

Public transport in Africa



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Public transport: a key challenge for cities in sub-Saharan Africa



Left: Getting potential users to the BRT artery is key. Informal transport by minibus can play an important role here.

Right: Example of poor use of road space: hawkers, pedestrians, and moving or parked vehicles all compete for a place on the road and pavement.

The first African Public Transport Congress was organised by UATP in Dakar in October. It clearly demonstrated the need to speed up and organise the development of collective forms of transport on the African continent. The economic competitiveness and sustainability of African cities are at stake. As the person who had the honour of serving as Congress rapporteur, here are my conclusions.

When it comes to transport, we tend to talk about Africa only to mention informal transport services and the problems they engender: poorly maintained vehicles, pollution, lack of road safety, unfair competition with regulated transport services, lack of professionalism, etc. These problems are clearly still relevant in many cities, yet to look at public transport solely from this angle would be to disregard the progress made in urban areas such as Lagos, Dakar, Abidjan and Johannesburg, the initiatives under way in Dar Es Salaam, Nairobi and Douala, and the growing awareness on the part of virtually all public authorities.

It is true to say that the urban mobility context in African cities poses problems and challenges that can only be resolved by developing public transport. First and foremost, there are the demographic pressures: the African population has now exceeded the one billion mark, and by 2020 over 60% of inhabitants will be urban-dwellers. Urbanisation is accompanied by urban sprawl, which in turn creates greater mobility needs and longer journey distances. This raises the issue of transport organisation. Unfortunately, with one or two exceptions, the institutional

and regulatory framework governing urban transport is either weak or absent. The great number of actors and levels of intervention (national, regional, local) creates overlapping responsibilities and organisational voids. The fact that several modes and types of operation exist alongside each other (small-scale and informal; professional and regulated) – and do not meet the same regulatory criteria – creates a disorganised mobility market, poor service quality, and unfair, even illegal, competition between operators, often with no public authority intervention.

Dilapidated fleets, crumbling infrastructures and flouting of the highway code all add up to dangerous road conditions: in Africa, 28 deaths per 1,000 inhabitants are road-related, i.e. four times more than in Europe. On top of this, road infrastructure is lacking and the public space is poorly used: hawkers, pedestrians and parked or moving vehicles compete for space on the road and on what pavements there are. The result is traffic congestion, despite the very low levels of car ownership.

Funding problems and the disengagement of public authorities are reflected in a lack of high-capacity modes with which to provide mass transit services, even though potential demand is significant. This mismatch between supply and demand, combined with high travel costs (travel represents 25% of household budgets in Douala and Conakry according to a SITRASS study), excludes a proportion of the population from public transport and prevents them from accessing urban services.

Urban transport professionals and actors in Africa are reacting in the face of these problems. Encouraging initiatives are emerging, which outline the direction to take and the solutions to adopt. At the institutional level, public transport's regulatory framework needs to be strengthened and made clearer in order to remove any doubt about which responsibilities are national and which local. The priority is to create organising authorities like CETUD in Dakar, LAMATA in Lagos and AGETU in Abidjan. These authorities need to be given the necessary human and material resources to organise the sector and place it on a professional footing. As such, their area of competency needs to extend across the entire territory and not be restricted to the city centre: journeys do not end at a district's administrative boundaries. The organising authority sets the public service conditions and any operator com-

ensation, while allowing operators enough entrepreneurial freedom to deploy their commercial strategy. *"We need strong operators, public or private, but we must define the public service conditions so that operators do not run at a loss and citizens are able to travel"*, stressed Ousmane Thiam, President of CETUD and of UATP. Within this framework, small-scale transport services need not necessarily be rejected, but rather organised and integrated into a regulatory framework that maximises the benefits they offer in terms of flexibility of supply and demand-responsiveness.

Developing cities are, by definition, under construction. They therefore have the advantage of being able to integrate transport infrastructures at an early stage of urban development. This is the approach which African cities should adopt: integrating transport policy with urban planning to limit urban sprawl and promote density, thereby reducing the need to travel long distances. Moreover, urban mobility plans are essential to have in place and must take all user categories into account. Given that almost half of urban journeys are on foot, there is an obvious need to provide infrastructures for pedestrians and to guarantee their safety. The sharing out of the public highway between the various categories of user must be clearly spelt out and adhered to.

