Workshop 6: The public agenda: What is working and what is missing

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ABSTRACT

Workshop 6 topics covered social inclusion, the informal transport sector, transport in developing countries and sustainability. The strong connections and complimentary goals were noted, where solutions to social exclusion and greenhouse gas reduction can both be realised with good transport and urban planning. There is an opportunity for developing countries to avoid the transport mistakes in many developed countries, such as car dependence. This will involve the development of infrastructure that offers accessible public transport to the majority of people, providing resources to the informal transport system and integrating this with public transport. The workshop considered specific issues such as rural transport, new technology, car tolls to subsidise public transport, safety issues with informal transport and the failure to evaluate the longer-term impacts of many major transport infrastructure developments. Recommendations were made in relation to research and policy and future Thredbo topics.

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1. Introduction

The third year of the Social Inclusion Workshop in the Thredbo conference revealed that considerable progress had been made since Thredbo 11 in The Netherlands in 2009 in relation to the infiltration of the topic of social inclusion into transport discussions, and the increasing recognition of the importance of understanding the critical role of public transport for users. Thredbo 12 expanded on the topic of social inclusion, recognising the important interplay between social, environmental and economic goals in transport. In particular it sought to understand the often complimentary goals of social and environmental sustainability. Particular emphasis was given to the perspective of the informal transport sector in developing countries.

The ability to travel despite not having car access is of considerable importance to society in terms of the wellbeing of citizens and the national economic costs associated with inequality and disadvantage. Private cars are a large source of greenhouse gasses, an issue which needs to be addressed through transformational thinking and actions by those involved in the transport sector. The implications of inclusion and pollution reduction and the opportunities for public transport development that may arise from solutions to these problems, is very significant, yet one which is yet to be fully understood and planned for. While some consideration is being given to these issues by some developed countries, there is still large-scale failure to grasp the magnitude of mobility problems in developing countries where the formal public transport supply is often non-existent and people are commonly reliant on walking or an informal transport sector to meet basic travel needs.

There is still a small window of opportunity to facilitate much better planning and transport solutions within developing countries in order to avoid the significant problems (in terms of congestion, greenhouse gas emissions and other pollution, poor land spatial and urban planning, and inequality and promulgation of disadvantage) which are now occurring in many developed car dependent economies. Workshop 6 considered the present state of social and environmental sustainability, the interdependence of these issues with economic policy, the opportunities which should arise as solutions are put in place, and trajectories for solutions to these issues.

2. Progressing transport and social inclusion

2.1. The role of public transport in promoting social inclusion

Social exclusion has largely been a policy tool used in developed countries to assist understanding in the transport field in relation to those people who have poor mobility and thereby risk reduced human rights and societal opportunities. With the increasing recognition that lack of mobility is a severe handicap for many people in developed countries, it is important to explore the usefulness of extending this concept to those countries where, as Lucas notes, social exclusion is a majority, not a minority problem. In these countries, up to 80 per cent of the population could be

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defined as excluded. Dimitrov reports that evidence from the National Household survey show strong links between social exclusion and a lack of transport in South Africa. However, it is likely that transport related exclusion may be, in part, country and situation specific. For example, Lucas has highlighted the legacy of apartheid as contributing to transport disadvantage in South Africa. Many Black South Africans still live in segregated areas on the fringe of urban areas where the bus and train routes still largely service a non-Black market. The universality versus specificity of transport problems, and therefore solutions, is an area which needs research.

The papers by Lucas, Dimitrov, and Stanley and Lucas point out that matching between the large demand and the type of supply of transport, needs improvement in South Africa as well as other developing countries. In South Africa there is considerable investment in large infrastructure projects, particularly road construction, but also rail and trolleybus, however these are of main benefit to those who have a higher income, and already may have the choice of car ownership. Indeed, the workshop highlighted that road developments and public transport can be both part of the problem and part of the solution. For example, Bus Rapid Transit may be targeted to the needs of many people but it may also exclude through price, it uses road space which could be available for walking and cycling and may be located away from where socially excluded people live and not have suitable feeder systems. It may also not be suitable for those with a disability, comprising 4.5 per cent of people in South Africa.

The workshop noted that considerably greater importance should be given to active transport in urban areas. However, this should not be promoted as the solution for people who need to walk long distances because they have no other mobility choices, a situation commonly found in relation to women and children in particular, in South Africa. Indeed, as Stanley and Lucas note, women are often the least likely to benefit from major transport infrastructure investments in many parts of the world.

