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Universal Basic Services and Social Protection

POLICY PROFILE 3.7

AFFORDABLE AND ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

A contribution to the Roadmap for Eradicating Poverty Beyond Growth

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This proposal addresses transport poverty — a major, and under-recognised, driver of reduced economic and social participation in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), which most acutely affects people living on or below the poverty line, and disproportionately women, children, older people, persons with disabilities, and residents of informal settlements and peri-urban peripheries. Building on the four-dimensional characterisation of transport poverty — availability, affordability, connectivity and acceptability — it calls for the development of reliable, affordable, accessible and safe public transport systems in LMIC towns and cities, in line with SDG 11.2, complemented by planning measures to contain urban sprawl, slum-uplift programmes integrating transit access, vehicle-restraint measures on urban highways, and radically improved walking environments. The operational core is an five-step programme articulating the roles of international, national and local authorities: raising awareness of transport poverty and embedding a clear mandate and targets within SDG 11.2, drawing on emerging recognition at EU level and in development-bank guidance; developing standardised indicators and open-source accessibility tools to measure country-level progress; providing training and multi-modal planning frameworks for local planners and operators, institutionalising participatory transport planning with affected communities — including informal and slum settlements — and supporting community-based transport consumer associations and citizen audits to strengthen budget accountability. The proposal addresses the chronic shortfall of finance for operating costs and fare subsidies, taking into account that multilateral lending largely covers only capital costs and that concessionary fares, while the most targeted tool for transport-poor users, are expensive. It does so by recommending hypothecated complementary revenues (congestion charges, road-usage and parking fees, environmental taxes, land-value capture) and a reorientation of development banks to include operating-cost subsidies in their financing envelopes, while tackling gender-based violence and safety concerns that shape perceived accessibility, notably for low-income women workers. Anchored in participatory planning and governance approach deeply embedded within LMIC local contexts, the proposal repositions public transport as a rights-based public service central to eradicating poverty beyond growth.

1. POLICY GOAL

Transport poverty is a major contributor to reduced economic and social participation worldwide, but it particularly acutely affects low-income populations in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).[1] This policy proposal is designed to help tackle the problem of transport poverty in towns and cities of LMICs through the development of a programme to support **reliable, affordable, accessible and safe public transportation systems for people living in poverty**, which is in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11.2 *to provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons*.[2] It proposes the essential democratic planning processes and governance mechanisms that need to be in put place to more effectively deliver socially inclusive and equitable transit systems.

Transport poverty is widely characterised as involving four interrelated key dimensions[3]:

1. The **availability** of transport resources – it occurs where there is no private vehicle available to a household or individual and no or limited public transportation options

2. The **affordability** of the transport options that are available – when an individual and household who is already experiencing financial poverty issues cannot afford to pay for the cost of travel to facilitate their daily activities (work, education, food shopping, healthcare and welfare needs).

3. The poor **connectivity to key destinations** of the transport that is available to the key destinations offering these activities (often referred to as accessibility but not to be confused with access for people with disabilities).

4. The **acceptability** of the transport that is available – whether it is physically accessible, safe, overcrowded, properly ventilated, etc.

Transport poverty will occur when one or all these conditions are unmet. While most people in LMICs experience poor public transport provision in their towns and cities, transport poverty most acutely affects the people who are living on or below the poverty line and especially affects women, children, older people and persons with disabilities. Home location is also a strong factor with people living in informal settlements in the urban periphery of

[1] Lucas, K. (2011) 'Making the connections between transport disadvantage and the social exclusion of low-income populations in the Tshwane Region of South Africa' Journal of Transport Geography 19:6: 1320-1334
[2] UN SDG 11.2 https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal11#targets_and_indicators
[3] Cluudius, J., Noka, V., Unger, N., Delfosse, L., Dolinga, T., Schumacher, K., Suta, C.-M., Lechtenfeld, R., Vornicu, A., Sinea, A., Serarols, A., García, M., Giardina, F., Lucas, K., Radzuan, H. S. M., Bouzarovski, S., Krawiec, K., Chrzanowski, P. & Ruciński, K., 1 (2024) *Transport poverty : definitions, indicators and mitigation strategies* Brussels: European Commission https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/4c180544-b1a1-455b-93df-d2b70f536596_en?filename=KE-01-24-003-EN-N.pdf

large cities and in smaller town and cities being particularly poorly served by public transportation[4].

