

SP- ABSTRACT

BUSREP- STRATEGIES FOR BETTER USER REPRESENTATION IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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USER REPRESENTATION AND CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT IN URBAN PUBLIC TRANSPORT: CREATING, MAINTAINING PRODUCTIVE RELATIONS BETWEEN CUSTOMERS, PROVIDERS AND POLITICS

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THE SITUATION OF PASSENGERS IN URBAN PUBLIC TRANSPORT: STRATEGIES FOR BETTER USER REPRESENTATION (BUSREP2)

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TOOLBOX FOR BETTER USER REPRESENTATION IN URBAN PUBLIC TRANSPORT (BUSREP2)

OBJECTIVE

Public transport services are an essential part of the quality of life for many people, both directly as a means to move around and as a tool for achieving environmental quality objectives in particular in dense urban areas. Better consideration of user interests can also contribute to the evolution of new products and services through a better awareness of their genuine needs.

The work is of topical relevance due to the debate on "passenger rights" in Europe (consumer protection in transport, in particular in case of delays and service disruptions). Since about 2002, EU policy initiatives (as well as demands in some Member States) have sought to improve the passengers' position, first in air transport, followed by railways and (in the future) bus/coach and maritime services.

The project is one of the first to consider these issues from an international comparative perspective. Furthermore, it goes beyond a debate of the legal situation by taking a comprehensive look at the passengers' interests in the different stages of the planning process (political/strategic decision level, service planning, implementation and customer care).

MAIN RESULTS

CHALLENGES FOR USER REPRESENTATION IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

In liberal societies and market economies, there are two main ways for transport users to express their concerns: through the political process (from elections and referenda to petitions and lobbying) and by

market forces such as companies' market research and planning, but also the customers' basic power to accept or reject the product on offer. Citizens in general and passengers in particular thus in theory should have different possibilities to express their likes and dislikes.

However, the position of public transport users is often weakened by the characteristics of this particular industry: two elements have characterised for decades the situation of public transport users around the world: A strong political influence has shaped the provision of services, and in all but few cases buses and trains operate under monopoly conditions so that passengers' choice is severely restricted. Furthermore, in contrast to most other sectors, public transport operators have traditionally been subject to much more limited legal obligations regarding compensation to consumers in case of malfunctioning of their products. Monopolies have deprived customers of the possibility to express dissatisfaction by switching to another operator. Although the integration of various operators and co-ordination of services has proved beneficial for other reasons such as efficiency of resource allocation, network cohesion and overall size of the market, it has left users in a weaker position than consumers of most other services where alternatives are available. The only alternative - to choose another mode (often the car) - is neither desirable from a sustainability perspective nor practical in captive markets such as urban commuting trips. It is worth noting that even in the UK where public transport was deregulated in the 1980s, on-street competition has largely ceased and is now limited to a small number of very busy corridors in the main conurbations.

The strong political influence has meant that passengers could seek to influence service provision by means of the political process either through lobbying activities or by using the role of political authorities as the owners of service providers. However, in general the chances of getting heard are linked to current priorities and the actors' influence in the political system. Fierce competition for attention and resources means that the outcome is often uncertain. Planning and market research by transport providers remain as the main means to get information about user needs, but in the environment described above, pressure to make adequate use of these instruments is more limited than elsewhere. And indeed, a rather technocratic perspective on planning where counting of "operator journeys" and similar units prevailed has dominated in the past. Transport companies' marketing budgets are limited compared to other sectors, and user satisfaction is also low if compared with other areas.

In this situation, public transport users need adequate means to ensure their views are given due consideration in planning and policy. Referring to the classical work of the economist Albert O. Hirschman, such means should focus on "Voice" (to express one's interests) as the option of "Exit" (to choose another provider as a sign of dissatisfaction) is rarely available in practice.

WHAT ARE "PASSENGER INTERESTS"?

It is useful to distinguish different levels of user interests in the process of planning and implementation. Although there are of course overlaps between them, there are differences in scale and impact:

- On the political level, the competitive framework for public transport is set up and the strategic decisions on the service level are taken.
- On the planning level, concepts for the service are developed and planned in detail including the preparation of operations and the level of spare capacity provided.
- On the provision level, these concepts are implemented, one of the main objectives being that deviations from the pre-planned pattern are kept to a minimum
- On the practical level, however, problems cannot be avoided and therefore one needs to think about solutions to problems arising from deficits in quality

Hence most decisions on the shape of the transport system are taken on the political and planning level. The basic decision on whether to introduce or expand a light rail system can be allocated to the political level, as such projects usually involve public funding as well as the city's assent to use public land. Furthermore, such decisions have a long-term impact and should be in line with urban planning priorities regarding land use, environmental protection and social considerations to maximise the benefits of the scheme. Detailed design, on the other hand, is a typical planning task involving mainly the operator/infrastructure provider and the relevant authorities, even if political decisions may be required on the adopted solution as well. "Planning" in this way includes not only the design of the route, but also of vehicles, service patterns, fares and other service elements. Advocates of light rail need to be able to address all of these institutions as necessary.

