

## Challenges and Opportunities in Urban Transport Projects

Career Reflections of Two World Bank Specialists

Ajay Kumar and Sam Zimmerman<sup>1</sup>

Problems or even failure in transport initiatives are more likely for projects set in the urban areas of developing countries. Connecting a rural village to an all-weather road or restoring a section of national highway is usually straightforward. Costs are modest, institutional issues limited, and the benefits obvious. In contrast, urban transport is not a single mode governed by a single agency but a collection of modes with varied administrative boundaries and many private sector stakeholders. Successful urban transport strategies reflect an understanding of linkages among transport, land use, and environmental factors. Working out the complex local challenges requires social, political, and technical capacities often in short supply in developing countries. And even when a project manages to attain its physical objectives, the civil and governmental capacity needed for sustainability often remains underdeveloped. The institutional frictions and gaps point to the elements of the way forward on urban projects: thoroughly understand the local context, then build broad public consensus around the value of better transport and the value of institutional arrangements to sustain it.



**The number of countries in which the World Bank supports urban transport solutions**

### What Makes Them So Difficult?

Every World Bank team helping with an urban transport project has had a meeting with the country's Secretary or Minister of Transport. The meeting often begins with the client asking, "Why are urban transport projects so difficult? Why have we failed in the past? And how can you help us?"

The difficulties of urban transport projects can be summarized in four categories: high political and news media exposure; the influence of the sec-

tor—the large size of its workforce and the political strength of its patrons; weak governance; and physical and social complexity.

#### High Exposure

The concentration of economic, political, and media power in a large urban area makes it a focus of any political agenda. In that environment, a significant local transport issue gets widely reported and sparks interest. The sensitivities are heightened by the entrenched nature of interests that have obtained rights to the operation of the area's transport systems.

#### Power of the Status Quo

In the capital city of one developing country, for example, 100,000 minibuses and 200,000 commercial motorcycles provide direct employment to

<sup>1</sup> Ajay Kumar, Lead Transport Economist, is retiring this year after 20 years of work on transport projects at the World Bank. Sam Zimmerman is a consultant and was an urban transport advisor at the World Bank until his retirement in 2009. These comments are adapted from their recent paper "Lessons in Design and Implementation of World Bank Urban Transport Projects: What Makes It So Difficult?"

more than 500,000 people. That numerical strength confers the power to combat transportation plans through organized action. In addition, ownership of vehicles and licenses gives many officials a financial interest in the informal transport sector or a political interest through their ability to distribute patronage.

### Weak Institutional Capacity

Typically the governments involved have little capacity to effectively plan, implement, and manage urban transport. Road projects proceed at cross purposes with rapid transit plans. Attempts to remedy congestion—the most visible impact of urbanization—will favor new roads instead of better traffic management. Instead of creating low-cost bus capacity or improving sidewalks, government will propose high-cost systems (rail, ring roads, fly-overs) in the mistaken belief that it is the only way to ameliorate congestion.

### Physical and Social Complexity

Land problems and resettlement issues in high-density urban areas are well known. Moreover, a single project will usually impinge on multiple travel modes, stakeholders, goals, and agencies. Unless the project staff successfully develops approaches to each dimension, the project is unlikely to produce the desired results. Nonetheless, overburdening a single operation with a multitude of long-term goals is often a recipe for failure.

## Creating Political Will

A political champion, or broad “political will,” is hard to find for projects whose benefits are spread across a wide and unorganized section of the population. In this context, what would be the best approach to develop transformational projects with a long-term impact?

### Engaging Citizens

People are affected by the location and use of transport even when they themselves are not users, and hence they are highly sensitive to any changes in the system or in the policies governing it.

That sensitivity is the key to creating political will. Demonstrating the value of the potential benefits and nurturing an atmosphere of common good can

mobilize public opinion in the service of reform. It can even create champions.

### The Case for Creating Broad Consensus

The gestation period of transport projects often goes beyond a political term. The support created by engaging diverse stakeholders in planning and design can assure that project ownership goes beyond immediate political interests and terms in office.

Creating popular support will never be easy. Urban transport reform means changing an industry that supports as much as 20% of a city’s population and affords considerable opportunities for rent seeking.

To generate consensus, the project must build capacity at the governmental level and it must engage citizens. Building capacity enables government staff to become a project’s champions, defend it in internal discussions, and actually become change agents. It also enables them to properly inform the political leadership.

The citizens’ level should be engaged in numerous ways, such as by forming a citizen board; conducting regular public consultations; using social marketing; and providing interactive social media to gain feedback.

## Summary: Some Key Lessons

- Understand local politics and local conditions. Then look for the best fit in the local context, not best global practice.
- Pursue institutional coordination across space and functions.
- Consult and engage with the community. That helps surface and balance diverse views in a climate of rational discourse.
- Focus on fundamental needs. Walking and taking the bus are the dominant modes of travel in most of the World Bank’s client cities, especially for the poor and women, and improving those modes should often be the first order of business.
- Do not be carried away by “flavor of the month” agendas.
- Help build the public sector capacity for transit planning and management.

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