A Means to an End - Transport & the MDGs

Transport "the missing link" in the MDGs

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Despite the pervasive influence of mobility and access issues on almost all aspects of development, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) make no explicit reference to transport. In the transport sector we have become accustomed to describing transport as the 'missing link' in the MDGs, the 'critical catalyst' that was overlooked when the eight goals were drawn up by the United Nations in 2000. In the years since, we have generated a wealth of evidence to articulate the relationship between transport and poverty and to justify our role in achieving the MDGs. What has this achieved, and as we pass the half way mark to the 2015 MDG deadline, how should we move forward?

A Critical Catalyst

The need for improved mobility and access for poor communities is implicit in the timely and affordable delivery of basic public services, the facilitation of economic growth through national, regional and international trade, the empowerment of vulnerable groups, and in establishing links with the market economy and information society. If we examine each of the goals in this context then the cross-sectoral importance of transport becomes clear:

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Three quarters of the world's chronically hungry live in rural areas, so enabling poor farmers to grow more food is an effective means of reducing hunger and poverty. Investments in improved transport infrastructure and services can be effective in lowering input prices, increasing agricultural production and reducing the monopoly power of agricultural traders by facilitating access to markets. Food security is also determined by purchasing power and therefore by the level and location of employment opportunities. Transport investments not only facilitate access to employment but also provide employment, for example through labour-based infrastructure construction and the operation of transport services.

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education. Getting to school in rural areas is costly in time, energy and money. Drop out rates are high and attracting and retaining quality teaching staff in rural schools is difficult. The distance between home and school, the lack of appropriate, affordable infrastructure and transport services to make the journey, and the time required to do so, are all constraints to this goal. Improved mobility can also relieve heavy domestic workloads that are a barrier to attendance, particularly for girls.

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women. Women often carry a heavier burden in terms of time and effort spent on transport. They have less access and control over resources and fewer opportunities than men to use transport technologies. By focusing more investment on the infrastructure and services used by and appropriate to women, their time poverty can be dramatically reduced. Improved mobility empowers women

to take more control over their lives by increasing their access to markets, their exposure to education and information, their opportunities to participate in income generation, community and political activities, and by improving equality in gender relations.

Goals 4 and 5: Reduce child mortality and improve maternal health. More than 60% of people in poor countries live more than eight kilometres from a healthcare facility and there is a clear association between infant, child and maternal mortality rates and distances to healthcare services. Improvements in mobility have shown measurable impacts such as a rise in the immunisation of children.

Factors that are conducive to good maternal and child health such as antenatal and postpartum care, birth in the presence of a skilled attendant and the availability of emergency obstetric services, are compromised by distances to referral health services and limited, inappropriate and expensive transport services. Long, slow journeys act as a deterrent to healthcare seeking behaviour by enforcing breaks in subsistence activities and loss of wages. Meanwhile, the poor handling and positioning of patients, particularly pregnant women, during transportation can lead to critical secondary injuries.

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS Malaria and other diseases. Transport costs are a major impediment to anyone seeking or supplying sustained healthcare treatment. Immunisation and disease control programmes are compromised by disruption to the safe and timely delivery of vaccines, while poor access prohibits the repeat attendance of patients.

The spread of HIV/AIDS has been exacerbated by the increased mobility of individuals and transport employees, particularly in Southern Africa. Transport hubs, road corridors, and locations of infrastructure construction and maintenance represent locations of high HIV/AIDS risk.

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability. Environmental degradation has a much greater impact on the livelihoods of the poor by increasing their vulnerability to natural and man-made disasters. Transport has a poor environmental record: greenhouse gas emissions, noise pollution, deforestation and contribution to urban sprawl. Yet transport also provides huge potential for minimising its externalities and developing environmentally sustainable technologies, for example green roads in Nepal and the rising popularity of bio-fuels. The promotion of more sustainable public transport and non-motorised vehicles and the development of traditional waterways can all contribute to a greener tomorrow.

Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development. Transport provides the links between rural areas and the outside world. It forges a life-link between rural communities and their markets, puts isolated people in touch with their representatives, sustains important social networks and in general, helps to empower communities and individuals by delivering freedom of movement. By providing and sustaining access opportunities, transport can be a key catalyst for a global partnership for development.

Reducing Isolation

The oversight of transport issues within the Millennium Development Goals has had the positive effect of encouraging the transport sector, traditionally technical and engineering focused, to deepen its own understanding of the relationship between transport and poverty reduction. This has been accompanied by a recognition and promotion of transport's cross-sectoral significance, and the initiation of new cross-sectoral partnerships. For example initiatives, such as IFRTD's Mobility and Health international networked research programme, that are promoting collaboration between sectors to address MDG issues. The Mobility and Health programme takes Goal 5, improving maternal health, as a focal theme, and significantly participants are drawn from both health and transport backgrounds.

An increasing recognition of transport's cross-sectoral role is also reflected in the integration of transport into some poverty reduction and MDG related initiatives. For example, the Millennium Villages Project (MVP), an initiative headed by Jeffrey Sachs at the Earth Institute at Columbia University and overseen by the United Nations Millennium Project, that is delivering integrated packages of development interventions to 12 pilot villages in Africa. Transport is now firmly on the MVP agenda with one village already provided with a modified truck to both carry cargo and serve as a community ambulance. Meanwhile the Sub-Saharan Africa Transport Policy programme (SSATP) has successfully integrated transport issues into national Poverty Reduction Strategies in the region.

