;

— reduce CO₂ emissions, environmental pollution, noise pollution and energy consumption;

— improve passenger and freight transport efficiency by taking external costs into account.

6.5 The special 'urban mobility' label recommended by the Commission, which the EESC urges should be implemented without delay, should only be granted if the above criteria are met.

Action 4 - Platform on passenger rights

6.6 The EESC is disappointed that the Commission has not taken on board its proposal to bring public transport passengers' rights together in one 'charter of rights'.

6.7 The Committee does, however, welcome the Commission's announcement that the regulatory approach will be complemented by common quality indicators to protect the rights of passengers and people with reduced mobility, as well as jointly agreed complaints procedures and reporting mechanisms.

6.8 The EESC regrets that the communication fails to address one of the main barriers to the use of public transport, namely the lack of security, especially on less frequently used lines and for evening or night-time travel, given that well-trained staff in sufficient numbers and video surveillance are effective for preventing crime on public transport.

6.9 The plethora of stakeholders, which gives rise to considerable differences in the form and substance of the measures adopted, makes it essential for the latter to be assessed regularly so as to determine whether a measure or policy meets users' needs, with a view to adapting, changing or abandoning it. The Commission's action plan, however, is silent on this point.

Action 5 - Improving accessibility for persons with reduced mobility

6.10 The EESC estimates that the number of Europeans with reduced mobility (including the elderly, people with disabilities or handicaps, and also women who are pregnant or persons pushing a pram) is well over 100 million.

6.11 Some towns and cities have indeed adopted excellent measures for people with reduced mobility, but these are isolated initiatives. All too often, such individuals face insurmountable barriers when travelling by public transport (due to problems with accessibility, vehicle design, etc.) or by foot (complex road junctions, narrow pavements, café and restaurant terraces on pavements, etc.). Another factor is other people's lack of civic-mindedness (some people park wherever they want, fail to respect parking places reserved for the disabled, etc.). The EESC welcomes the Spanish Presidency's intention of creating a pan-European scheme/programme to promote the accessibility of European cities and towns and expresses its interest in being closely involved in such an initiative, given its relevance to civil society.

6.12 Technical support is not sufficiently developed to meet people's real needs, due to the limited size of the market, which hampers investment and innovation.

6.13 The EESC therefore fully agrees that accessibility for people with reduced mobility is a matter which should be included in the EU Disability Strategy 2010-2020 and that appropriate quality indicators and reporting mechanisms should be established.

6.14 To back up these measures, the appropriate financial resources should be made available at national, regional and local levels, but primarily at the EU level, through Community funds.

Action 8 - Campaigns on sustainable mobility behaviour

6.15 The Commission intends to consider a special award to encourage the adoption of sustainable urban mobility plans.
6.16 The EESC can but welcome the introduction of an award of this nature, and refers the reader to its opinion (CES 324/99) on the Green Paper on a citizens’ network which already put forward the idea that providing awards for quality and/or price would provide a real stimulus for quality-based competition.

Action 12 - Study on urban aspects of the internalisation of external costs

Action 13 - Information exchange on urban pricing schemes

6.17 ‘Affordable’ public transport undeniably pays off in social terms, but it is also clear that, financially speaking, it runs up considerable losses. User-generated revenues cannot cover all operating costs and even less so, investments, which means that public subsidies remain essential.

6.18 Against this background, the EESC agrees that a methodological study of the urban aspects of the internalisation of external costs, as announced by the Commission, will make the process of calculating costs in the sector more transparent in future. The Committee wishes to point out that the issue of external costs was in fact already addressed in the 1998 communication, as was the possibility of reinvesting revenue from road pricing locally, especially in public transport and provisions for pedestrians and cyclists. No action has yet been taken on these two issues.

Action 15 - Analysing needs for future funding

6.19 Only 9% of Structural Fund appropriations for transport are allocated to urban transport, whilst practically all cities and regions lack (to highly varying degrees) the funds needed for sufficient investment in urban mobility.

6.20 Although in its roadmap the Commission plans to study future financing needs after 2010, whilst continuing to give financial support to the CIVITAS programme (*), the EESC would have preferred a more formal commitment to the allocation of additional funding, without, however, overlooking the possibilities of funding urban mobility, at least in part, through funds generated by urban road toll schemes or parking charges. The EESC proposes that a specific financial instrument be set up to promote urban mobility.

6.21 In its 1998 communication on developing citizens’ networks, the Commission announced its intention to prioritise support for sustainable local and regional transport schemes and expressed the wish to look into ways of ensuring that the parties promoting such schemes took account of accessibility requirements. The EESC would be extremely interested to see the findings of this research.

6.22 In the EESC’s view, rather than setting priorities, the future regulation on Community funds, when reviewed as planned in 2013, should make the allocation of Community financial resources for urban public transport conditional on the implementation of urban mobility plans and strict compliance with criteria on accessibility for people with reduced mobility.

Action 17 - Establishment of an urban mobility observatory

6.23 The EESC welcomes the proposal to set up an urban mobility observatory in the form of a virtual platform, because exchange of good practice should cover all aspects of urban mobility, including accessibility for people with reduced mobility.


The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee

Mario SEPI

(*) CIVITAS: (City VITALity Sustainability) Community programme for research and innovation in the field of urban transport.