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One Man’s Meat

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In his presentation titled “Developing Sustainable Urban Transport Corridor through Bus Rapid Transit (BRT),” Yoga Adiwinaroto from the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) shared his vision of what might be in store if we identify sustainability as a priority and provide the right incentives in terms of urban mobility. Since 2004 the ITDP has designed, supported and inspired 54 BRT corridors, at a total length of 1,033 km. Every day, some 7.7 million people ride these BRTs, saving each person seven days a year in commuting time, according to Adiwinaroto. The principles for sustained urban mobility include developing neighborhoods that promote walking and cycling, creating dense networks of streets/pathways, and building regions with short commutes.

In his presentation titled “Integrating Sustainable Transport in National Urban Policies,” Madan B. Regmi from the Transport Division, UN ESCAP (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific), Bangkok, shared his thoughts on the challenges facing a rapidly urbanizing Asia-Pacific. The region, Regmi explained, includes more than 2 billion urban residents — or 55 percent of world’s urban population. What’s more, the same proportion of the world’s 28 megacities, including the three largest — Tokyo, Delhi and Shanghai. No less than 90 percent of the world’s urban expansion is happening in developing countries, where urban sprawl and slums are all too common. But amid the challenges also lie opportunities.

The emergence of secondary and small-sized cities in Asia provides opportunities to plan and implement sustainable urban transport policies.

Transport corridor

In Baku, Azerbaijan, dissemination of these concepts has translated into tangible results: reduced block sizes, complete sidewalks, and cycle lanes and parking at transit stations. Efforts have also been made at having families of different incomes in the same neighborhood, limiting driveway access, restricting car parking spaces at new buildings, and pursuing development with dense networks.

Adiwinaroto’s dream of tomorrow’s urban world might evoke feelings of nostalgia among some Chinese...

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According to one plan, by 2020, bicycles would account for up to 10 percent of urban traffic, with the share of taxis. To achieve this, the local government is trying to create a bike-friendly environment with more bike lanes and cycling facilities (parking, sheds and bike racks).

China used to be a kingdom of bicycles, and residents in Shanghai once frequently went out to guangjie (take a leisurely stroll). Today, walking (or biking) is a much more intimidating experience. In big Chinese cities it is no longer easy to cycle your way around. In the design of roads, to ensure the smooth flow of motor vehicles, pedestrians are often viewed as nuisances.

It is not uncommon for a pedestrian to wait five minutes or more just to cross a single street. In building people-centered cities, there is need to adopt traffic calming measures, which include the creation of speed tables or reduction in road widths, or giving pedestrians and cyclists better legal protection against motorized vehicles.

In a presentation submitted for discussion by Professor Jiang Yulin from the Academy of Transport Science under the Ministry of Transport, she explained that China can no longer afford to repeat the mistake of developed countries. In much of the US, for example, public transport has become effectively an option only for the poor. But even in this context, the situation in big cities like New York is somewhat different.

Jiang believed that without proper policies regarding public transport, bicycles, and private cars, China will miss the opportunity to cultivate sustainable urban mobility. We cannot afford to wait until we are forced to change due to choking pollution and congestion. We should try to expedite positive change by pursuing policies that foster green and sustainable public transport.

It is still not too late for China. As Jiang explained, car ownership here is still low by Western standards, suggesting that their is still room to make things better before they get worse.