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Mobility is rapidly becoming one of the greatest challenges facing developed and developing countries alike. Vehicles account for 20 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions. There are also rising concerns about their impact on the quality of urban life, including social inequities, and about the effects of their pollution on health and buildings.

Billions of hours are being lost in congestion, with commensurate financial losses for economies businesses and individuals. According to the Texas Transportation Institute, for example, congestion in United States in 2007 cost close to \$90 billion a year, due partly to four billion hours — and 11 billion litres of fuel — lost in travel delays.

We are on the road to nowhere if existing policies and economic models prevail with their over emphasis on private cars and on shifting shipments of goods to the roads. The world's vehicle fleet is projected to triple from less than one billion to 2.6 billion cars and light trucks by 2050. Developing economies will account for some 80 per cent of the increase. Greenhouse gas emissions are conservatively expected to double: especially when it is considered that roughly a third of an average vehicle's life-time emissions are released during its manufacture. And increasing areas of productive land will end up under asphalt.

A new UNEP strategic paper estimates that, if all these projected 2.6 billion vehicles were subcompact cars, their required surface area alone — excluding any roadway or parking spaces

— would cover about 10,500 square kilometres, equivalent to the entire surface of Lebanon. If they were comparable to the average American compact sedan, they would cover the entire surface of Djibouti and weigh more than ten billion tonnes.

Fortunately there is no gridlock in inspiring Green Economy ideas; but we need to embrace and accelerate them with creative public policies, including transformative market signals. Earlier this year, UNEP launched the 50by50 Global Fuel Economy Initiative, in collaboration with the International Energy Agency, the International Transport Forum and the FIA Foundation. This is essentially a road map on how six billion barrels of oil and two gigatonnes of CO₂ — equivalent to half the total current annual emissions of the EU — can be saved each year through an ambitious world wide programme in line with the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Among the greatest challenges is demonstrating real and credible alternatives to the simplistic growth of private transport, while bringing some transparency to its economics. Countries and cities worldwide heavily subsidise highway infrastructure, parking, fuel, and other commodities. These subsidies — and the lack of real market pricing on vehicle-related goods — distort decisions in favour of using cars, vans and lorries.

UNEP is demonstrating alternatives in Guatemala City, Guatemala; Concepción City, Chile; Cartagena, Colombia; Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania; and Jakarta, Indonesia in partnerships with the Network for Environmentally Sustainable Transport in Latin America and the Caribbean and the Institute for Transport Development and Policy, backed by funding from the Global Environment Facility.

The Concepción system, for example, includes plans to build four roadway corridors with 50 kilometres of exclusive bus way and three stations to integrate different modes of transport into the City's bus system. It also envisages a bus management centre, a centralised control system for railway traffic, improving the infrastructure of urban trains, and constructing 21.4 kilometres of bike lanes.

Funding is always a challenge. But a reformed Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), under the UN climate convention arrangements, could be a big boost. One CDM proposal is looking at introducing large numbers of electric scooters and three-wheelers to replace conventional ones in Indian cities. Another envisages modern fleet-control telecommunications systems to streamline bus movements. In Chongqing, China. Mass transit cable cars linking to the metro system are being planned for hilly areas of the city of Medellín, Colombia. And there are more fascinating and imaginative plans in the pipeline.

In just a few short weeks, representatives of more than 190 governments will gather in Copenhagen for the crucial climate convention meeting. If they can get into gear to propel the world to a low-carbon future, societies may also finally embark on a journey to more sustainable transport.