

## "How Will Our Planet Accommodate the Mobility Needs of 8 Billion People?"

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An overview of the research conducted by 10 students from The Heller School for Social Policy Management at Brandeis University: Amanda Yu, Abby Despres, Mariama Fatajo, Molly Finch, Meron Hagos, Daniela Jurado, Victoria Melbourne, Nneamaka Jennifer Omo, Samuel Siaw, Oliver Torres.

Supervised by their professor Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld.

### The perspective of social policy students: "Impact of climate crisis on mobility habits and lifestyles"

For [\*the 2nd edition of its live debate\*](#), the Forum has partnered with three leading universities located in three different regions of the world, incorporating the perspectives of youth and articulating the expectations, needs, and demands of future generations. Each university has focused on a specific dimension of the debate, coherent with their respective disciplines, to tackle the global issue: "How Will Our Planet Accommodate the Mobility Needs of 8 Billion People?"

Students from The Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University, delved into the societal dimension. More specifically, they uncovered the connection between the decisions being made about mobility due to concerns about climate change, social justice, and equity. Their research explores the major factors driving inequities in access to transportation and identifies relevant pathways for promoting greater mobility equity and accessibility for all.

The digest below summarizes their key ideas and insights.

#### Exploring the Imperatives of Equitable and Sustainable Mobility

Humans have always been mobile, but current mobility practices contribute to societal inequality and harm the environment. Climate change exacerbates mobility disparities, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. A multifaceted approach is needed to address mobility challenges, focusing on inclusive policymaking and technology integration.

In this historical moment, how can we turn this crisis into a catalyst, fundamentally rethinking mobility in ways that reverse historical and extractive disparities and pioneer a better future for all? What does mobility equity look like for eight billion people and our planet?

#### Understanding the Impacts of Modes of Mobility on Lifestyle

The past two centuries have seen significant improvements in global quality of life, largely driven by technological advancements. However, not all populations and individuals have benefitted equally from this progress, and several key social and environmental challenges can be mentioned:

- Social and physical mobility, crucial for accessing opportunities, remain restricted due to systemic barriers.
- Inadequate transportation infrastructure exacerbates disparities, limiting access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.
- The ultra-mobile elites enjoy global access to the best opportunities, reinforcing wealth disparities and contributing significantly to climate change.
- Excessive consumerism, fuelled by unsustainable lifestyles, further exacerbates environmental degradation.

Urgent global action is needed to redefine success and address mobility inequities, as climate change threatens to worsen existing inequalities, leaving billions of people vulnerable to its impacts.

### **Identifying Key Drivers of Mobility Inequity**

The UNDP reports that, in 2021, 45% of the global population struggled to access essential healthcare due to transportation limitations, with over 1 billion people lacking access to all-weather roads, exacerbating societal inequalities.<sup>1</sup> These data show that the global landscape of mobility is marked by profound inequalities, compounded by the unequal impacts of climate change. Structural and systemic barriers intersect with various aspects of identity and circumstance to create disparities in social, physical, and climate mobility. Several drivers of mobility inequity, contributing to the above-mentioned disparities can be identified:

- Geographic inequality is highlighted by the projected mass displacement due to climate crises, with billions facing ecological threats by 2050.
- Urbanization further exacerbates mobility gaps, with rural communities often left underserved and isolated.
- Socioeconomic disparities limit access to transportation options, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality. As an example, an OECD study suggests it could take as much as 150 years for a child from a poor family to reach their country's average income.<sup>2</sup>
- Racial inequities, stemming from historical discrimination, continue to limit mobility opportunities, particularly for marginalized communities.
- Gender divides in mobility persist, with women facing unique challenges in transportation access and safety.
- Aging populations experience compounded mobility restrictions, further exacerbated by climate-related hazards.
- People with disabilities encounter significant barriers in physical and social mobility, often overlooked in broader discussions.
- Workforce inequality is characterized by limited mobility options, particularly for low-wage workers, and unequal distribution of the risks and benefits of climate change adaptation.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. (2021). *Sustainable Transport Conference Fact Sheet Inequalities*.

[https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/media\\_gstc/FACT\\_SHEET\\_Inequalities.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/media_gstc/FACT_SHEET_Inequalities.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> OECD publishes a new report on social mobility. (October 29, 2018). Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission.

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1250&newsId=9227&furtherNews=yes#:~:text=On%20average%20at%20current%20rates,as%20many%20as%20six%20generations>

## Designing Pathways for Mobility Equity

Addressing these mobility inequities necessitates comprehensive solutions that take into account the intersecting dynamics of identity, socioeconomic status, and climate vulnerability, along with targeted interventions to promote accessibility, safety, and equity in transportation systems worldwide. In this regard, different pathways to achieve true mobility equity can be considered, including the following:

- Investing in equity, which is essential to break cycles of deprivation and inequality and requires wealth redistribution and targeted programs for education, climate mitigation, and alternative mobility.
- Designing for justice, which means adopting equity lenses in policy, infrastructure and climate risk assessments, ensuring inclusivity and environmental harmony.
- Shifting from a consumption-focused culture to sustainability, which entails empowering local production, promoting durable goods, and ethical supply chains.
- Enabling climate migration, which demands equity-driven policies, risk assessments, and plans for safe relocation. Currently, an estimated 110 million people are displaced worldwide, a figure expected to escalate because of climate change.<sup>3</sup>
- Leveraging technology for mobility advancements, which requires data protection, community experimentation, equity assessments, and productive partnerships.

By addressing these different pillars, societies can pave the way for inclusive, sustainable, and fair mobility systems.

## Key insights in a Nutshell

In conclusion, the role of mobility in shaping lifestyle and societal well-being is crucial, yet systemic inequalities pose significant barriers to its realization. A holistic approach that transcends traditional mobility paradigms is needed, urging policymakers, stakeholders, and communities to prioritize equity, sustainability, and social justice in their efforts to address the climate crisis. A transformative vision of mobility envisions a future where all individuals have equal access to opportunities and resources, contributing to a more equitable and sustainable world for generations to come.

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<sup>3</sup> Staff, B. U. (June 14,2023). UNHCR's Grandi: 110 million displaced is an indictment on our world. *UNHCR*. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/unhcr-s-grandi-110-million-displaced-indictment-our-world>