

Reimagining urban mobility: A white paper in support of the 2025 U20 communiqué

Executive summary

This white paper has been produced by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) to supplement the Urban 20 communiqué to G20 leaders. The ITF strongly supports action on the U20's four key priorities for 2025, especially climate action and urban resilience. This white paper provides further input on the issue of public transport to inform both discussions at the U20 summit and the other components of this year's G20 process, under the presidency of South Africa. We hope it proves useful for U20, G20 and other leaders in tackling some of the most pressing global challenges the world now faces.

Introduction

1. In their draft communiqué, U20 leaders note that “urban mobility strategies must be worker-led [and] gender-sensitive, ensuring safe, accessible, and affordable transport options for women, including informal and unpaid care workers”, as a means to achieve “comprehensive urban mobility reforms that accelerate the global mode shift toward sustainable mobility”. **We strongly support this aspiration and urge G20 leaders to help their city counterparts make it a reality** by providing them with the requisite policy instruments and funding. (Similar aspirations were reflected in a global meeting of trade unions from the urban transport, road transport and railway sectors, held in U20 co-host city Johannesburg in 2023; these are reflected in the ITF [Johannesburg Declaration](#).)
2. **Access to mobility is a fundamental and universal right**, and one which cannot be met exclusively or even predominantly by access to private transport. At the 2021 [International Labour Organisation \(ILO\) technical meeting on the future of decent and sustainable work in urban transport services](#), governments, employers and unions jointly concluded that public transport “constitutes a basic service under public regulation. It is an enabler of other rights and of access to other vital services. It is a powerful driver of equity, development, sustainability, growth, productivity and employment opportunities”, and “contributes to the achievement of many of the Sustainable Development Goals set out in the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)”.
3. **Workers and their unions have a vital role to play in building safe, clean, reliable, inclusive and affordable public transport systems**. During the Covid-19 pandemic, formal and informal workers kept public transport systems moving and were recognised as “[guardians of mobility](#)” by the International Association of Public Transport (UITP). The ITF is the global union federation which represents transport workers worldwide, including across all modes of formal and informal public transport. The ITF's [Our Public Transport](#) programme promotes a social model of public transport, which incorporates public ownership and financing, decent work, gender equality, technological sovereignty and climate justice. We believe that our [People's Public Transport Policy](#) can help bolster the calls on urban mobility made in the U20 communiqué.

The People's Public Transport Policy

4. Public transport should, wherever possible, be maintained in **public ownership and operation** rather than outsourced or entirely privatised. It provides a vital foundation for other forms of economic activity, including those in the private sector, and serves a fundamental social and environmental need. While the trend in recent decades has been towards the partial or full privatisation of public transport services, the track record of such policy experiments is exceptionally poor: service quality decreases, costs to passengers increase, and labour standards for workers are eroded. Indeed, there is now a reverse [tendency to de-privatisation](#) around the world, with operations returning to municipal, regional or national ownership. Crucially, public ownership should be accompanied by robust democratic control to ensure that passengers, workers and other stakeholders participate in decision-making on their own public transport systems.
5. In addition to public ownership, public transport systems should be the subject of **public financing**. Governments should treat spending on and investment in public transport in the same way as healthcare and education, maintaining strong foundations on which the rest of society can thrive. Private financing often brings unnecessary compromises and trade-offs, such as diverting valuable public funds to guarantee profits for investors rather than using them directly for public service provision. By contrast, the public sector is a site of innovation for the common good. Cities around the world are experimenting with approaches such as [participatory budgeting](#) for public services, launching [public-public partnerships](#) to share solutions between local governments facing the same challenges, and making public transport [free at the point of use](#). The ITF [Manifesto on Sustainable Public Transport Investment, Funding and Fares](#), published in 2023, provides a comprehensive set of principles for the financing of public transport systems worldwide.
6. The most important resource on which public transport depends is its workforce, which is why **decent work** must be placed at the heart of all public transport systems. The U20 communiqué rightly identifies that urban mobility strategies should be “centred in social dialogue with local stakeholders, and especially transport workers, including informal workers, to protect labour rights, improve citizens’ livelihoods, and reduce costs”, a theme key to recent ITF and UITP [research](#) on the state of employment in the urban transport sector globally. This is also echoed by the assertion in the [L20 communiqué](#) that “decent job creation should be promoted through strong investments in job-rich climate-friendly sectors”. Where informal transport services prevail, governments should support the [worker-led formalisation of employment](#) using [labour impact assessments](#) to ensure that new formal systems such as bus rapid transit do not further undermine labour standards. Formalisation can provide particular benefits for participation in the workforce by women and migrant workers. Similar to this, and as recognised in previous U20 communiqués, climate action must guarantee a [just transition](#) for public transport workers so that environmental progress does not inadvertently lead to social regression.
7. **Gender equality** for both workers and passengers is central to any public transport system. Women public transport workers face additional challenges compared to their male colleagues, most significantly: gender-based discrimination, harassment and violence; and routinely poor access to sanitary facilities which are clean, safe and dignified.