In reality, the two levels naturally overlap: On the one hand, planning matters may become political ones even on a very small scale if users or other stakeholders cannot achieve a solution that satisfies them. On the other hand, political stakeholders may also wish to prescribe small details of the service pattern if they consider this important for their strategy. 'NIMBY' protests against new bus routes and 'political' fare reductions are examples of this. The close links between operators and (local) political authorities as their owners – so far common in many European countries – has certainly favoured such influences.

WHO SPEAKS FOR THE PASSENGERS?

There are two main ways by which citizens can express their views: As individuals - for example in a participatory process, see below - and through organisations which campaign on their behalf. Both ways have their strengths and weaknesses and should be used accordingly.

Although the history of "passenger organisations" is relatively recent, there is now in most European countries a range of organisations aiming to represent transport users' interests. From the start, two courses of action have intermingled in their work:

- transport political concerns deal with strengthening public transport in competition with automobiles
- consumer politics deal with representing users' interests in relation to service providers.

The main types of organisations representing transport users are shown in the upper part of table below, while the lower part shows groups that do so in certain circumstances and may be considered potential allies. Even though the likelihood that aims and priorities will coincide decreases as heterogeneity increases, passenger organisations need to be able to forge alliances to add weight to their cause. Many organisations active in this field were founded in the 1970s and 80s in opposition to plans to reduce or abandon tram and mainline rail services. Even today, many local organisations focus their work on a particular railway line, and even larger ones tend to put rail improvements at the heart of their strategy.

HOW CAN TRANSPORT USERS EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS?

Three main kinds of processes can be found: formal and informal participatory processes and the informal dialogue with decision-makers. They may be open for individual citizens, organisations or both of them.

On the political level, typical *formalised procedures* are petitions, hearings, the appointment of "expert citizens" or parliamentary questions. However, informal lobbying is at least as important. The main tool of lobbying is informal dialogue, which does not have to be limited to delegates, but should include both their associates as well as the associates of people involved in administration. Specialized knowledge is very helpful in this endeavour in finding the right contacts through the network of dispersed responsibility. The second main feature is public relations, for which a number of tools are available: press releases, press

conferences, dissertations and other detailed documents, collections of signatures, demonstrations and other similar campaigns. The common goal of these activities is ultimately to garner public attention, to win support and thus influence the political decision-making process. The two areas are hard to separate from one another. What is important is that the various instruments are used in a balanced manner.

On the planning level, participation is formally regulated in many areas. For example, plans for expanding transport infrastructure are dealt with in planning approval procedures that legally mandate the involvement of affected parties. Examples of such formal practices are public consultations for infrastructure projects or land use planning. The crucial issue for passenger organisations and likewise light rail advocates is to be recognised as a stakeholder and be allowed to participate in such processes. This is not always guaranteed by the legal frameworks and guidance documents.

'Informal practices' go further than formal agreements. In informal practices, the range of topics and methods is usually larger. They tend to be more cooperative, often entail working in groups and with methods designed for group processes and usually are designed to be open-ended. Some examples are citizens' exhibitions, brainstorming workshops for future activities, or planning cells.

The *informal dialogue* through correspondence or meetings of interested parties and political or administrative representatives are the least structured form of participation. Here, the primary concern is the exchange of opinions in order to have an impact on decisions. Participants, location, agenda and other practical issues are decided based on the requirements of the topic, limited only by the participants' willingness to collaborate. Such dialogue accompanies most planning and policymaking processes, therefore its importance should not be underestimated. However, is not necessarily aimed at involving "the public", and the concrete conduct of such processes is hard to trace through publicly available sources.

Archetypes of participative processes

Formal participative procedures	Informal (cooperative) participatory practices	Informal dialogue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • required by law • fixed content • fixed procedure • formal documentation <p>usually also</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participation subject to formal conditions • legal action possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ voluntary ▪ standardised schedule ▪ stimulate dialogue ▪ promote mutual understanding and agreement ▪ promote creativity ▪ results with publicity value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • voluntary • any theme, any format • based on personal contacts • free exchange of views • "internal affair", no public documentation

While many processes are more easily used by those with a certain knowledge of the issue under discussion, and thus lend themselves to groups and institutions as participants, participation by non-expert "lay users" is in part also possible and may even be encouraged to get an unbiased, "genuine" view. Informal procedures in particular can be designed to be easily accessible and generate detailed information on the citizens' expectations. The case studies in the adjacent boxes give examples of how different planning tasks can be presented to citizens. Even with limited group size, such processes can get high credibility if the composition of participants can be shown to be balanced.

