

On the Road to Sustainable Commute

Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy

By Anantha Lakshmi Paladugula.

The phenomenal rise in personal vehicle use, especially in urban areas, during the pandemic is bound to have serious environmental implications. States and UTs should, therefore, consider implementing the Motor Vehicle Aggregator Guidelines 2020, especially the sections that deal with the aggregation of non-transport vehicles (personal vehicles) and ride pooling. Until now, various state transport departments have been opposing the move to allow aggregators to integrate non-transport vehicles and offer ride pooling as they have not been complying with the existing aggregator rules or motor vehicle acts in these states.

However, given the current situation and the absence of a robust public transport system and feeder services in urban areas, the latest guidelines could be a game-changer in promoting sustainable and safe urban transport. They offer a framework to the states and UTs to regulate motor vehicle aggregators, which in turn will reduce emissions and improve urban mobility.

Aggregation of Non-Transport Vehicles: Emphasis on Reducing Traffic Congestion and Pollution

Given the environmental impact of traffic congestion and vehicular pollution in urban areas, the guidelines allow pooling of non-transport vehicles (two-wheelers, cars, etc.) by aggregators unless

prohibited by state governments. This means citizens other than professional drivers can integrate with aggregators (e.g., Quick Ride, sRide) and offer rides. A maximum of four intracity and two intercity ride-sharing trips are allowed in a day for each non-transport vehicle integrated with an aggregator.

States and UTs should allow pooling in the non-transport vehicle segment in urban areas.

Aggregation of non-transport vehicles could significantly reduce emissions and improve air quality as the number of vehicles on the road start to decrease because of effective vehicle utilisation, thereby promoting sustainable travel choices.

Ride-Pooling Services: Emphasis on Women Safety and Improvement in Accessibility

One of the other highlights of the guidelines is the option for female passengers to pool with other female passengers. While the provision is offered by some of the aggregators, the official directive would encourage all of them to implement this feature uniformly. This is in addition to some of the current safety features offered by aggregators such as in-app SOS alert button, option to share details of their ride, in-vehicle GPS-enabled panic buttons, disabled central locking system, and 24/7 helpline. Enhancing these safety features would encourage more women to use sustainable travel options, thus reducing the use of personal modes of transportation.

Measures have also been suggested to improve the accessibility of ride-pooling services in areas that are not well served by public transport services. At present, reasonable detours (limited to certain kilometres) can be made by drivers to make the pooling facility available to more riders once a route is confirmed. States may relax these detour restrictions further to improve accessibility in urban agglomerations and areas outside the municipal corporation limits.

Key Considerations for Sustainable Commute

When ride pooling and other aggregator services became popular in India, most of the states were opposed to the idea citing safety reasons and long detours. However, the latest guidelines offer better safety and more mobility choices to urban commuters. These choices could significantly reduce emissions and improve air quality. Permitting such alternative mobility choices would also improve accessibility and availability of reliable services.

The guidelines also encourage state governments to implement electric/biofuel two-wheeler taxis to reduce the environmental impact caused by emissions. States and UTs should treat these guidelines as an opportunity to promote sustainable urban commute by promoting clean vehicle technologies or zero-emission vehicles. Allowing clean vehicles can help states and UTs achieve the [electric vehicle and emission reduction targets](#) set by the Government of India.

While the new guidelines offer some solutions to the sustainable urban transport puzzle, more guidelines need to evolve given the dynamic nature of aggregator business models. It is up to the states and UTs now to come up with pragmatic interpretations of the guidelines to implement them effectively.

The author works in the area of Environment and the Ecosystem at the Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (CSTEP), a research-based think tank.