All transport policies need to address pollution caused by mobility. By viewing road safety as a public health issue, Senegal managed to reduce the number of people killed on its roads between 2000 and 2008 by 300%. Benin introduced a direct self-funding mechanism for lasting and stable road safety: resources are generated through activities managed by the country's National Road Safety Centre. Vehicle technical inspections make tackling pollutant emissions possible and ensure vehicles are mechanically sound. In Côte d'Ivoire, a public-private partnership offers the

advantage of benefiting from private sector profitability for carrying out technical inspections, while at the same time complying with public authority standards. Raising environmental awareness among citizens and professionals is vital to shaping mobility choices and driving habits.

Recent advances have yielded a diverse range of modal solutions, ranging from minibuses to metro systems and BRT to light rail. With a blurring of the boundaries between modes, which mode to choose is becoming less and less obvious. The many criteria for selecting a system also render any analysis complex. Lagos opted for BRT, whose advantage is that it can be rolled out in a short space of time (22km in just 15 months); however, the city is also considering building a light rail line. Both cases require a high-capacity artery – the only possible solution for carrying a large number of passengers daily: 50,000 passengers a day in Johannesburg; up to 220,000 in Lagos! To reach such figures, potential users need to be able to reach the BRT or metro line easily, hence the need for optimum feeder services. It is here that the small-scale sector can play a key role. The interface between modes is also important at interchange hubs by ensuring easy and seamless modal transfers. In short, the integrated system is an optimal, hierarchically structured combination of the various modes. Fares within this system influence user choice and should be devised in a way that ensures access for the most disadvantaged populations.

Like anywhere else in the world, funding is a crucial issue for the development of public transport. Yet it remains a more acute issue in Africa because of the continent's many infrastructure priorities. Although urban transport is distinctly local in flavour, it requires government support and cannot draw all its funding sources from the urban framework. Access to international funding is also a possibility, but the

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Left: Alongside the lack of public transport offer, the expense of travel (25% of household budgets in Conakry) excludes a whole sector of the population from using public transport services in Africa.

Right: SOTRA, Cote d'Ivoire has been successful at subsidiarisation, particularly for its training activities.

stringent conditions often imposed by donors prevent African countries from accessing it. Nevertheless, within the framework of bilateral funding arrangements some creditors are less exacting – China, for example, whose involvement in Africa is growing in importance and visibility. It should also be stressed that the African Development Bank is currently devising an urban transport strategy based on: developing mass transit systems; developing public-private partnerships; and pollution control in urban areas. Private sector involvement can provide innovative funding solutions – leasing, revolving credit – especially for rolling stock acquisitions. Lastly, the subsidiarisation of certain activities is a way of cutting costs and transferring risk. SOTRA in Abidjan has been suc-

cessful in this activity, particularly for its training sector.

Public transport is a service activity in which the human factor plays a fundamental role. Capacity building is thus essential. This starts with improving knowledge about the problems and the current state of the art in terms of mobility. Qualitative and quantitative surveys, counts, opinion polls, etc. enable a better understanding of expectations, and thus a better definition of service offer. Service offer is directly influenced by operating and maintenance staff – being the ones who produce service quality – and they are therefore the priority target in terms of training. This is all part of placing the sector on a professional footing. Similarly, the respective responsibilities of staff

providing training for operators and authorities gives them influence and clout in terms of decision-making. For this reason it is vital to ensure they have the necessary expertise and skills for such a level of responsibility.

The Congress sessions were rich in ideas, and the debates very lively. This article summarises the aspects I considered as the greatest significance in terms of urban transport. If there is a message to take home, it is the strong awareness among all stakeholders and their determination to be involved in developing public transport in Africa. Sitting in the front row was His Excellency Abdoulaye Wade, President of the Republic of Senegal, who sees transport as a key challenge for Africa's economy: *"Infrastructures create economic activity, not the reverse"*. His words demonstrate the political will that should form the basis of any initiative in the transport sector.

Don't miss the Africa Workshop

The emerging market of the public transport sector in Africa
16.00 – 17.00 on Tuesday 12 April 2011



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