

In Ethiopia, New Leadership Embraces Transport Solutions to Fight Climate Change

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Photos: ITDP Africa

In Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, over half of daily trips are taken on foot. This rapidly growing city, home to over three million people, is expected to exceed five million within the next decade, and has until recently followed a familiar transport growth trajectory: building more space for cars to the detriment of all other modes. Luckily, in the wake of this population boom, the government of Addis Ababa has enlisted another strategy, one that prioritizes pedestrian space and infrastructure to support the needs of their entire population.

The city has prioritized cars and designed most of its roads not for the walking population but for the comparatively wealthy minority, 15 percent, who travel by private vehicles. With ITDP's guidance and consultation, the Addis Ababa Transport Bureau (AATB) has developed a ten-year Non-Motorized Transport (NMT) Strategy to address and respond to this challenge. Fortunately, the government is up to the challenge. Much of Ethiopia's progress is due to the young, forward-thinking government elected to power in 2015, and the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed since 2018. Ahmed has empowered young civil servants to advance progressive ideas and has himself become a global leader, winning the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize for his work toward reconciliation with neighboring Eritrea. "This government is open to transformational change in a way that is rare anywhere in the world, particularly East Africa," says Chris Kost, ITDP Africa Program Director. "They understand that new approaches to transport planning are necessary to provide access for everyone as the city grows, and they have been enthusiastic partners with ITDP in working to build a more equitable city."

The ambitious NMT Strategy takes a holistic approach to road design, focusing on complete streets, which provide dedicated

Left: The Addis Ababa government NMT strategy includes creating dedicated space on roads for pedestrians and cyclists. Right: Addis Ababa's forward thinking government has committed to a NMT strategy.



space for cycling, walking, and other transit modes. The city has committed to creating 600 km of walkways, 200 km of cycling infrastructure, and a bikeshare system with 10,000 bikes, among other goals. To date, the city has built or rebuilt 26 km of well-designed pedestrian walkways and established initiatives like Car Free Days, of which there have been 12 in 2019. Kost says, “Car Free Days, which simply involve removing cars for a period of time from a major street, can really be powerful instigators for change. Suddenly, people can imagine all the ways they could use public spaces, such as playing, exercising, art, socializing, that would be available to them if we didn’t give away so much of our city spaces to moving and storing private cars.”

One of the major goals of Ethiopia’s government is to move the country from an emerging to a fully competitive economy. It has implemented a green economic plan with an ambitious goal: to be carbon neutral by 2025. “Ethiopia’s leaders understand that their country, which is quickly losing its vast forests, will be on the frontline of the impacts of extreme weather brought on by climate change,” says Kost, “and that means that the route to economic security must include green policies.” One of the more dramatic actions was the planting of 350 million trees in one day all over the country.



Top and above left: Addis Ababa has 26 kilometers of pedestrian walkways.
 Above right: One of the major goals of Ethiopia’s government is to move the country to a fully competitive economy, which includes an ambitious transport strategy.

This initiative set a world record for the largest number of trees planted in a day and sent a clear message to Ethiopia’s citizens and the region that they are serious about their green agenda.

With climate change bringing about destructive effects at an unending pace, Addis Ababa and Ethiopia have taken the smart approach to focus on equitable, sustainable transportation. An empowered class of ambitious young people in the government are driving policy and moving their country and region forward. In a country that stands to lose so much due to climate change, this strategy offers a path that many governments around the world would do well to follow.