WHAT CAN BE ACHIEVED BY PARTICIPATION?

The problems that are solved through project planning and participatory practices can be divided into two categories: 'problems of innovation' and 'problems of conflict.'

In the former, the main tasks are to search for and invent new, user-friendly solutions. The participants' creativity should be activated because a 'normal citizen's' knowledge, experiences and ideas are frequently not used in internal administrative planning. With the implementation of participative methods, for example, problems can be identified which would not otherwise be recognized.

The latter refers to the development of collectively binding decisions. Planning often involves the allocation of scarce resources and thus creates 'winners' and 'losers'. In such cases, participation can be used to reach a sustainable compromise or at least to make the general parameters for such decisions more transparent and comprehensible.

Most of these considerations apply to light rail development as much as to other public transport modes. What is specific to LRT is its widespread perception as a technology with a particular appeal, not only for travellers but also to decision makers. The efforts taken by French councillors to design their LRT system in a specific and attractive way are well known to readers of this journal, but even elsewhere trams are often an object of civic pride. However, some care needs to be taken in exploiting this potential, too: From the passengers' view, the most important debate is about safeguarding and improving the position of public transport against the private car. The support of one particular technology like LRT achieves greater political credibility, and hence chance of success, if it is embedded in a comprehensive, positive vision of the public transport system as a whole which builds upon the passengers' needs. In this way, participatory processes can be important tools to build up support for innovative ideas.

OUTLOOK

This topic is of interest for transport operators, planners, politicians and scientists, consumer and environmental organisations as well as citizens' groups involved in transport. The project team has examined the situation in several European countries: Austria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Further examples were studied in Switzerland and Belgium. The leading question was: Which strategies are used by the stakeholders to make the passengers' voice heard?

Certain structures are similar in many countries. But there are significant differences. In most countries, political and corporate responsibilities for public transport have become separated. Only in the Czech Republic has this course not yet been completed. In the UK and Sweden, portions of the market have been tendered for decades and thus put into a competitive sphere.

On the regional level, passengers have the chance to be intensively involved in discussion processes through advisory boards, discussion platforms or other means. But legal claims to participation often turn out to be quite limited. They exist only in protracted or extensive planning for major projects. In every-day business, such as changes to timetables, the passengers or the associations representing customer interests are dependent on the good will of the company or the organization responsible.

In all of the countries, there are special organizations that address the rights of bus and train customers. They differ in terms of the size of their membership, their structure and financial means. In the United Kingdom, national organizations receive public funding to fulfil these tasks. In other countries, participants involved on an voluntary basis or a very small staff of full-time employees head the associations.

Passengers' rights in each country are closely connected to the settlement of disputes. Claims provided by laws, ordinances or companies' general terms of carriage are limited in most countries, most provide only further transport with the least possible delay. There have, however, in many countries been positive developments for the customers. In Britain, for example, there are minimum standards for national terms of carriage. Many companies in the United Kingdom have voluntarily exceeded these. In Sweden, 95 percent of all trips are covered by a service guarantee. Only in the Czech Republic and Austria does this form of quality guarantee play almost no role.

There are significant differences in the countries concerning the various dialogue and participation possibilities. In The Netherlands, there are publicly supported discussion forums in which associations, companies and political decision-makers discuss public transport. In the other countries, many associations are dependent on the good will of their respective providers

What are the particular strengths of the individual countries? In the United Kingdom this is certainly the public financing of national passengers' 'watchdog' organizations. In Sweden, consumer protection has a long tradition. In The Netherlands, the legal framework for citizen participation was set in 2000. In France, many companies institute certification processes to guarantee quality.

One thing, however, is the same in all countries. Public transport is always de-pendant on public co-financing. Public funding is, therefore, indispensable. Finally, in many countries, due to external influences, the transport market still has considerable change processes to undergo. All stakeholders should make an effort to maintain the right tension between economic necessities on the one hand and active customer orientation on the other. Citizens and the associations that represent them should therefore be involved in these processes.

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FURTHER READING

The topic of passenger involvement in transport planning, policy and implementation is discussed in detail in: Schiefelbusch M/Dienel, H-L (eds.): Public Transport and its Users: The Customer's Perspective in Planning and Customer Care, Ashgate, Aldershot 2008, Transport and Society series, ISBN 0 7546 7447 9.

Further publications and contact details can be found on the project website www.busrep.net .