

A model BRT?

Transmilenio in Bogotá

Transmilenio is a bus rapid transit (BRT) system that was inaugurated in Colombia's capital city, Bogotá, in December 2000. It is the most used BRT system in the world, with 1.6 million passengers a day, and the most extensive, with 88km of exclusive road plus an integrated feeder system. It is currently in its third phase of expansion.

The system is overseen by a public company, Transmilenio, but operated by private companies who are contracted for particular routes. The system receives no operating subsidy from the city, although it was developed with public finance, including a series of six World Bank loans totalling US\$450.4 million.

At the fourth International Mass Transport Fair, Transmilenio was described as the "world reference point for bus rapid transit systems". Colombia has hosted delegations from more than 20 countries looking to learn from its experience of implementing BRT. However, there are widespread complaints about overcrowding on the buses, and high levels of theft, and the poorest of the city cannot afford the fares. In addition there is no system in place for accountability to users.

Given the chaotic state of urban public transport in Bogotá before the introduction of Transmilenio – with thousands of old, polluting vehicles competing for passengers in what was known as the *guerra del centavo*, the 'penny war' – it is clear that the centrally planned provision of bus rapid transit represents an improvement. The World Bank celebrates the cuts in travel time, accidents and pollution resulting from the reforms and investment it has supported. Bogotá's local government describes Transmilenio as the pride of the capital, part of efforts to transform Bogotá into a city of the future.

The *guerra del centavo* was organised in a way that incentivised unsafe driving in the fierce competition for passengers. Spending 16 to 18 hours a day at the wheel in order to take home a living wage left many drivers suffering from back and kidney problems and otherwise poor health. So the move to BRT was good for those that were able to work in the new system.

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However, the much higher rate of labour productivity that BRT enables means that only one in seven of the bus drivers in the old system were able to find work in the new one, and many of those who could not do so failed because the conditions in the old system left them unable to pass the medical for the new one. One of the positive achievements of Transmilenio has been the creation of formal jobs in a sector previously characterised by precarious and informal employment relationships, but in the words of Francisco Mora of the Colombian Transport Workers Union: “We call the (old) system the penny war. So we served in the war and we got into debt for the war, but now that the war is ending we are out in the cold.”

This situation is not surprising given the lack of any consultation with workers and their representatives in the planning and implementation of Transmilenio and the impunity with which breaches of core labour standards are treated there. As the International Centre for Trade Union Rights (ICTUR) has put it: “The situation of trade unionists in Colombia is, in short, dire. Over recent years hundreds of trade union activists have been murdered for the simple fact of their trade union membership and activities.”

There are also question marks against some of the broader social and economic benefits claimed for the reforms. In a press statement on 31 March 2010, the World Bank lauds Transmilenio as “a modern and financially self-sustaining bus rapid transit system”, and the second stated objective of the World Bank Colombia Integrated Mass Transit System project is “providing reliable transport accessibility for the poor”.

However, the 1,600 pesos (approx. 80 US cents) Transmilenio fare (which excludes the price of the feeder buses) currently puts the service beyond the reach of many of the city’s poorest and most vulnerable citizens. Following the deaths in April 2010 of two 13-year-old school boys under the wheels of a Transmilenio bus they tried to board without paying, there were renewed calls for a differentiated fare that makes the service affordable to all. The National Association of Secondary School Students, the National Association of University Students and the Organisation of Colombian Pensioners are among the voices calling for a two-tier fare system.

Rigidities built into the contract arrangements will make that a difficult goal to accomplish, however; with the public company Transmilenio in receipt of only 4% of the income from the system -- the other 96% goes to the private operators of the buses. Transmilenio is required to compensate the companies if it chooses to set the passenger fare below the “technical fare” established in their contract. Transmilenio’s financial sustainability is predicated in practice, therefore, on the service being more expensive than the city’s poorest inhabitants can afford.

Transmilenio is used as a model throughout Latin America and the rest of the world, partly because of the public-private partnership model. The World Bank has supported -- and indeed recommended -- this because of its distrust of state-owned enterprises in the operation as opposed to the financing and regulation of public services.

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