The inclusive role of the ability to be mobile is that it enables connections to be made − between people and jobs, between people and sources of support and leisure activities, and between people and social networks. The workshop was also presented with the idea by Stanley and colleagues that the provision of transport can also lead to secondary benefits in relation to the facilitation of networks and sense of community. People at risk of social exclusion have been found to have lower levels of social capital and lower levels of sense of community than people not at risk of exclusion (Stanley, Hensher, Stanley, & Vella-Brodrick, 2011). Being able to build personal social capital and feelings of connection with the community, especially building networks outside a person's immediate family and friends is likely to reduce exclusion and increase wellbeing and opportunities. One unit increase in sense of community was valued at $A60 a day to a person living in Victoria, Australia. The ability to be mobile is a key ingredient to achieving these outcomes.

3. The informal transport sector

3.1. Characteristics and organisation of the sector

The workshop explored the role of informal transport in the public transport mix in developing and developed countries. At present the major differing characteristics are the size of the sector, the informal sector being a much more significant player in developing countries. The informal sector has always been dominant in under-developed countries, but as the countries change to a more centralised economy and with the growth in urbanization, there has been a significant failure to provide formal transport

options apart from the growth of roads to meet the expanding demand for private car ownership growing at more than 10 per cent each year in some developing cities (Gakenheimer & Dimitriou, 2011). The informal sector is very different from the formal sector, it having evolved commonly to be characterised by the presence of multiple operators, unregulated or unsuccessfully regulated, the use of smaller buses and larger cars. However, unfortunately the informal sector is uncoordinated, irregular, rarely has comprehensive coverage, the journey may be long and cumbersome, is often unsafe and can be expensive − but people have little choice. Finn and colleagues also believe the 'competitive tension' to be a defining feature of the informal system. Stanley and Lucas point out that the 'soft' side of the informal transport system − walking, cycling and using animal power are excluded from transport planning and find they have to compete for road space with accompanying safety concerns.

Balassiano and colleagues documented the turbulent history of the evolving informal transport sector in Rio de Janeiro. The present fleet stands at about 15,000 vehicles. Attempts to regulate the sector have largely failed. These vehicles work the busiest routes competing with buses but not having to halt at every stop to pick up new passengers as does the formal bus system, and as a consequence have greater speed. The downside, Balassiano notes, is that these informal vehicles are poorly maintained thus heavily contributing to air and noise pollution, increased traffic congestion and conflict, and engagement in dangerous driving. Other concerns relate to the frequently poor profit margins of renters of vehicles as distinct from the owners, thus the motivation to engage in side deliveries − bottled water and gas and at times involvement in drug trading.

The workshop learned that positive changes are taking place to improve the service of the informal sector. Organisation of aspects of the informal transport system is presently beginning in many developing countries. The nature of this intervention varies, some localities putting regulations in place, some providing new vehicles for fixed routes, some linking the informal sector as feeder routes to the formal public transport system. The choices appear to be between the extremes of initiative and enterprise, and regulation and control − understanding where are the appropriate boundaries are. A hybrid system would seem to offer the most, where markets can emerge with creative solutions. While there is a need to improve safety, business capacity, driver training, and road access, there is a need to also maintain local enterprises, draw on local knowledge (what transport is needed, how much, where) and build on community solutions and strengths. It is hard to find the right balance, but the workshop learned of some examples.

Finn and colleagues gave a valuable summary of the informal sector and the need for the informal operators and those with related businesses (such as mechanics) to maintain the business stake due to their vulnerability when the government seeks to intervene and impose change. Examples included the organisation of the informal sector in Ghana which has resulted in small scale ownership combined with a common organisation and operational model, resulting in a consistent and coherent service being provided in urban locations in Ghana. Such an approach has also avoided the turf wars often characteristic of other informal operations. This positive outcome was achieved through local governance systems based on a system of 'Unions' with National, Branch and Local officials with respective roles and who self regulate and issue a system of Permits for routes. This is combined with compulsory vehicle inspections.

Wright and Nelson gave the workshop an example of possible connections between a formal passenger system (train travel) and a new use of a feeder system (multi-passenger taxis). This British scheme is designed to address the problem of a single occupancy