



People-oriented mobility policies will induce global changes

We left you last year with the thoughts of Dr Udo Becker on future mobility. Shifting our focus from 'traffic' to the people-oriented notion 'access', as Dr Becker suggests we do, may change not just *our* society.

Dr Udo Becker is head of the chair for Transport Ecology at the Technical University Dresden, Germany. Starting point for his research was Dresden itself, but soon it became clear that his findings will, in the long run, have global ramifications. So he developed a broad view.

Human perspective

“We have to change from the wind-shield and asphalt perspective of instruments and vehicles (vehicles are instruments, as are roads or airports or rail road lines) to the people using the instruments to satisfy their needs,” says Becker. “From instruments and concrete to humans. Needs are for example: to get food, to reach friends, to get doctors' help, et cetera.

“The true objective function of all transport and transport policy and transport planning should never be to maximize infrastructures or maximize travel but to guarantee access – of course with least damages, costs, noises, pollution, accidents, area, waste: with least traffic.”

Who suffers most?

He continues: “Traffic price are too low. Climate change, air pollution and noise are not included in travel prices. If we continue to externalise traffic costs, we refer costs to other people, other places or nations – for example to people in Third World countries – and to future generations. Lower income parts of the population suffer most.” How is that so? Becker replies:

- “Who lives in cheap apartments alongside loud arterial roads? Rich people usually live in quieter neighbourhoods, but travel along these loud roads to their offices. Poorer people live there, but often cannot afford a car. So they contribute little to the problem, but pay the costs (health costs, for example).
- Who lives in good air quality houses?
- Who suffers most from climate change? Just compare the Netherlands to Bangladesh. Both will have problems with rising sea levels, but the Netherlands contribute much more CO₂-emissions. For protection, the Dutch will build dikes and levies. But people in Bangladesh will not have the resources for such measures.
- A last point: wealthier people (travelling a lot) will always find more or less subtle ways to react to changes, damage costs or tax increases. Poorer people, although generating much less damages and behaving more efficient (using less fuel and producing less noise to satisfy the same needs) will just not have the options and capabilities to react.”

Solution

How to solve this inequality? Becker says: “I just hate it when some politicians claim: 'Well, poor people are worse off than richer ones, so we need to artificially lower traffic prices so that these people can afford a car and fuel.' This approach is so short-sighted: it would just maximise damages for these people in the long run. To help these people, it would be best to increase prices *and* to offer or generate options to avoid the high prices (buses, bikes, near shops and so on). This yields access for the poorer.”

Two roads

So would Becker object to initiatives like the Tata Nano, a small cheap car aiming at the huge Indian market? “Of course we cannot deny others what we have here,” he replies. But according to Becker there are two roads leading to less car possession in other parts of the world.

First of all, by setting an example here in Europe. If the scenario unravels as Becker sketched last week and our society will change to see integrated living-and-services neighbourhoods where we do not need cars as much as today, Second and Third World countries may follow in our footsteps.

Secondly, it is possible for Third World countries to 'leapfrog' and get ahead of us. Here's how that could work. However much oil prices may have dropped during these last months, soon fossil fuels will become scarce and expensive. Becker explains: “In the long run, we will need to cut back our CO2 emission levels to one or two tonnes per person per year. This would mean an eighty per cent decrease for us, but a doubling for India. In rural parts of India, people emitting little will be able to sell part of their emission rights to Western countries. To us, that would mean more emission rights for a comparatively small price, but to them it would mean a huge increase in income, which allows them to create much more access for themselves.”

But won't these people, once they've attained more wealth through selling emission rights, start to emit more themselves instead of creating the low emission access we've got in mind for them? We can hardly deny them to do so.

Trend

So the current political trend towards making polluters pay may, for example through emission trading schemes, have global consequences. The seemingly idealistic scenario Dr Becker laid out, may very well unroll itself. But then again, it may not.

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