Another positive outcome has been a drive by the sector to determine transport and poverty indicators that deliver against the MDGs. In 2005 African Ministers responsible for transport and infrastructure met in Ethiopia and issued a declaration recognising the importance of the role of transport in the realisation of the MDGs. The declaration set out clear targets that are aligned to the MDGs, for example a pledge to halve the proportion of the rural population living beyond 2km of an all season mode of transport by 2015. The declaration also included implementation guidelines and commitments of support.

Meanwhile, the World Bank is involved in an ongoing programme to review the measures and indicators that are used in the transport sector. The 'Transport Results Initiative' strives not only to understand the data and indicators that will help us to manage efficient transport infrastructure and services, but also to monitor the social and economic impact of these interventions alongside the sector's progress towards achieving the MDGs.

The New Challenge

Despite these positive outcomes, the oversight of transport within the MDGs has also created a significant challenge for the sector. As donor priorities have shifted to align with the Goals some bi-laterals are choosing to move away from transport altogether and if this continues we can expect to see the sector left in the hands of the bigger multi-laterals. The impact of this could be the prioritisation of large-scale road-focused investments over the smaller scale transport initiatives that are more likely to benefit poor communities. This will also result in a weaker voice for the grassroots as a consequence of lost support to international and national NGOs and networks that

currently rely upon the shorter lead times and willingness of the bi-laterals to support smaller scale initiatives (Werner 2007).

Moving Forward

As we mark the mid-point to the 2015 deadline for achieving the MDGs, it is time for the transport sector to consolidate a more pro-active cross-sectoral role and to address our own internal challenges in realising a pro-poor agenda. Although current transport rhetoric looks beyond an exclusive focus on roads to a more integrated approach encompassing low cost means of transport and the optimal location of services to suit local needs, this rhetoric is still not matched by practice on the ground.

A paucity of reliable and comprehensive travel data is one of the weak links between policy intention and the actual delivery of solutions. Participants in consultations carried out as part of the World Bank's Transport Results Initiative have called for the inclusion of household travel information as part of regular national surveys. Examples include the 2004 Nairobi Urban Household Travel Patterns Survey, which revealed that transport accounted for over 10% of expenditure for at least 68% of households in the city. Also the 2005 South Africa National Household Travel Study, which recorded transport difficulties for approximately 82% of rural households.

We need to further refine and scrutinise the transport and poverty indicators that we have developed. Do they fully reflect the complexities of improving access and mobility for poor communities? For example the Rural Access Index (RAI), one of the most established headline indicators, endorsed by the World Bank, defines rural access in terms of the percentage of a population within 2 kilometers of an all season road. Does distance alone sufficiently capture issues of affordability, availability and reliability of transport services, or even the differential time burdens encountered due to various terrains, or climate patterns, for example increased difficulties during the rainy season? How do we measure and mitigate against less recognised obstacles to mobility such as personal security for women, men and children? The Bayam Salam women, rural entrepreneurs in Cameroon, have been found to be more susceptible to bribery at road blocks due to being forced to sit on the roofs of taxis to protect their merchandise, leaving them more 'accessible' to officers. They are also exposed to sexual harassment when using community paths to access suppliers and to sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDs, because transport operators frequently demand sexual favours in return for seats. (Meli 2007).

This instance of bribery is a small example of a further reaching development issue, the combined forces of corruption, bad governance, poor transparency and lack of accountability. The transport sector accounts for the largest proportion of EU and World Bank investment and nearly 6% of global gross domestic product. Over the past decade the World Bank has provided more than $30 million or well over 15% of its total lending commitments to support transport projects. It is inevitable that good governance must be a key focus for the transport sector if we are to contribute to the achievement of the MDGs, and initiatives such as the new Construction Sector Transparency Initiative (CoST) are paving the way.

To date the transport sector has displayed a limited capacity to value and integrate rights based approaches. Engineers at local and central level often consider this a burden to an already heavy workload and not necessarily relevant to the task of road-building. The Nyanza Roads 2000 strategy in Kenya is addressing this by working with the Kisii Training Centre, to introduce cross-cutting poverty reduction issues into training courses for Engineers and Contractors. Contract design and performance evaluation is also skewed towards technical outcomes rather than poverty reduction targets. For example measuring the number of kilometers of road built rather than improvements in school attendance. Roads 2000 in Nyanza now expects Engineers to report gender disaggregated employment figures, however this does not yet extend to an evaluation of impact, such as the impact of employment creation on the local community (Ndirangu, Flanary, van Riet 2007).

Although gender has been on the transport sector agenda for over a decade many transport professionals continue to be unable or unwilling to translate gender and transport concepts into practice. Even where gender is mainstreamed at policy level and in programme design, this is generally not reflected in field level outcomes. There is the opportunity however to learn from some examples of good practice, for example by the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) who support the inclusion of a strong gender specialist in all project preparation teams and promote engendered programme documentation (Fernando 2007).

To truly fulfil its role as a critical catalyst for the delivery of the MDGs it is clear that the transport sector has a lot of work to do. We need to use the coming years to cement new cross-sectoral partnerships that will support the implementation of integrated programmes. We need to establish clear mechanisms that will ensure that appropriate travel data is systematically collected and monitored against meaningful transport and poverty indicators. Ultimately we need to close the gap between our own rhetoric and the harsh reality of poor access and mobility that is still experienced by so many communities in developing countries every day.

IFRTD

The IFRTD is a global network of individuals and organisations working together towards improved access, mobility and economic opportunity for poor communities in developing countries.

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