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Public Transport & Sustainable mobility transition for everyone

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The Story of Einfach Einsteigen and the ÖffiCON*

Keynote: Mark Wege, Einfach Einsteigen

Good evening!

Welcome to our first international digital Public Transport Conference ÖffiCON. Make yourself comfortable, wherever you are, take a seat or a walk, and be ready to be with us during this evening and the following days.

My name is Mark Wege, I am founder and one of the speakers of Einfach Einsteigen, the organisation behind this event. In this introduction, I would like to tell you our story, how it is intertwined with the idea the ÖffiCON, the Free Hanseatic city of Bremen we live in and our ideas on how to make a successful sustainable mobility transition that works for everyone.

Our ideas and approaches are not totally new. And they definitely need adaptation to the given local circumstances. But we believe that our story can inspire and hopefully, together with all the input from all over the world, lead to fruitful discussions and speed up the project “sustainable mobility transition”.

This conference originally was meant to take place in the Free Hanseatic city of Bremen. This is where we, the organizers, live. For those who are not from Germany: Bremen has about half a million inhabitants and is not only a town, but at the same time one of the 16 federal states in Germany. We are known for the still popular and formerly very successful football team Werder Bremen. Some people know us for Becks, our local beer brand which people either like or hate. Children and grown up folks who have stayed young of course know us for the infamous Bremen Town Musicians. In recent years we also got known for the comedian Jan Böhmermann, who was born here. A few years ago he received

international attention for his poetry. The Turkish president Erdogan and Angela Merkel apparently really loved it, so that he now has an international states affair named after him.

Now let's talk about what is really important: Bremen is also known to be the bicycle capital of Germany. On the international Copenhagenize index we are on rank 11. The bicycle modal share is at about 25 %, which means that 25 % of all trips in the city are made by bike. This is great, many people love it. Still, many people see the need for heavy improvement. Luckily, the city's government has a plan and high ambitions to improve the bicycle infrastructure even more. No matter the effort, we will never beat the world bicycle capitals Copenhagen and Amsterdam. But this does not matter much. Modesty is a quality which belongs to the city like the Bremen Town Musicians of Bremen.

So Bremen has a good bicycle network and since 2019, the local government committed to a sustainable mobility transition. In Germany we call this „Verkehrswende“. Since the peaceful revolution of 1989 which ended in the reunification of Germany, in English the “Turnaround”, we love to call big transitions in society „Wende“. We have an ongoing Energiewende, many of us are waiting for the Agrarwende and a lot of people like to talk about the Verkehrswende, the sustainable mobility transition.

When we're not in a pandemic, German cities are still flooded by cars. Then there is this, you might have heard about it, climate crisis. To the misfortune of the German car industry and some males who believe petrol is running through their veins, traffic emissions are contributing significantly to that climate crisis. They also pollute the air and harm our health. As you are here at the ÖffiCON, I don't think I have to tell you more and I assume you agree with me, that the number of cars has to drop soon and fast. There is no way to go to just make them all running on batteries. Apart from polluting the cities, I guess most of us agree, they are a waste of precious space. Most of the time cars are not used, stand around limiting space for the people and if they roll or not, they are a threat to human beings.

In Bremen, apart from being the bicycle capital and having lots of bikes, we unfortunately have lots of cars, too, and they are even getting more and bigger in size. There are 140.000 people commuting in and out of the city every day. Most of them by car. We have this problem although we have a really great public transport system! How is this possible? Because our great public transport network in reality mostly only works for those who more or less live around the city center. The further you move away from that center and the further you get out of town, the public transport network more or less fades out and is not convenient to use.

This needs to change, to make a sustainable mobility transition happen. Unfortunately, the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen is not so free. In Bremen when it comes to expenses. While the region of Bremen is among those with the highest rates of millionaires in Germany, the city itself is rather poor. This is due to an unjust tax system where those who work in the city, pay their taxes in the small towns surrounding Bremen in Lower-Saxony, the surrounding federal state. There is not much to invest and although the financial future of the town started to look a little brighter before the pandemic kicked in, we got used to a tough financial regime. The sustainable mobility transition is mostly limited to extra funding coming from the federal government and the European Union.

This is basically the founding momentum of Einfach Einsteigen.

