

EARTH DAY WRITING CONTEST 2012

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Topic: Tell us about a pressing environmental issue in your city. How would you go about addressing it?

Hanoi Urban Transport Initiatives, Benefiting air quality!

Zoe groaned heavily as another minute passed, and the car moved one more inch forward in the line of traffic. After an hour of traffic, there we were in Bach Mai hospital, greeted, yet again, by another hour of waiting. Zoe, an American girl, stayed with our family for one month last July. At the end of the first week of her stay, she got a serious case of asthma, which was predicted by the doctor to have been caused by breathing in much air pollutant. Zoe said she was stuck in traffic for at least an hour almost every day on her motorbike taxi. After this experience, she never goes out without a face mask to protect her lungs.

As I recall this experience, I realize how transportation can pose impacts on the citizen's physical well-beings by the dramatic deterioration of air quality. Hanoi, callow on her way of developing into a sustainable city, faces a dilemma in an inadequate transportation system, on which if improvements are made, the environmental condition will be greatly ameliorated.

According to the results of the annual environmental study conducted by Yale University, Columbia University and the World Economic Fair, Vietnam is among the

ten countries with the highest rate of air pollution. This ominously puts Vietnamese people's health at risk. The Ministry of Health has alleged that the Central Pulmonary Hospital is receiving rapidly growing number of cases caused by ambient air pollution, such as pneumonia, bronchitis, asthma, and dust allergy, etc. More dangerously, the risk in chronic obstructive pneumonia (COPD) rose by ten to twenty times in the last ten years, causing the death of estimatedly 2000 people a year. COPD, in the words of PhD. Đinh Ngọc Sỹ, Director of the Central Pulmonary Hospital, is caused mainly by contaminated air.

Transport accounts for 70% of urban air pollution in Hanoi. What is worse, in the report on environmental status in Hanoi, the Hanoi Institute of Urban Study suggested that particulates like TSP, PM, PM10, PM2.5 are at levels higher than applicable Vietnamese standards 5 to 6 times. Therefore, more attention from the denizens and the authorities of Hanoi should be focused on transportation pollution and the solution to it.

At the top of the list of criteria for an urban transport scheme is sustainability. Sustainable development is described as: "Development that improves long term health of the human and ecological systems."¹ Applying this theory to the case of transportation, the ultimate solution is public transport: an accessible, affordable and relatively low-emission vehicle. Of course, to what extent that depiction is correct relies tremendously on how public transport is carried out in different countries.

¹ Joseph Goodman, Melissa Laube, and Judith Schwenk, "Curitiba's Bus System is Model for Rapid Transit," *Urban Habitat* (2007)
<http://www.urbanhabitat.org/node/344>

In many cities, private vehicles are limited and public transport is developed to meet people's expectation as an alternative means of transport. In Singapore, the urban transport policy is a "hard-headed "bargain" that offered steady improvements in space-efficient public transport at the price of making ownership of space-wasting cars unattainable for most."² This has been widely perceived as successful, since Singapore has changed from being faced with traffic chaos, a failing bus system and little money for infrastructure in the early 1970s to being one of the most space-efficient cities in the world. In Ho Chi Minh city, the city has passed "The construction of Metro line 2", having begun in August 2010 and is planned to be completed by 2015.

Countries have different approaches to this problem, therefore, there are many different methods and schemes proposed as solutions. One solution is the financial boundaries, which can restrict the use of privately-owned vehicles by high purchase and ownership taxes, or usage charges, namely Electronic Road Pricing. Another idea is car-sharing, together with car-rental and taxis, which acts as the alternatives to privately owned cars. The low levels of car ownership in places like Tokyo, Manhattan, Hong Kong island or central Paris demonstrate that affluent people will happily remain "car-free" if the alternatives are comprehensive enough. That is why many public transport systems have been proposed: Tramways – electric buses, LRT (Light Rail Transit), MRT (Metro Rapid Transit), BRT (Bus Rapid Transit), Velib Cycles, tube, etc. Each has its own strength and suitability to certain cities.

"The main factor in urban air pollution is private vehicles like cars and motorbikes. Which city in Asia has the lowest use of public transport? Unfortunately, it is Hanoi."

² Paul Barter, "Make not owning a car a smart choice" (2006)

Marc Cagnard , Director of UBIFRANCE remarked in the “Air quality in Hanoi workshop” held by the Department of Environment and the French Embassy.

In the case of Hanoi, with dense population and restricted area, Tramway on the second-level road and Green quarters are two recommended schemes. Tramways have high speed, cheap price, low-emission, and adequate space for all travelers, especially commuters. This will encourage people to be settled out of the city center. The green quarters of Hanoi will be a green lung for the over-crowded city, and will also encourage the building of public parking areas. With enough space in budget, other methods mentioned above can be applied too, together with road investments and awareness spreading.

There are possible objections about investments on public transport schemes that consumes a lot of money while there are alternative schemes like establishing fees or raising oil price, but to create a sustainable city, investments made in time are better than investments delayed until it is too late. Urgent actions must be taken now by the authorities. The people, the victims, in this case, are accomplices in deteriorating air quality themselves. Citizens should all contribute to reduce air pollution by supporting public transport, and walking or cycling in short distances. With the cooperation of the authorities, and the people towards a sustainable public transport system, Hanoi will positively solve air pollution step by step.