- a. In 2019, the landmark ILO [Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work](#) (and its associated [Recommendation 206](#)) were agreed during tripartite negotiations between governments, employers and unions. These instruments set a new global standard for ending violence and harassment, including against women workers. In 2021, global union federations including the ITF launched a [C190 Campaign Toolkit](#) to support workers and unions in lobbying their governments to ratify the convention.
 - b. Meanwhile, the ITF [Sanitation Charter](#) provides an outline of the problems and proposes solutions, including actions to be undertaken by employers, governments and other stakeholders in transport workplaces to ensure safe access to decent sanitation facilities for all workers. This is complemented by a [Sanitation Toolkit](#), launched on International Women's Day 2022, which provides practical guidance for workers and unions to assess and improve their workplaces.
 - c. We must end the systemic exclusion of women from decent, safe and secure work in public transport, and employers must engage in proactive strategies to hire, retain and promote women workers. Much of this vision is expressed in a bipartite agreement signed by the ITF and UITP in 2019: the [Positive Employer Gender Policy: Strengthening Women's Employment and Equal Opportunities in Urban Public Transport](#).
8. At a time when public transport systems around the world are seeing the introduction of new technologies, **technological sovereignty** for workers, passengers and residents is becoming ever more important. No new technologies should be introduced in the workplace without negotiation with workers and unions, and the uses and impacts of these technologies must be closely monitored, regulated and evaluated. Employers should be especially attentive to [the impact of new technologies on women workers](#), ensuring that they help redress rather than embed gender inequality. Beyond specific workplaces, local governments should make level-headed assessments of beguiling proposals like 'smart cities', ensuring that the collection, analysis and use of data by the private sector is subject to rigorous transparency mechanisms and democratic control. The ITF's [Technology and Decent Work Charter](#) outlines key issues to address in the introduction of new technologies and data management, while our [Metro Workers' Charter](#) lays out principles for technological sovereignty in a public transport mode strongly shaped by these forces of change.
9. Public transport is uniquely placed to help achieve the renewable energy transition and **climate justice**. Modal shift away from private vehicles and to public transport is one of the most effective ways of achieving climate mitigation and adaptation and tackling [air pollution](#) in our cities. Addressing air pollution is central to improving health and safety outcomes and the quality of life in cities for both workers and residents. The electrification of public transport systems also has an important role to play, and to fully realise climate benefits this should proceed jointly with the decarbonisation of global energy systems. As already noted, the renewable energy transition must incorporate a just transition for public transport workers, including providing a new generation of good, unionised jobs for young workers. This will contribute to realising Sustainable Development Goal 8 on decent work and economic growth which calls for a global strategy for youth employment, as well as

the ILO [Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all](#) and [Resolution concerning a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all](#). Public transport systems should also be fully integrated with other opportunities for active mobility, primarily walking and cycling.

The Future is Public Transport

10. In response to the public transport crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, the ITF forged a strategic alliance with U20 co-convenor C40 Cities to support the recovery of the sector. ITF [research](#) identified the intense financial strain afflicting public transport systems around the world, due to a combination of falling fare revenue and potential or actual cuts to national government spending. This created the serious risk of public transport systems being eroded, just at the moment when they were vital to both post-pandemic economic recovery and climate action. It remains the case that **only a partnership between workers and local governments, with support from other key stakeholders, can deliver thriving public transport systems which are equipped to deal with the challenges of the coming years and decades**. In March 2021, the ITF and C40 launched [The Future is Public Transport](#) campaign to make this a reality.
11. In the lead-up to COP26, held in Glasgow in November 2021, unions, local governments and other partners joined with ITF and C40 to acknowledge that **the number of public transport journeys worldwide needs to double by 2030 in order to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement**. Meanwhile, our [research](#) demonstrated that the requisite investment in public transport would: create tens of millions of jobs, both directly in the sector and elsewhere; cut urban transport emissions in half; and reduce air pollution from transport by 45%. The urgency of meeting the target on journeys – and the benefits of seizing this opportunity – have only become stronger at we reach the middle of the current decade. As we approach COP30 in Belém, it is vital that governments include public transport in their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and implementation plans, with commitments on mitigation, adaptation and just transition across both areas. In Belém itself, it is critical that governments reach agreement on a Just Transition Work Programme which explicitly supports sectoral and subnational action in areas such as public transport, with social dialogue, decent jobs and conditions, labour rights and broader human rights at the centre.
12. A wider group of key stakeholders have given further support to this vision through the Sustainable Mobility for All (SuM4All) consortium, which brings together governments, public and private employers, unions, civil society and development finance institutions. In the lead-up to COP27 in 2022, the SuM4All public transport working group identified [six areas for action](#) to **unlock public transport for climate and sustainable development**. This platform for change has been reiterated at subsequent UN climate negotiations by the world's most broadly representative set of public transport stakeholders.
13. The UN General Assembly has also lent its support to this broader agenda. In July 2022, an overwhelming majority of countries voted to recognise **a new human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment**. While the [resolution](#) is not generally binding on UN member-states, it further deepens the global consensus on the co-dependence of

