Our Transportation System is in Crisis – 292

The problems in the transport sector are political in nature. Is it possible to solve political problems with technical answers? Politics can take the form of policies, regulations and directives.

There has been an explosive growth in vehicle ownership. The ratio of population to car ownership in 1965 was 21:1, recorded when the first National Transportation Study (NTS) was done in 1967. This ratio has dropped drastically to only 4:1, according to the Central Statistical Office (CSO). Even though private car ownership is high in this country, the reality is that the majority of the population do not have access to a private car. Evidence of this may be seen every morning and evening with persons, particularly women and children, desperately awaiting some form of public transportation, including PH taxis and PH vans. In other words, access to transportation is difficult for non-car owners, and made increasing more so by the traffic congestion caused by car owners.

But the emphasis of successive Governments has been making the ownership of cars cheaper and facilitating their use by progressive road capacity improvements. How many lanes of roadway are adequate to keep the rapidly expanding traffic volumes at acceptable speeds, and for how long?

These policies combined with an increasing concentration in POS of Government ministry head offices and other public buildings have resulted in the following impacts: increased demand by the private sector to be near Government buildings in POS; increased parking demands; increased traffic in the East-West and North-South Corridors; decreased productivity-hours per day due to increased travel times; increased overall travel cost; increased accident and road fatality rates; increased atmospheric pollution from vehicle emissions; and, increased demands for disposal of tyres and disused vehicles.

Transportation users are traditionally considered to be primarily motorists (including drivers, passengers and businesses that rely on commercial deliveries). Non-motorists are categorized as a relatively small and unimportant minority, and defined as members of households that do not own an automobile. These non-motorists are the voiceless who have no influence on decision-makers and policy-shapers.

According to the Victoria Transport Policy Institute, this focus on automobile travel places little value on transit and other non-motorized travel, since they represent a small portion of vehicle-mileage. It considers walking primarily as a way for motorist to access parking facilities or as a form of recreation, and so devotes little transportation funds to non-motorized facilities.

Further, it favours solutions that increase road and parking capacity, roadway traffic speeds, vehicle ownership, and the affordability of driving. From this perspective, the best way to benefit non-drivers is to help them become motorists, by making auto travel convenient and inexpensive.

The correct technical approaches are often not acceptable for several reasons, including:

1. They are politically unpopular, and the fear of being voted out becomes a concern; and,
2. They require a long lead-time for implementation (including planning and preparation) and successful testing.

The resulting decisions most prevalent are continuing adjustments and compromise by more of the same in the sector. For example, the rationale given for reducing the fuel subsidy betrayed a lack of understanding of the fundamentals of why our transport system is in a crisis. The primary emphasis should not be on the fuel consumption volumes, but on the need for reduction in the discretionary vehicle-kilometres travelled, particularly during peak hours. The approach should be on influencing motorists to budget their travel distances.

The performance of the transportation system has several characteristics, including, in no order of priority:

- Vehicle ownership and usage;
- Mobility in terms of (a) Transport intensity, such as passenger-km per population and freight tonne-km per population; and (b) Transport growth, such as passenger-km per GDP and freight tonne-km per GDP;
- Modal share, such as percentage of passenger-km by mode;
- Energy consumption, such as of per capita fuel consumption;
- Air quality, such as of Carbon Dioxide emission;
- Safety, such as number of road fatalities;
- Economics, such as per capita congestion costs, and expenditures on transport;
- Land devoted to transportation facilities, such as sq.km; and,
- Accessibility to destinations.

The two most important characteristics are mobility and accessibility, and these terms need careful appreciation. Mobility refers to how frequently you travel, and is commonly measured as the product of the number of persons or vehicles and their distances travelled. Accessibility refers to how easily you travel between activities, or the overall difficulty in getting from an origin to a destination. While both terms are important, the latter estimates land-use–transportation connectivity and so is a more important measure in determining transportation policy.

The voiceless, car-less, transit-captive nationals of TnT have never demanded rapid rail or any exotic transport. They are into the basics, including: (a) minimizing their limited disposable income on travel, (b) frequent, reliable with published schedules, (c) availability for all classes of user-disability, (d) Effective, serving a wide range of origins and destinations, (e) Responsive to changing travel needs and patterns of activity, (f) Secure, providing a travel experience that is not blighted by fear of assault, attack or other anti-social behaviour throughout the journey.

The amazing thing is that an effective, equitable, well-organised transit system (which we have not had to date) will be available to all customers, and will reduce congestion by more than 25 percent, for starters.

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