We began our journey a little more than three years ago. Our focus is a new financing model for the local public transport network. It is based on a local transport tax equally paid by people and companies. It allows to abandon all tickets and allows to invest into the network and offering. You can leave the house and just enter. That is where the name of our organisation Einfach Einsteigen reflects the idea: “Einfach Einsteigen” translates to something like “just enter”, “simply enter” or “just hop on”. We believe, that public transport as part of a sustainable mobility transition, needs to be simple. Something you don’t need to think about. It is just there, it works, no long waiting times, it is safe, it is clean, there are no barriers. You leave the house, the workplace, wherever you are, and you embrace your journey. In the best case scenario there is not even an app or a time table you need to think about. But in case you need it, it is there and it works. But you do not need to care about mobile ticketing. There is more to learn and know about our model. My colleague and co-speaker Wolfgang Geissler will present the details in a separate talk on Friday.

Since we started developing our concept, we have dedicated a huge amount of our time into talking. Talking with the public, to the media, but even more we spend our time with discussions with politicians, administration, people in transport authorities and companies, people in initiatives and civil society and all kinds of experts. Through these conversations we learned a lot. Although we are not scientists, planners or researchers by education, we believe we now are some kind of experts. This process is not over, in fact it is a continuous learning process. I believe one of the most important things we learned is not: How to develop a model for financing public transport or the components of a successful sustainable mobility transition. We learned what is standing in the way of making this happen. And believe me, it is not the “evil car industry” alone. The answer is more complex. The sustainable mobility transition is not a technical challenge. It is rather a social and cultural challenge. And this means it is the people. But it is also us. By us, I mean all the people in initiatives, NGOs, administration, research, public transport companies and politics who

want a sustainable mobility transition to happen. By highlighting that I don't want to play a blame game and hide the fact that it is also about power and that on national level we are heavily lacking leadership on this matter.

I want to give you a few examples why I believe my point is relevant.

Example number one:

In January 2018, the German Federal Government wrote a letter to the European commission in which it proposed to introduce Free Public Transport in five German cities Bonn, Essen, Herrenberg, Reutlingen and Mannheim as a test. The motivation of the German government was to prevent the EU Commission from taking action against the country who had failed to take appropriate action against air pollution in cities. I have to add, the proposal was not very substantial. Apparently, no one had even talked to the city governments that were on that list. A positive effect about that letter was, it stirred up a debate about fare-free public transport. It is still ongoing and part of why some of you are here. But guess what happened? The named cities rejected the extra funding. All sorts of experts seemingly agreed that a zero tariff network is bad, does not serve the environment and that our public transport network could not serve that amount of users. I don't blame those experts for saying things which are mostly true. What I blame them for: Most of them were seemingly unable to see the window of opportunity and point out a bigger picture. We agree that just making public transporting free for everyone to use does not automatically lead to people giving up their cars - To make this happen, first of all you need a sufficiently large and dense public transport network which reaches everyone, offers good connections and has sufficient capacities. This is not only a fact, but matters more than the price tag on public transport. So if you want to have fewer cars, reduce air pollution and CO2 emissions, free public transport is not enough – you must do more: If you want to prevent some of the cyclists and pedestrians to favor public transport over their so far even more environmental way of transport, then you must improve their networks at the same time. On top of that: If you already own a car, old habits are difficult to change. So, you need to give them a motivation to not use the car or even abandon it by reducing parking lots and making motorists pay an adequate price on the space they are taking away.

We learned a lot from experts over the time. But what we did not learn from them the most important aspect that accompanies every transformation process: Understanding that we need an overall strategy on how to win the hearts and minds of the people to make a sustainable mobility transition in a country where many people have a fetish on cars. Sustainable

transformation, that is accepted and wanted by the people is not so much about technical changes but about a change of mindset; a change of social and cultural patterns of thinking and acting on all levels and areas of society. It comes down to the question how we, as a society, – or as humanity as such – wish to live together.

When it comes to tickets and pricing, experts often come up with fancy ticketing systems and ticket subsidies for the poor. They lack the understanding, how humiliating it is, to apply for reduced fare. This is not only about the poor, it is about simplicity of everyone as I have elaborated before. The idea of Einfach Einsteigen is to bring a new spirit into the domain of public transport. We believe that a fare-free public transport system financed by a public transport tax combined with a clear vision of a transition process and, importantly, a combination of the methods can successfully drive a sustainable mobility transition in Bremen. Not only in Bremen, but adapted to local conditions, this can also work elsewhere. And, of course, we need this simplicity for everyone who chooses to ride the bike and more so, where it already should be native: If you walk.

