The concept of ‘sustainable transport’ has scored a historic victory, in one sense, in that it is now nearly impossible to defend a transport policy except by claiming that it is sustainable. Motor manufacturers, airlines, construction projects, housing plans all have their prospectus-writing teams at work demonstrating how they meet popular and government demands for sustainability.

What this handbook provides, on the other hand, is a tighter and more thoughtful set of definitions, theories, analytical frameworks and empirical evidence to enable the reader to read between the lines of such claims. It is necessary to reclaim a scientific legitimacy for policies which can genuinely improve the quality of life at the same time as improving economic efficiency; reduce carbon and noxious emissions at the same time as contributing to a fairer distribution of costs and benefits; be financially viable for governments and businesses; and enable debates about transport policy also to recognise invalid claims, disingenuous arguments, false premises and excuses for delay.

One of the major changes which has taken place in recent years has been the acceptance in principle – though not yet so often in practice – that sustainability is not just important, but urgent. Thinking in terms of emergency requires a shift in approaches to the development and implementation of policy, the speed at which behavioural change has to be enabled, and the seriousness of resource allocation. At just about the time that Climate Emergency became a notable phrase in policy discourse, Covid-19 gave the world a sharp and unpleasant education in what a world-wide crisis can look like, upsetting all preconceptions about the scale of effort, and the nature of fundamental change in axioms of political acceptability and stability of trends.

And the internationalisation of scientific life. The four parts of the book comprise chapters by 61 authors based in 14 countries, mostly academics and researchers (ranging from up-and-coming scholars to some of the most experienced Professors in the field), and including planners and policy advisors. Many have an experience which includes working outside professional circles, with resident groups and campaigners. I’ve had the pleasure of working as colleagues with half a dozen of the authors, and encountered many others, over the years, at the sort of events and working groups that used to be the mode for advancing science and practice. However, all authors have been forced to the conclusion that it will necessarily not be based on the same amount of long-distance travel in the future that it has in the past. It is sad to think that there will probably never be an event at which all the authors will be able to meet each other. But the meeting of minds through such books will then become even more important. This is a conversation of great importance, for which an active and informed readership is a critical condition.

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