What is the problem?

Currently, the problem of transport poverty and its economic and social consequences is poorly recognised or understood in almost all LMICs. The problem gradually being recognised at the supranational level of governance through the EU[5], and through various guidance documents published by the Development Banks[6]. However, a lack of empirical evidence at the local level of interventions within LMICS means that it is difficult to for policymakers and planners to understand the where, when and for who transport poverty is occurring and so to plan for its reduction through targeted policy interventions.

2. POLICY FORMULATION

Core proposal

This proposal is developed around the observation that most LMICs do not currently have control over the provision and operation of public transportation in their towns and cities or the power and finances to enact targeted local interventions. And so, to address the problem of transport poverty first requires:

- A high-level universal framework and mandate for policy action on transport poverty
- A much stronger evidence-based to identify where and who is affected by it at the local and national level
- Clearer guidance on what practical interventions will be the most feasible and cost-effective for LMICs to reduce it.
- Strong evidence and guidance on 'what works' to reduce poverty and how best to implement suitable local interventions

[4] Tiznado-Aitken, I., Lucas, K., Munoz, J. C. & Hurtubia, R., (2022) Freedom of choice? Social and spatial disparities on combined housing and transport affordability Transport Policy. 122: 39-53 14 DOI: https://authors.elsevier.com/c/1ez-x,L-HRiPCm

[5] Cluudius, J., Noka, V., Unger, N., Delfosse, L., Dolinga, T., Schumacher, K., Suta, C.-M., Lechtenfeld, R., Vornicu, A., Sinea, A., Serarols, A., García, M., Giardina, F., Lucas, K., Radzuan, H. S. M., Bouzarovski, S., Krawiec, K., Chrzanowski, P. & Ruciński, K., 1 (2024) *Transport poverty : definitions, indicators and mitigation strategies* Brussels: European Commission https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/4c180544-b1a1-455b-93df-d2b70f536596_en?filename=KE-01-24-003-EN-N.pdf

[6] Scholl, L., Fook, A., Barahona Rebolledo, J. D., Rivas, M. E., Montes, L., Montoya, V., Pedraza, L., Noboa, N., Sandoval, D., Lee, S., Rodriguez Porcel, M., Bocarejo, J. P., Vergel Tovar, E., Urrego, L. F., Moreno, J. P., Bertucci, J. P., Oviedo, D., Sabogal-Cardona, O., Serebrisky, T., & Mojica, C. (2022). *Transport For Inclusive Development: Defining A Path For Latin America And The Caribbean*. https://doi.org/10.18235/0004335

The proposed eight steps to promoting policies to provide reliable, affordable, accessible and safe public transportation systems to reduce transport poverty are as follows:

Five Steps to Reducing Tranport Poverty in LMICs

Step 1: Commitment - Who is already committed to the need for policy action and who else needs to be convinced?

The United Nations should work to develop a framework for raising national government awareness of the problem of transport poverty and the important role of public transport in addressing it within LMICs. It should provide the mandate for policy actions and targets to reduce levels of transport poverty within SDG 11.2. High-level national and local government commitment to reducing transport poverty is needed within LMICs. This can best be achieved by making evident the links between improved public transport services and other SDGs such as SDG1: reduced poverty, SDG3 improved health, SDG 5 - gender equality and empowerment and SDG 10 – reduced inequalities between countries. Signed commitments to policy action at the local level should be used to drive the delivery process.

