

Vientiane Declaration¹

on

Sustainable Rural Transport

towards

Achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Preamble

Rural transport remains a grossly neglected sector in Asia, yet sustainable rural transport is a key driver for improving rural wellbeing, economic development, community empowerment as well as livelihood - and food security. Due to a lack of basic rural transport infrastructure and services, many developing countries of Asia confront a number of socio-economic and development challenges. Poverty, under nutrition, lack of access to agricultural markets, basic utilities and services (e.g. drinking water, energy, education and employment opportunities, health care facilities, and recreation sites) remain formidable challenges in the development of most of the rural areas in Asia. Additionally, environmental problems arising from vehicular emissions, lack of proper vehicle inspection and maintenance, fuel adulteration significantly affect rural inhabitants and ecosystems.

Improved rural transport infrastructure and services are a key enabler to increased rural resiliency, rural empowerment and rural socio-economic transformation through poverty eradication, hunger elimination, social integration, increased food security and improved supply chain logistics. Thus, it is of paramount importance for developing countries to improve and maintain their rural transport infrastructure and services, to ensure better accessibility for low-income communities, farmers, women, youth and other vulnerable groups, and to ensure that “no one is left behind,” as urged by the recently-adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As most agricultural production takes place in rural areas, improved access to both local markets and urban areas can make a significant contribution towards improving economy and livelihood security of farming communities.

Due to increasing frequency and magnitude of natural and climate-driven disasters (e.g. floods, cyclones, earthquakes, landslides, avalanches and droughts), rural transport systems require strategic investment and design to help increase resilience of rural communities. Climate adaptive and disaster resilient transport investments in rural areas can help secure all-season access to markets and essential services and prevent isolation of fragile or remote communities, thus contributing to economic development and well-being.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 related targets at its core, represents a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity, and reflects national commitments to put the world on a more sustainable and resilient path. Through the adoption of this Agenda, member states have acknowledged the vital role of sustainable transport in achieving the SDGs. Essential steps realizing the SDGs for the rural sector include developing and maintaining rural transport infrastructure (e.g. footpaths, tracks, trails, farm and feeder roads, railroads, waterways, bridges and drainage systems), expanding rural transport service networks to promote education and health in isolated areas, and improving rural transport access to provide enabling environments for trade and commerce.

¹ *Vientiane Declaration is a good-will, voluntary and legally non-binding declaration.*

Declaration

We, the participants, who are representatives of member countries of the Regional Environmentally Sustainable Transport (EST) Forum in Asia (i.e. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Russian Federation, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Viet Nam), observer countries (.....), international organizations, bilateral and multilateral agencies, civil society organizations, the scientific and academic community, the private sector, sustainable transport professionals, and other stakeholders having met at the Tenth Regional EST Forum in Asia, held in Vientiane, Lao PDR, from 14 to 16 March 2017, unanimously adopt the “***Vientiane Declaration on Sustainable Rural Transport towards Achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development***”,

Reaffirming the voluntary actions of participating member countries of the Regional EST Forum in Asia to achieve the twenty sustainable transport goals under the Bangkok 2020 Declaration (2010-2020) agreed upon at the Fifth Regional EST Forum in Asia (2010),

Acknowledging the Bali Declaration on Vision Three Zeros - Zero Congestion, Zero Pollution, and Zero Accidents towards Next Generation Transport Systems in Asia adopted at the Seventh Regional EST Forum in Asia and Global Consultation on Sustainable Transport in the Post-2015 Development Agenda (2013),

Noting the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development in Ethiopia in 2015 and the Istanbul Declaration and Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020, which highlight the need to build safe, resilient and sustainable infrastructure and services in developing and least developed countries as a priority area of action,

Reaffirming the significance of sustainable rural transport and multiple benefits of rural access in the effective implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and related targets set by the United Nations and international community,

Noting the outcome of the Global Sustainable Transport Conference held on 26-27 November 2016 in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan,

