qualitypublictransport

Briefing Number 2
January 2012

What does a good public transport system do?

A good public transport system needs to meet three sets of objectives effectively:

- It contributes to **economic development** by enabling markets to function and by getting people to work.
- It supports **social justice** by providing affordable access to jobs, services and amenities.
- It makes cities more **sustainable** by polluting less than private motorised transport.

This means that running a quality *system* involves trade-offs, because not every public transport *service* can achieve all those goals equally at the same time.

Trade-offs between quality objectives

There are always trade-offs between the benefits and costs to different people, now and in the future.

For example, providing a good service to enable commuters to switch from cars brings major benefits in terms of reduced congestion and pollution -- a sustainability objective -- but that investment might not be on routes that bring immediate benefits to the most disadvantaged people -- a social justice objective.

Public transport contributes to social justice in many ways, and particularly by providing access to particular groups of disadvantaged people, including lower income people, the elderly and young, and people with disabilities. It does not meet their needs automatically: services have to be planned and designed with the different needs of different groups explicitly in mind.

But it is also important that public transport is used by better-off sections of the community as well. It needs to appeal to people who have access to cars and who would otherwise use their cars, because otherwise it will not contribute so much to reducing congestion and pollution.

qualitypublictransport

is a partnership between Public World and the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), with the support of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Its purpose is to support transport unions in building alliances with passengers and other civil society organisations to promote good services and sustainable transport systems.

That means services that enable everyone to travel safely, comfortably and reliably, and employ enough securely employed, properly trained and fairly rewarded transport workers.

public world
democracy at work

itf

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

Also, the financial viability of quality public transport systems requires overheads to be spread over as many fare-paying passengers as possible. And since many service require public subsidy, it is important to maintain political support for keeping fares at levels that less well off people can afford, while also providing sufficient revenue.

There can even be trade-offs between passengers on the same service at the same time. For example, if a bus stops a lot it enables more people to use it for short journeys while slowing down the journey time for people using it from one end of the route to the other.

Planning for quality: an Australian example

The objectives of a good urban public transport system and the need to manage well the trade-offs between them are articualted well in a Best Practices Guidebook, called Evaluating Public Transit Benefits and Costs, published in 2011 by the Victoria Transport Policy Institute in Australia.

Its author Todd Litman categorises the benefits of urban public transport improvements as:

- *User benefits* resulting from improved convenience, speed, comfort or financial savings to travelers who would use transit even without those improvements.
- *Mobility benefits* resulting from the additional mobility provided by a transportation service, particularly to people who are physically, economically or socially disadvantaged.
- *Efficiency benefits* resulting from reducing costs of traffic congestion, accidents, pollution emissions, and so on.

The trade-offs between different benefits can affect a range of decisions, including modal choice, as Litman explains:

"High quality transit is much more than simply a vehicle; it is an integrated system that includes compact, high quality stops and stations surrounded by compact and mixed-use development, good walking and cycling conditions, good taxi services, reduced parking supply, and more social acceptance of carfree living. ... All of these features should be considered when planning for high quality public transit ...This does not mean that every transit improvement has all of these impacts."

Developing a good public transport system within budgetary constraints also involves trade-offs between the costs and benefits of different modes. Litman points out: "Debates between bus and rail transit generally boil down to a tradeoff between lower initial costs but smaller long- term benefits of bus, versus higher initial costs but larger potential long-term benefits of rail."

Relationship between urban public transport and private transport

A good public transport system also takes into account its relationship with private transport, including not only cars but also cycling and walking. However, it is important not to oversimplify the linkages between public and private car transport, because expanding public transport to link in the wrong ways with car uset can lead to higher GHG emissions, as a recent study has shown.

"High quality transit is much more than simply a vehicle; it is an integrated system."

In Transport for Suburbia: Boyond the Automobile Age (Earthscan 2009) Paul Mees shows that that public transport investments are often promoted as part of plans to link with 'park-and-ride' facilities for cars, which can actually lead overall to increased car use and emissions. He argues, therefore, that to present a real alternative to driving, high quality public transport networks must reach right into residential neighbourhoods, including suburbs.

