

Economic Fall-Out of Failing Urban Transport: An Institutional Analysis

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Abstract

A good public transport system is essential to the creation and sustainability of economically, socially and environmentally successful cities. Good public transport systems share one important characteristic--widespread acceptance of the socially diverse populations that comprise contemporary cities. Acceptance requires systems to be as safe, affordable, speedy, convenient and reliable as possible for all users. The success of global cities such as New York, London, Paris, Rome, Moscow and Tokyo rests in no small measure on the fact that they have public transport systems that tend to meet these criteria with varying degrees of success. While none gets a perfect score, it is still the case that all of them, along with many other similar systems in the cities of the Global North,¹ get sufficiently high marks that they contribute immeasurably to the well-being and prosperity of these cities.

The same generalization cannot be made for the cities of the Global South. Most of the largest cities in middle- and low-income countries do not come close to meeting the above criteria. Instead, and especially in the poorest cities, public transport, to the extent that it exists at all, is largely an improvised system. Urban transport in these cities tends to be bifurcated and segregated by social class (Vasconcellos, 2001). The most affluent residents are often chauffeured or drive their own private vehicles on typically very poor road infrastructure in highly congested central business districts. The poor on the other hand have little access to mobility; walking is their characteristic travel mode. They are often forced to share the same roadways where the more affluent ride. This lack of pedestrian accommodation contributes to both slower travel times for all parties and high rates of pedestrian fatalities. When the poor do use motorized transport it is typically through para-transit in the guise of informal operators in the form of overcrowded and unsafe mini-vans or aging taxis. The operators of such vehicles often charge prices that are comparatively high in relation to local incomes. Although travel times are somewhat better at the edges of the urban center, closer to the center these conditions lead to chronic gridlock and travel speeds that are only slightly better than walking. The transport systems that serve the affluent are not public and the ones used by the poor are at best poor systems.

Keywords: urban transport, institutional analysis, Global South, Global North

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For further reading: http://www.amazon.com/Urban-Transport-Developing-World-Persepctives/dp/1847202055/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1302205928&sr=8-1

¹ “Global North” is a short hand expression for the wealthier and more economically developed nations of the world that tend to be located in the northern hemisphere. “Global South” refers to the less developed low and middle income countries (LIMC) of the world that tend to be located in the southern hemisphere.