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Be like Rotterdam and ‘make it happen’

The planet is in danger. The trouble is that all too often targets and declarations can become ‘sign and forget’ - we need to act now

▶ *“The frequency and intensity of heavy precipitation events have increased since the 1950s over most land area for which observational data are sufficient for trend analysis (high confidence) and human-induced climate change is likely the main driver.”*
Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

Get off your train (powered by renewable energy - because they all are) at the modernised Rotterdam Centraal station. Turn north out of the station (crossing the river of cyclists) and turn right. Close by you will find a public square with space for ball games. Much of the square is recessed, because that way the square can hold and store 1.7 million litres of water in a storm. The rain may fall fast but the water collects slowly in the square and then can be slowly released into the groundwater and nearby canal, thus reducing the risk of flash flooding. Circle round the station and head down into the underground car park. It isn't obvious but above you is an enormous water storage tank - its construction integral to the wider station rebuilding project. Again designed to hold rainwater to slow its release and reduce the risk of flooding when the hard rain falls.

Keep exploring the immediate vicinity of the station and you will find watercourses that were underground but are now open to the sky, tram lines set in a carpet of green and urban farms (ground level and on rooftops).

Organising principle

Targets, visions, speeches, declarations: the planet is in danger - we must act now. The trouble is that all too often targets and declarations can become ‘sign and forget’, displacement activities. International, national, regional, local, sectoral targets that don't link up with each other. Hanging wires. On the kind of timescales we need to work on to limit the scale of climate damage what really matters is not what declarations an organisation has signed but what staff do when they go to work on Monday morning. Is it contributing to decarbonisation - or is it not?

The key challenge now of decarbonisation is not Extinction Rebellion finding ever more sensational ways of stopping buses and trams from moving in city centres, or delivering more earnest speeches. It's organisational strategy and management, because the need to decarbonise is no longer a debating point, it's a practical challenge. And for national and local government in particular it's a very complex challenge: a three dimensional game of chess.

The first of the three dimensions is sectoral. The big three carbon generators are energy production, transport and the built environment. Carbon emissions from energy

have fallen rapidly, transport is the worst offender at present (but there is some kind of plan) and then there's the built environment (where the plan is sketchy to say the least). The clock is ticking so we need to move across all the sectors simultaneously and in sync. Like Rotterdam does - but also like Islington, which has sourced waste heat from the underground to heat council estates. Or Leeds, which put in the piping for district heating at the same time as making the city centre roads that sit on top of them favour active travel, buses and trees.

The second dimension is temporal. Some things you can do quickly and relatively easily on carbon reduction (replacing old buses with zero emission buses) and some things will take time and are hard (decarbonising the existing built environment). But if you don't start on the hard stuff now then inevitably it isn't going to happen in time. We need to get carbon emissions down as soon as possible so it would also be wrong not to crack on with the easier stuff. And different actions have different costs attached - some of which will fall over time (though only if somebody else invests in them when they are expensive so that unit costs can come down for everybody else). So given finite resources how do you get the sequencing right?

The third dimension is the balance between taking measures to decarbonise what an organisation is doing now and reducing the impacts of the carbon that is already in the sky. For example, do you use your land holdings and roof space to generate renewable energy through turbines or solar panels? Or do you use it for making your city spongier and cooler through urban drainage systems and more greenery?

Winning this three dimensional game of chess is the challenge of the age. It means decarbonisation has to become everyone's job within an organisation (as Covid was). It means working across disciplines and departmental boundaries and budgets. All this set against finite resources and the danger that if you touch too many public raw nerves then the backlash could set you back by years we don't have.

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“Organisations will need to put their money where their mouth is”



Putting the money where the mouth is

As well as reorganising around the climate imperative, organisations will need to put their money where their mouth is. The most important part of any organisation's plans and strategies is not the vision at the front - it's the annex at the back (which shows what the money is actually being spent on). And the annexes at the back on transport haven't been changing fast enough. There are still too many road schemes in them and not enough roadside gardens.

Meanwhile, car use is too cheap and public transport use is too expensive. As long as this mismatch persists we are in danger of putting more subsidy into public transport just to keep it in the game. Not winning the game - just losing the game more slowly.

The way forward is for national and local government to find the opportunities where they can to level up the score between the car and public transport - which in turn needs to find a new and more attractive equilibrium on fares (lower and simpler than they are now).

A crunch is coming

The forthcoming multi-year spending review will be a key test of whether government is putting its money where its mouth is on decarbonisation. In previous spending reviews the government more widely has not treated transport as a protected department but within its beleaguered budget intercity road and rail spend has been given a degree of protection not afforded to local transport. However, it's not credible in any way, shape or form to continue to give priority to a bloated £27bn national road programme which will pump yet more traffic into cities (which have tough air quality and climate goals to achieve) and stimulate more car dependent sprawl around junctions.

This is money which is being squandered at the same time as active travel and bus strategies have set out ambitious aspirations for delivering everything which the national road programme won't do - reduce pollution and carbon, less social exclusion and fewer death and injuries on the roads. And although the £3bn promised for transformational bus funding sounds a lot - if you subtract what's

been spent already and then divide what's left by three years, then by capital and revenue, and then by 79 local transport authorities - then it won't come even close to the magnitude of what the bus strategy rightly envisages.

Utopias and dystopias

The strange thing about the moment we find ourselves in, at a time when we face a dystopian threat at a global level, is that the most practical thing we can do is be inspired by what might be seen as utopian ideals; greener cities, public transport as a universal service. But only if we organise ourselves methodically and adopt the slogan of the City of Rotterdam: 'Make it Happen'. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.