human rights and environmental protection, including climate action. One of the best routes for national governments to make this right a reality is by prioritising public transport for its health, social, economic and environmental benefits.

Conclusions

14. The U20 key priorities represent a range of pressing challenges facing local, regional and national governments worldwide. The good news is that a solution to many of these challenges is close at hand. **Public investment in and modal shift to public transport can deliver on the 2025 U20 vision**, providing social, economic and environmental benefits in a single package. As those ultimately responsible for delivering public transport services every day, workers and their unions have a central role to play in shaping the future of the sector.
15. Therefore, local, regional and national governments and international institutions should place investment in **public transport at the top of the agenda**, both as part of this year's G20 process and beyond. We hope to see this reflected at both the U20 and G20 summits, as well as in other upcoming multilateral fora such as COP30. The ITF, its affiliated unions and public transport workers everywhere stand ready to help make this vision a reality.

For more information on any of the issues raised in this white paper, please contact the ITF at opt@itf.org.uk.

Resources

ITF resources

[People's Public Transport Policy](#)

[Bus rapid transit and the formalisation of informal public transport: A trade union negotiating guide](#) (2019) [with the Global Labour Institute]

[C190 Campaign Toolkit](#) (2020) [with other global union federations]

[Sanitation Charter](#) (2019) and [Toolkit](#) (2022)

[Positive Employer Gender Policy: Strengthening Women's Employment and Equal Opportunities in Urban Public Transport](#) (2019) [with the International Association of Public Transport]

[The Impact of the Future of Work for Women in Public Transport](#) (2019)

[The Pandemic, Local Public Transport Funding and Union Responses](#) and [Recommendations for Sustainable and Socially Just Public Transport Funding](#) (2021)

[Making COP26 Count: How investing in public transport this decade can protect our jobs, our climate, our future](#) (2021) [with C40 Cities]

[A Just Transition for Urban Transport Workers: Issues and Experiences from Unions in Cities of the Global South](#) (2022)

[Johannesburg Declaration: Transforming Road, Rail and Urban Transport for the Common Good](#) (2023)

[Manifesto on Sustainable Public Transport Investment, Funding and Fares](#) (2023)

[Technology and Decent Work Charter](#) (2024)

[Metro Workers' Charter: Our Jobs Are Your Rights](#) (2024)

[Understanding Informal Transport in Africa: Labour Impact Assessments as Tools to Improve Workers' Conditions](#) (2025) [with the Global Labour Institute]

[Global Employment in Urban Public Transport](#) (2025) [with the International Association of Public Transport]

Further resources

International Association of Public Transport: [The Guardians of Mobility: keeping cities alive and moving](#) (2020); [Full free fare public transport: Objectives and alternatives](#) (2020)

International Budget Partnership: [Open Budget Survey](#)

International Labour Organisation: [Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all](#) (2016); [Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work](#) and [Recommendation 206 on Violence and Harassment in](#)

[the World of Work](#) (2019); [Conclusions of the technical meeting on the future of decent and sustainable work in urban transport services](#) (2022); [Resolution concerning a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all](#) (2023)

Labour 20: [Statement to the G20 Labour and Employment Ministers](#) (2025)

Sustainable Mobility for All: [How to Unlock Public Transport for Climate and Sustainable Development: Six Areas for Action](#) (2022)

United Nations: [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) (2015); [General Assembly resolution 76/300 on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment](#) (2022)

University of Glasgow: [Public Futures database](#)

World Health Organisation: [Air quality database](#)