

Policy Networks for Sustainable Transport and Land-use in Nairobi: Opportunities for Change

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Abstract

Nairobi strikingly illustrates why Africa's growing cities must embrace and adapt innovations in transport and land-use. Transportation policy focused on road building combined with high rates of urbanization, liberalization of car imports, growth of automobile use and the absence of integrated and holistic land-use and transport planning is causing predictably severe problems including oil dependency, traffic congestion and environmental degradation. Concern exists that these problems may ultimately undermine Nairobi's potential for economic expansion and social improvement and hence the government's aim of making it a regional and global hub. Yet, this is not the whole picture. Kenya is in the midst of monumental political, institutional and policy change linked to a complex democratization process of its state and society. This has culminated in a new constitution and a current state of institutional flux that has the potential to radically shape the future of its rapidly growing cities like Nairobi. While Nairobi's transport and policy arena seem locked into policy inertia and negative dynamics, this paper draws on policy network theory to suggest that given the current critical moment, creative and strategic networking can turn this around and that new frames, mental models and practices around urban transport are possible. The new constitution in Kenya along with the existing hard won freedoms to organize, discuss and lobby for change provide invaluable opportunities for addressing some of the problems with the current closed and privatized nature of transportation planning and the lack of coordination between land use and transportation.

This paper starts with an overview of theory behind urban sustainable development and policy networks and uses this to present a preliminary analysis of the institutions and politics of decision-making in the transportation sector in Kenya and explain why more holistic and innovative approaches are currently not part of transportation planning and practice in Nairobi. At the same time the aim is to examine institutional shifts that present new opportunities and reveal some avenues for changing the problematic status quo. Finally, using lessons from current policy network theory, it suggests concrete strategies for bringing in new approaches in this policy realm.

Keywords: policy networks, sustainable transport, land-use, Nairobi

Klopp, J. Policy Networks for Sustainable Transport and Land-Use in Nairobi: Opportunities for Change. Working Paper.

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