Step 2: Data audits – What do we already know about who and where people experience transport poverty? What further data do we need to collect and how will this be done?

Policymakers need to fully evaluate their existing transport policies to understand how they address the needs of different low-income communities and population groups, such as female workers, and young and older people, and explore how to expose power relations and vested interests in the provision of transport infrastructure and service provision. The United Nations could assist with data collection by commissioning data gathering and analysis against a set of core indictors and metrics, such as the percentage of the population can access trains and public buses within a 1-kilometre walk of their home location. Many organisations already provide tools, apps and open-source data for city planners to assess the accessibility of their public transportation systems (including informal services).[7] These tools can be used to provide a first step towards planning interventions in collaboration with affected communities on how to make them more equitable and inclusive.

Step 3: Participative action planning - Are there existing project to address transport poverty. If so, what will they change in terms of a) increased patronage and b) the economic and social outcomes of this increase? How can a new collaborative action plan improve the effectiveness and impact of existing delivery? What are the mechanisms for engaging transport poor communities in the public transport planning process to assess their needs?

Reducing transport poverty requires a fundamental re-ordering of transport policy priorities in LMICS towards people- and place-oriented planning, which meets the intrinsic mobility and accessibility needs of every member of society rather than the elite few. To assist with

[7] For example, the TRUFI Association has developed an opensource localized intermodal journey planner, which integrates official public transport, semi-formal mini-bus routes, taxis, and other transport modes, ensuring comprehensive coverage for users. It is designed to support any language, including local dialects, and is compatible with both iOS and Android platforms. https://www.trufi-association.org/mission/

the planning and coordination of the transport poverty reduction agenda locally, local government needs to institute participatory transport planning processes and undertake participatory planning exercises with different communities (including informal and slum settlements), to understand their actual mobility and accessibility needs. Promoting the establishment of community-based transport consumer groups would help support longer-term relationships in the public transport sector and beyond. For example, is a place for citizen audits in the transport sector, linking to wider budget accountability.

Therefore, to address the problem of transport poverty at the local level, policymakers, urban planners, and transport managers and operating personnel will need to receive appropriate (re)training in how to develop more socially inclusive transport strategies through their decision-making processes and in their daily working practices. This will require the establishment of suitable frameworks for multi-modal planning, including the full integration of non-motorised and paratransit modes.

Step 4: Investment - Where are the greatest gains in poverty reduction from specific investments in better public transport likely to occur (spatially and for different social groups?). Where is the best opportunity for visible interventions and what would it change? Where will the investment come from?

Reducing transport poverty will not happen without direct government investment in specific local interventions. It might mean a diversion of existing budgets from e.g. large infrastructure projects to small scale local interventions, such as improved walking infrastructures. It can involve rerouting existing public transport services to under-served areas and/or establishing agreements with informal transport operators to redirect their services to specific areas or to improve the accessibility of their vehicles or to offer concessionary fares. The schemes that have delivered the greatest gains in transport poverty reduction have usually required a multi-agency approach to include e.g. schools, colleges, health centres and other public service providers in their planning and delivery.[89]

Step 5: Audit/Monitor How is performance of the public transport system currently assessed and how can consideration of transport poverty be included?

The United Nations should monitor and evaluate country-level progress on reducing transport poverty annually against a baseline standardised set of metrics e.g. How many countries have developed clear policies to reduce transport poverty? What measure have been put in place to reduce transport poverty at the local level? How much money has been allocated to the provision of: i) improved public transport accessibility; ii) *reduced* public transport fares; iii) improved public transport safety? How is progress towards transport poverty reduction being measured and monitored?

[8] Social Exclusion Unit (2003) *Making the Connections* https://www.ilo.org/media/312721/download
[9] pteg (2010) Transport and Social Exclusion *How we made the connections in our cities* https://www.urbantransportgroup.org/system/files/ptegTransportandSocialInclusionreportMay10.pdf

3. EXPECTED BENEFITS

Access to public transport services that provide reliable, safe and affordable mobility that efficiently connects people to jobs, education, healthcare, markets, welfare services and social opportunities has direct social and economic benefits for individuals and households. For example, providing safe walking routes within cities will reduce traffic deaths and injuries, reducing the cost of travel will mean that poor families have more chance to feed and clothe themselves, making buses safer for women and children will give them better access to work and education.

