

MOBILITY AND THE URBAN POOR

By Alexandre Gomide

Exploring the links between public transport and quality of life, Alexandre Gomide posits a reframing of the public debate about mobility for the urban poor.

Poverty is a phenomenon of many dimensions. It is not just about insufficient income to meet basic needs, but also about the deprivation of basic social rights and limited access to essential services such as public transport. Urban poverty manifests itself through the spatial segregation of the poorest in the peripheries – areas characterised by insubstantial public services and deficient infrastructure – where the provision of mass transport is inappropriate in terms of price as well as availability. As a result, the poorest have restricted access to the opportunities offered by life in the city.

For the poorest, expenses for transport are very high in relation to their low household incomes. IGBE reported that for 20 per cent of the poorest people living in the São Paulo Metropolitan Region, the cost of urban transport represented around 8 per cent of total family expenses – double the average of 4 per cent for the entire population. This association between mobility and income is important. The Origin and Destination survey for the São Paulo Metropolitan Region reported in 2002 that people with lower incomes make about 60 per cent of their trips each day on foot while the rich make five times more per day on motorised transport. This indicates serious problems of access to employment opportunities, recreational activities and social facilities, since the distance the poorest are able to reach each day is restricted solely to walking.

Another survey conducted by the Institute of Information and Development in Transportation and the Instituto de Pesquisa Economia Aplicada identified problems of urban mobility for low-income populations in four Brazilian metropolitan regions, including São Paulo. It showed that people with family incomes up to three

times the minimum wage are deprived of access to collective public transport because of the high prices and infrequency of services as well as the difficulty to physically reach distant stations. It also showed that low levels of mobility for leisure activities during weekends are partly due to the prohibitive total cost to transport a family, but also because the scarcity of public transport is even worse on weekends.

The formulation and implementation of public policies for urban transport towards the poor is imperative, especially for those living in metropolitan peripheries. Suggestions to facilitate the mobility of low-income populations include mainly a reduction in the price of tickets, but also an increase of the quantity of services and the reduction of waiting times. Since a large part of the poor live in areas with deficient road infrastructures, paving streets was also recommended to allow vehicle access to their neighbourhoods.

In this sense, it is understood that there needs to be means to subsidise transport for the poor by, for example, extending the benefits of *vale-transporte*, which is currently provided by employer to employee, to low-income people employed in informal markets. Mechanisms to provide financial assistance for people searching for employment should also be developed. Funding of such programmes must also be taken from sources outside the current revenues from ticket sales, and not from a cross-subsidy among users of the services. A legitimate cross-subsidy in urban transport systems would tax cars in congested areas in view of their negative impact, with the collected resources allocated to subsidise public transport.

Mobility can be improved not only by investments in rapid and efficient transport systems, but by a better distribution of economic and social activities in urban space. Doing so would reduce the distances required for travel. Here, the relationship between land use and transport policies is critical. Their proper integration is a key issue to ensuring sustainability and mobility in cities. Through their integration, it is possible to reduce distances, increase the productivity of the available infrastructure, reduce costs and travel times.

However, such actions are not going to be solved by

technicians, but in the political sphere where conflict – around public budgets, the location of urban activities, the use of property or the granting of public services – is inevitable. From this perspective we see the need to strengthen and improve democratic institutions and political dialogue. Civic participation in the formulation, monitoring and evaluation of local policies becomes more important every day.

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