

Making transport work for the poor

Peter Njenga, IFRTD Regional Co-ordinator, East and Southern Africa, considers the role of transport in poverty reduction...

Deep and pervasive poverty – both in developing countries and countries in transition – is one of the key development challenges of the 21st Century. Progress towards its reduction is not only a moral imperative, but also a political necessity. Currently, more than 1.3 billion people exist on less than one dollar per day in developing countries (Gannon and Liu, 1997). Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and South Asia are regions with the world's poorest people. There is also evidence that low-income earners in former communist states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union are increasingly sliding into poverty and misery. Widespread poverty carries social, political and moral implications that go beyond the countries in which it is experienced. The true emergence of a prosperous, secure and democratic global community of nations is unlikely to be achieved when half of the world's population lives on less than US\$2 a day.

Recognising the urgency with which the problem of poverty must be confronted, new policy initiatives are being designed to help mobilise and target resources towards poverty reduction efforts. Many developing countries have produced Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) as policy and strategy instruments to unify and consolidate poverty reduction efforts. Similarly, many international development agencies have put poverty reduction objectives at the heart of their bilateral co-operation policies in developing countries. DFID, in particular, is a leading supporter of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, which provide a global framework for more focused development assistance.

Getting transport to work for the poor

Based on the foregoing, it is becoming common practice to evaluate development policies and proposals on the basis of their contribution to poverty reduction. An increasingly key question that is being asked of public investment programmes is the extent to which they will contribute to poverty reduction. The transport sector is no exception to this.

In many developing countries, the transport sector receives a substantial part of the public sector budget, and a very high proportion of international development assistance.

In general, transport planning as a discipline has very little in terms of received theory or a set of policies to eliminate

poverty. Transport has no special claim to be a cost-effective channel for redistribution of welfare to the poor. Nevertheless, there are some general ways in which policy can be focused to give particular assistance to the poorest groups, through concentration on the needs of particular social groups, or indirectly through assistance to those modes on which the poor are known to be particularly dependent. We will focus on four key elements that can underpin efforts to make the transport sector more responsive to the needs of the poor. These are as follows: supporting the use of non-motorised transport; focusing on improving accessibility for poor people; emphasis on employment creation in infrastructure projects and support to informal transport sector operations.

Supporting use of non-motorised transport

Choice of different modes of transport is highly dependent on income. In many poor countries, only a very small proportion of trips is undertaken using motorised vehicles. In sub-Saharan Africa, both rural and urban transport is largely undertaken by foot. In medium-sized towns in India, between 50% and 80% of trips are by non-motorised modes (bicycles, rickshaws and animal carts). Non-motorised transport also plays an important role in freight transport; 90% of non-motorised traffic in rural Africa is for freight transport (World Bank, 1996).

Thus, one direct way that the transport sector can respond to the needs of the poor is to facilitate the use of non-motorised transport. For the very poor, walking is the dominant means of transport. The security and convenience of walking can be enhanced and protected through improved network improvements and legislative support to improve safety. Even more dramatic improvements can be achieved by supporting shifts from walking to cycling, and from head-loading to use of animal-powered vehicles.

The role of non-motorised passenger and freight transport is rarely recognised in official statistics. Its users are disadvantaged in many ways: for example, they are often physically vulnerable due to absence of separated lanes for motorised and non-motorised traffic. In addition to this, there has tended to be official hostility towards non-motorised traffic, which is seen as an embodiment of poverty and backwardness.

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Luckily, the emphasis on poverty reduction has led to increased acceptance that non-motorised vehicles are an important means through which the mobility of the poor can be enhanced.

Focusing on improving accessibility for poor people

An important role of transport in poverty reduction is the extent to which it improves poor people's access to goods and services that are strategic to their livelihoods. A focus on access allows transport planning to go beyond economic and engineering considerations, to the questions of the social objectives to be met in implementing any transport scheme. It also allows a clearer analysis of the transport problems confronting different groups of poor people, differentiating between the urban and the rural poor, as well as distinguishing between the needs of men and women. Access in the context of transport is about reducing physical constraints to goods and services by provision of appropriate transport infrastructure and affordable transport services.

Emphasis on employment creation in infrastructure projects

Other direct impacts on poverty that the transport sector can help achieve include employment generation in transport infrastructure projects, as well as the transport service industry. Delivery of infrastructure can be done in a way that optimises use of local labour and resources. Similarly, local transport services have a potential for providing employment opportunities to operators and providers of other support services. Bicycle taxi services in parts of east Africa are now employing tens of thousands of people, and they offer an example of how this sector can employ local labour in large numbers.

Support to informal transport sector operations

Motorised and non-motorised transport services – for passengers or freight – provide a particular opportunity to improve the quality and reliability of transport services available to the poor, as well as generating local employment. Contrary to popular expectations, state-owned public transport operations often fail to maintain adequate and reliable service levels. Public transport services can only be a short-term measure. In the long run, the public subsidies end up being an unsustainable way of maintaining transport services to the poor.

Support to informal private sector operations often yields much better services to the poor, and, when operated competitively, can actually reduce the prices of transport. Encouraging the growth of the informal sector can also have significant and direct effects on reducing poverty because of the entrepreneurial and income-generating possibilities that it opens up to the poor.

Conclusions

Good transport policy should contribute to poverty reduction by recognising both the necessity of improved macroeconomic efficiency and the need for direct targeting

of transport interventions. There has been a tendency to treat these two dimensions of transport policy separately, with the result that an effective and unified approach to poverty reduction in the transport sector has been lacking. One way of dealing with this is by ensuring that poverty reduction becomes an explicit objective of transport policies, with clear strategies to bring the benefits of economic efficiency to poor people through redistribution and direct targeting programmes.

Transport is necessary in achieving a wide range of objectives, including economic growth, personal welfare, governance and empowerment, as well as security. However, the effectiveness of the sector in doing this is limited in the absence of policy links with other sectors to whose objectives it contributes. The sector needs to address the following challenges. First, the sectors need to move from a position of isolation and find clear interfaces with other sectors that are delivering on poverty reduction. This provides increased scope for more integrated methods of planning that involve optimal combinations of transport interventions and other service interventions. Second, the sector needs to embrace an institutional and regulatory framework that embodies pro-poor principles, such as institutionalising participatory approaches in the transport sector and mainstreaming of social assessments.

Finally, there is a need for the transport sector to continue learning its role in poverty reduction by examining experiences from other sectors that have been working with poor people for many years. These include the sectors of agriculture, water, health and sanitation services, etc. A common thread that runs through most of these is the institutionalisation of the principles of participation, cross-sector collaboration and partnerships, and an emphasis on balancing between hardware investments and software elements (emphasis on local capacity-building, local knowledge and monitoring of impacts). This is the paradigmatic shift that the transport sector also needs to make.

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