

Alleviating Poverty through Sustainable Transport and its relevance for the post 2015 Global Development Agenda¹

Over 1 billion people still live in poverty. Poverty alleviation will remain an overriding concern in the development of the post 2015 global sustainable development agenda. Economic and social development in support of the eradication of poverty require the further development of transport infrastructure and services, especially in the developing world where poverty is the most severe. In setting the Millennium Development Goals the world community agreed on targets for poverty alleviation and social development. Realizing these MDGs is not possible without improving access to jobs and markets, or to schools and hospitals. Transport like energy is an essential enabler of poverty eradication.

Yet, choices need to be made in the development of transport infrastructure and services to ensure that these indeed contribute to poverty alleviation and social development. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in a message to the 2012 Asian Transport ministers while speaking on the importance of transport for the MDGs said: “The transport sector plays an ever-growing role in achieving the Millennium Development Goals and enhancing opportunities. As you begin your deliberations, I urge you to keep one word uppermost in your mind: access. Access is the heart of this Conference: access to work; to markets and shops; to schools and colleges; to family and friends; to hospitals and sports facilities.”

However, in practice, policies and investments have not focused enough on access in pursuing mobility. In developing policies and making transport related investments the emphasis has been mostly on the construction of road infrastructure and little consideration was given to the specific needs of the poor who mostly use public transport, walk or cycle. This is also true in rural areas although rural road infrastructure is important and much less costly than urban expressways.

Investments in public transport have remained behind investments in road construction and as a consequence the relative share of trips by private vehicles has gone up at the expense of the share of public transport trips. The growing ownership of private cars and the development of a supportive road infrastructure has provided the growing middle class with access to jobs markets and services. In most cases the poor continue to struggle to reach their jobs, markets, schools and services.

The poor live either in outlying parts of the city or in low income or slum areas, which are mostly, not well integrated in transport infrastructure or public transport systems. They are disproportionately dependent on informal public transport systems, which often cost more but provide less quality.

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In many cases the main means of transport for the poor is walking; a means of transport that has been systematically ignored by many of the cities in the developing world to a point that walking is not even reflected in many transport statistics or acknowledged as a separate spending category in city transport budgets.

The rapid growth in motorization is actually undermining the economic and social development it aims to enable and contribute towards. Ambient air pollution, to which transport is an important contributor, according to new 2012 WHO data is responsible for 3.2 million premature deaths per year, a large majority of which are in developing countries. Road accidents account for 1.3 million deaths per year and a tenfold of serious injuries, again with an overwhelming part in the developing countries. Traffic congestion is increasingly a routine part of urban life in the developing world with estimated increased transport costs due to congestion ranging from 2-5% of GDP. Transport now contributes 23% of energy related greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and in developing countries is the fastest growing source of emissions.

In many cases it is the poor that are disproportionately affected by these negative externalities. They do not have the means to deal with the negative impacts of for example air pollution or road accidents; this perpetuates the cycle of poverty. A report by the Global Commission on Road Safety estimates that the poverty of 70 million people around the world may be a consequence of economic losses related to road traffic crashes.

Action on sustainable transport should recognize that transport contributes to sustainable development if it enables access to jobs, goods and services that support equitable development while limiting short and long-term adverse consequences for environmental, social and economic services and systems. Sustainable transport in support of poverty eradication is a key pillar directly supporting the social, economic and environmental dimensions of the post 2015 agenda. Sustainable transport has commonalities with sustainable energy or sustainable urban development but it has its own institutions and policies, separate from those on energy and cities that guide its development.

An explicit recognition of sustainable transport and its essential role in poverty eradication and social inclusion in the discussion on the post 2015 global development agenda can greatly accelerate its development and implementation. This will boost countries and cities in the developing world to develop and take action on pro-poor sustainable transport and will also be an important signal for the world's eight largest multilateral development banks who at Rio+20 made an unprecedented \$ 175 billion voluntary commitment for more sustainable transport.