Example number two:

In Bremen, but also outside of Bremen we often talk to people who work in administration planning and decision making processes. They are mostly highly dedicated people, take their job seriously and yes, we believe most of them want to make a sustainable mobility transition happen. But there is a problem: In the past shows not all people in charge of administration were in favour of a sustainable mobility transition. Past experience also shows that it takes a real long time to make projects like a new tramway line or a bicycle bridge happen. People fear the change, don't understand it, don't see the advantages for themselves or don't want to support proposals from political competition . So they resist and this is what makes administrations and politicians hesitate. They work under the assumption that those projects take their time. But times have changed. The omissions of the past have lead to the situation we are facing now. It requires fast actions and changes not only in the area of transport. If there is one thing the pandemic is teaching us, it is that it's a bad idea to sit things out. Hesitating, just doing little in order to show everything is under control, has consequences. Political and administrative procrastination should not be further cultivated. The climate crisis clearly demands that we need to speed things up. How? On the matter of a sustainable mobility transition it is clear: We need to paint the big picture of what will be going and what needs to happen in the 5, 10 or 15 years.

Together with the local chapter of Friends of the Earth Germany, the BUND, last month, we presented our vision how a double-sized tram network could shape the mobility in our town. This should be done until the midst thirties, not in 100 years. If we develop such visions, we

need to work on how to actively communicate them and convince citizens rationally, but more so emotionally. The idea of cars being the core of transport – providing freedom to the individual and core family – stuck deeply in the minds of people. We need to understand, that there are not 80 million transport experts in our country, even so many citizens in the comment section of Facebook sometimes appear to act as such. We, as sustainable mobility and public transport communities really need to work on our skills of communicating what needs to be the future and how this is cool, better and not threatening to the people's existence. We won't win everyone over, but there are many hearts and minds to win. Politicians from all parties need to open their eyes to realise this opportunity.

After 3 years of talking with people from different political parties it is our observation that at least the political parties who form the government in Bremen are not as far apart. It should be possible to come to a conclusion that leads to an overall vision on how the city's sustainable mobility transition in the next decades should look like. The main obstacles we observe are of ritualistic nature and have a lot to do with conflicts which should belong to the past. There is no time to waste.

Within this appeal there is some good news: We believe, we are on the brink of success. Last week, the leading Social Democratic Party SPD presented their plan to introduce ticketless and fare free public transport within two years. They have not been too forthcoming about public transport in the past. This is a window of opportunity. Of course their plan is not perfect. It needs to be spiced up with a clear commitment of the expanding of the network. Combined with better pedestrian paths, the further expansion and improvement of the city's bike network and parking management in the whole city, we can make it work and make Bremen a really sustainable mobility town. A town, where moving around by foot, bike or public transport is just simple and for everyone.

With the third example I like to move over to a conclusion and how this is related to the idea of the ÖffiCON. We have not only met with experts, but also with other initiatives. Those we encountered are often driven by dedicated people who want to make a difference and have good intentions. But good intentions do not always lead to good results when they lack expertise or have a limited perspective. There are many initiatives in Germany who demand Free Public Transport for different reasons: Many because they believe it can help to fight the climate crisis and reduce car traffic in the cities. Others also embrace a social perspective or a combination of those motivations. But the answers to solve those problems are more complex. I do not want to downplay the contributions of dedicated initiatives. Despite being well founded there is a tendency to remain stuck in what in the internet age is called a bubble. Therefore, concepts tend to be made just for one's own kind. But as I pointed out before, public transport and the sustainable mobility transition must be made for everyone. And by everyone, I mean everyone. No matter of age, wealth, skin color, gender, cultural

background, appearance, mobility, ability, financial background, place of residence or gender. Surely, I missed a perspective on that list, I am sorry for that, I really mean everyone. I consider mobility a basic human right and we have to find ways to better address that.

This is why we initiated the ÖffiCON: We wanted to bring the different bubbles together, overcome limited perspectives, learn from each other and come closer to make public transport better and a sustainable mobility transition happen. The pandemic has made this a little more difficult and not everything has worked out as planned. But it is as it is. So let this pandemic not stop us and let's make the ÖffiCON happen together and see it as a starting point. We hope you enjoy the time with us and each other. Welcome to the ÖffiCON! Thank you everyone for listening.