Urban public transport and sustainability

Rapid expansion of urban public transport is essential to make cities sustainable.

A sustainable transport system have been defined in the European Union as one that:

- Provides for basic access and development needs
- Supports safety and human and ecosystem health
- Promotes equity within and between successive generations
- Is affordable, fair and efficient
- Offers choice of transport mode
- Supports a competitive economy and balanced regional development
- Limits emissions and waste within the planet's ability to absorb them
- Uses resources at rates which permit renewal or substitution
- Minimises impacts on the use of land and the generation of noise

(Cited in 'Urban Transport and Mobility', Anthony May and Greg Marsden, International Transport Forum, Paris, 2010.)

A survey of the international literature about how to reconcile urban development with reducing greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) in India -- where at present both private motor transport use and GHG emissions are rapidly increasing -- concluded that four key areas of action are required:

- Expansion and improvement of quality public transport.
- Better policy making to rigorously and transparently evaluate the costs and benefits of alternative approaches.
- Reforms to land use regulation to favour both public transport investments and increased urban density.
- Using market instruments such as road pricing, fuel taxes and congestion and parking charges to "redistribute the financial resources and increase the efficiency of public transport with minimised market distortions".

(Drawn from 'Decoupling urban transport from GHG emissions in Indian cities -- a critical review and perspectives', Jun Li, in *Energy Policy*, Vol. 39, No. 6, 2011).

Similar lessons emerge from another study: 'Urban transport trends and policies in China and India: Impacts of Rapid Economic Growth', in *Transport Reviews,* Vol. 27, No 4, 379-410, 2007.

Urban public transport and land use policy

A fundamental issue in good public transport planning is that the goal must be to improve *access* rather than *mobility.* Therefore it is essential to integrate urban

transport investment decisions into overall urban planning, and especially into land use policy and practice, as Paul Mees points out:

"Urban planners can make the task of adapting urban transport to cities easier, by discouraging scattered fringe development, clustering higher-density housing and major travel destinations in centres along major trunk transit corridors, and designing neighbourhoods in ways that foster walking, cycling and efficient bus operation."

The relationship between land use policy and transport planning has also been emphasised in a recent British study, which pointed out:

"A considerable body of professional and academic research analyses the interaction between land use planning and transport. In broad overview, the evidence leads to one compelling conclusion: where sustainability of transport is an integral consideration in the land use planning process, non-car modes of travel become dominant, but where development proceeds without due regard to transport considerations then car dependence is the outcome." (*Thriving Cities: Integrated land use and transport planning,* PTEG, Leeds, 2011.)

Fair fares for quality transport

All of the objectives that must be considered in the design of a good public transport system show that public transport must be understood as a public service, albeit one that also beings private benefits to individual citizens. (Many public services do that -- think of education and health care services, for examples.)

Therefore, it is not only reasonable but right that the way in which the system is financed shares the burden between public spending and fare revenue, and between different services, in ways that balance fairness to passengers on particular services with the public policy goals of the system as a whole.

Services must be affordable to low income people. That can mean that better-off people benefit from a subsidy they could afford to do without. But that is preferable to pricing poor people out of the system, and sustainable public transport needs to serve the whole community. Clearly it is not feasible to apply means testing to bus fares, and so it is better to use the general taxation system to ensure better-off people make a fair contribution.

In this way, the price mechanism can be used to make public transport an attractive option relative to private car use. That in turn means that the costs to the whole of society, today and in the future, of private car use -- what the economists call 'externalities' -- are internalised though mechanisms such as congestion and parking charges and fuel taxes.

Good employment and management

Good transport systems require services provided by workforces that are securely employed, properly trained and fairly rewarded, because poor employment standards undermine service quality.

Just as important are good management systems -- systems that enable the people who plan, design and operate public transport to do a good job and to improve continuously.

Public World

34b York Way

London N1 9AB

Public World is a social enterprise working internationally to promote equitable and sustainable economic and social development through workplace and civic participation.

www.publicworld.org

ITF

49-60 Borough Road

London, SE1 1DR

The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) is a global union federation linking 690 unions representing over 4.5 million transport workers in 153 countries.

www.itfglobal.org