

Policy statement on walkability and cycling in our cities

This statement is the outcome of six projects done in six cities in India, namely Patna, Nagpur, Indore, Guwahati, Shimla and Ranchi by SUM Net members. These small studies reflect the real situation of urban transport in our country better than any other plan, mission or policy. In most of the cities, these projects were the first of its kind, to be carried out dealing with urban transport and involving people as important stakeholders of the process.

Walkability studies were done in Patna, Ranchi and Guwahati, wherein selected streets were measured on how walkable they were, supplemented by user survey results and interviews with other stakeholders such as government officials, media and other civil society organisations. These studies revealed that even a capital city like Patna had little to show for as pedestrian infrastructure. And studies in Patna and the other two cities brought out that it isn't just about the infrastructure. Pedestrians and cyclists are hardly considered while planning streets. This needs to change. Cycling related studies were undertaken in Indore and Nagpur, which gave similar issues faced by cyclists in these cities. Probably, similar problems must be faced by all of our cities. The suggestions given by citizens involved in these projects can become important pointers for cycling

Based on the specific outcomes of these studies, some broad level policy inputs can be extracted as follows;

1. The existence of a National Urban Transport Policy, doesn't seem to have much impact on ground even after a decade of its creation. Be it walkability or the infrastructure for cycling and public transport, not much from the NUTP has trickled down to the cities. Even after a decade, awareness among stakeholders such as officials, media and institutions remains very low. The basic tenets of sustainable transport endorsed by the NUTP – namely good public transport and facilities for non-motorised transport are compromised in varying levels in all our cities.

The only way to move ahead is for states to come up with their own state urban transport policies which can then be used to formulate enforceable rules. While the presence of the document is a welcome event in the absence of nothing before, the time has come to elevate the expectations from the policy towards the next step.

2. At the city level, authorities need to engage in creating systems for good design of streets through formulating street design guidelines and according to the requirement, come up with dedicated policies for pedestrians and cyclists.
3. These studies involved a component of public engagement in the form of public discussions, surveys, release events which is lacking from the realm of decision making in urban transport in cities. This presents an opportunity to demand robust public engagement through various methods and of the varied kind of stakeholders while deciding on the city's urban transport.

The revision of the NUTP, which was abandoned mid process also lacked a robust public consultation process. SUM Net, at that time had conducted public consultations in about eight cities and compiled the inputs to the draft policy.

4. On the lines of public engagement, is the broader issue of public awareness. While often it is the civil society organisations that are in the forefront when it comes to raising awareness about transportation issues, it is the government that should be proactively planning and executing awareness campaigns. Civil society can be effectively engaged, but the task needs to be initiated and supported by the authorities. The school campaign done in Indore is an example of the kind of exercise which can be taken up at a large scale by the government.