

Towards a Political Economy of Transportation Policy and Practice In Nairobi

Author: Author: Klopp, J.

Abstract

A flurry of road building is transforming a number of African cities including Lagos, Addis Ababa and Nairobi. Financed in part through foreign loans, governments are investing substantial public resources and incurring public debt in these efforts. Yet the impacts for Africa's cities and its residents, while large are unclear; this constitutes a major challenge for researchers, policy-makers and urban activists. Transportation policies, projects and practices have enormous impacts on the land use, air quality, income and time spent on traveling, access to services and overall quality of life in cities and in addition have long term impacts on the way the cities grow well into the future (Fitzgerald 2010, Boarnet 1998). If done well, transportation policies and projects can play an enormous role in improving health, equity and overall quality of "cityness". If done poorly, they can intensify struggles over urban land and space especially for the poor, contributing to poverty and the violence and terror of everyday city life (Edgars 2011).

Despite the importance of transportation projects and policies in terms of shaping urban land, space and quality, in general, analysts, policy-makers, and civil society do not always hold this sector up to the same level of political analysis and monitoring as they do for others like health, education, land or housing. Indeed, critical political, sociological and historical analysis is more the exception¹ than the rule, in part because theorizing around transportation tends to be the domain of economists and engineers (Khayesi and Amekudzi 2010, Vasconcellos 2001). This paper aims to help fill this gap by conducting a preliminary historically informed, political economy and institutional analysis of decisions on transport policy in the Nairobi metropolitan region with a particular focus on the majority of residents in Africa's cities who do not own cars and are reliant on inadequate, often unsafe public transport, walking or riding bicycles to reach work and services (Gannon and Liu 1997: 12, Salon and Gulyani 2010). Building a public transportation system that offers more choice for the majority, in addition to making the cities healthier, more accessible and livable for all, is also critically important to challenging historically entrenched inequalities in access to urban space and opportunities. In brief, the transportation sector might be more fully incorporated into struggles to reconstitute citizenship in Africa's cities and entrench "deep democracy" (Appadurai 2002).

Keywords: political economy, transportation policy, land use, Nairobi

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For further reading please contact CSUD staff member Susan Delamare:
sdelamare@ei.columbia.edu

¹ For some of the exceptions see Flyvberg (2002), Zittoun (2008), Vasconcellos (2001), Vigar (2001) and Weir, Rongerude and Ansell (2008).