Noting also the outcome of the UNESCAP Ministerial Conference on Transport held on 5-9 December 2016 in Moscow, Russian Federation, that adopted the Regional Action Programme on Sustainable Transport Connectivity, Phase I (2017-2021) including achieving greater rural connectivity as one of the core themes,

Taking into account that currently about 47% of the population in Asia lives in rural areas and that rural poverty is a major barrier to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in developing countries,

Considering that rural areas are the growth engine of agricultural products and that a lack of basic rural transport infrastructure and services increases the cost of transport, limits access to local markets for agricultural products, and reduces productivity, employment and business opportunities,

Recognizing the efforts of many of the countries in the region that have resulted in substantive improvements in rural transport infrastructure and services, but ***acknowledging*** that much more needs to be done including greater use of the various options for financing rural connectivity,

Noting that food waste because of inadequate rural transport infrastructure and services continues to threaten food security in the region and through embodied Greenhouse Gas emissions in food waste is a major contributor to dangerous climate change,

Noting that it would be important to take into due consideration of the environment, such as implementation of environmental impact assessment while building transport infrastructure, in order to preserve natural environment, ecosystem and prevent all forms of pollution in rural areas,

Underscoring the fact that Asia is one of the world's most vulnerable regions to the impacts of climate change and natural disasters, and that the rural areas of the region are disproportionately affected by these impacts due to limited resilient transport infrastructure and services, and that improved rural transport and accessibility will have significant positive impacts prior to, during, and after extreme weather events and other disasters, including more efficient evacuation, relief mobilization and relocation and rehabilitation,

Recognizing that rural transport is a key enabler for social equity, human resource development, local economic growth and employment generation, efficiency and productivity in rural areas, and improvement of the quality of life of the rural poor, farmers, girls and women, youth, the elderly and other vulnerable populations, and

Underscoring that efficient rural-urban connectivity plays a crucial role in the generation of income, employment and wealth and urban food security, yet is often ignored in national economic and trade policies,

1. *Express* our commitment to promote inclusive, affordable, accessible and sustainable rural transport infrastructure and services, thus facilitating improved access to basic utilities and services including health and education by the rural poor, farmers, agricultural workers, girls and women, youth, and physically disabled and vulnerable groups;
2. *Recognize* that rural access does not only comprise investments in new roads, but as well adequate maintenance of existing infrastructure, including the provision of sufficient funding for necessary road works;
3. *Express* our commitment to explore climate adaptive road and infrastructure investments in rural areas to enhance resilience of local communities as well as to secure all-season access to essential utilities and services;
4. *Express* our commitment to promote environmentally sustainable transport in rural areas by introducing low-carbon transport system and avoiding road development without environmental consideration;
5. *Express* our commitment to promote efficient rural access, rural-urban connectivity and sustainable freight movement with an objective to achieve rural livelihood security, rural resilience, rural empowerment and productivity, and sustainable rural and regional development in support of successful implementation of the SDGs;
6. *Express* our commitment to assign due priority to rural transport projects and initiate the development of national strategies and policy frameworks to improve rural transport connectivity to wider local, national and regional transport networks;
7. *Express* our commitment to improve transport safety, sustainability and efficiency in rural areas through better coordination of relevant stakeholders, legal frameworks, and enforcement of safety and environmental regulations, including mandatory vehicle

inspection and maintenance (I/M), driver and mechanic training, monitoring of fuel quality against adulteration, and inclusive planning and management techniques;

8. *Utilize* the outputs of research for innovative methodologies to provide more sustainable and appropriately-engineered rural connectivity that provides value-for-money and incorporates local resources and materials; and

9. *Call* for the widest possible national, regional and international cooperation and support for reviewing progress, institutional capacity-building, knowledge sharing, technology transfer and research and development for innovative solutions to improve rural-urban connectivity; to improve and green supply chain logistics (from producers to consumers); to achieve safe and sustainable rural access; to achieve resource and energy efficiency in rural transport services; and to reduce local air and water pollution as well as mitigate, and adapt to climate change.

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