Expanding public transportation is a structural lever for poverty eradication and ecological transition. Reducing the costs and burdens of daily travel for households increases disposable income and improves people's access to opportunities without relying on higher private consumption. When embedded in broader territorial planning strategies, affordable public transport supports compact, inclusive cities and regional cohesion, enabling mobility to function as a social equaliser rather than a source of inequality.

However, these positive impacts are highly context- and person- sensitive, so having a clear framework for policymakers and planners to understand these interrelated impacts and understand their wider economic and social benefits is essential to ensure that proposed investments and physical interventions are well-targeted, appropriate and effective for achieving these social goals.

4. EVIDENCE, EXAMPLES & BEST PRACTICES

The proposed five step approach to reducing transport poverty in LMICs is based on two piloted case studies to create Sustainable Transport and Equity Partnerships in Nairobi Kenya and Dhaka, Bangladesh.[10] The Pan African Action Plan for Active Mobility, which was officially endorsed on 30th April 2026 by African Transport and Environment Ministers, has also successfully followed a similar pathway to promote a framework for walking and cycling in African cities.[11] The milestone builds on ongoing efforts across the continent, including implementation activities already underway in flagship countries such as Cameroon, Kenya, Ghana, Malawi, and Morocco. Member States have committed to aligning national strategies, establishing regional coordination mechanisms, and accelerating investments that support safe, accessible, and people-centred mobility.

[10] Eight Steps to Creating Walkable Cities, Workshop with city officials in Nairobi - delivered by Walk 21, the International Network for Transport and Mobility in Low Income Communities (INTALInC) and University of Nairobi 9-11th April 2019. https://intalinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/nairobi-workshop-notes210419.pdf
[11] Pan African Action Plan for Active Mobility: A Commitment Towards a Better Walking and Cycling Environment for People and Planet https://wedocs.unep.org/items/7210e304-ec4e-4644-8da4-ec6c696e7710

5. OBJECTIONS, POTENTIAL BARRIERS & COUNTERARGUMENTS

Significantly, improved public transportation services in the four key dimensions of can help to reduce transport poverty in LMIC towns and cities, but on its own will not be sufficient to eradicate it. Complementary planning policies to contain urban sprawl, slum uplift programmes which integrate public transport access, enforced traffic management and vehicle restraint measures on urban highways and radically improved walking environments are needed to support the delivery of **reliable, affordable, accessible and safe public transportation systems**.

1. **Increased motorisation and increased vehicle ownership as the prevailing policy aspirations within LMICs**

Government preferences for improved automobility symbolising social development are partly due to culturally framed aspirations that situate vehicle ownership and motorised travel as 'modernity', which have in turn marginalised the institutionalisation of active mobility as 'transport of the poor'. Much of the current financing of public transit projects in LMICs comes from the Development Banks and is targeted towards large infrastructure projects, such as Metro, Light Rail or Bus Rapid Transit systems. Whilst these projects may be needed to rationalise, the chaotic and fragmented informal systems that exist in most LMIC cities, they often do little to reduce transport poverty. Overcrowding is a regular problem; accessibility is not spread equally across the city and improvement in transport equity for the poorest residents of the city have not been forthcoming.

Klopp et al[12] recommend that a better option given the low-income economies of developing cities would be a more incremental approach that uses capital and operational subsidies to upgrade the functioning of existing services. The introduction of functioning strategies and strong institutional arrangements within LMICs to improve walking environments and non-motorised mobility, which most poorer households rely upon for their daily travel needs would also help to counteract this barrier [13].

2. **Securing the available finance to support local public transport interventions to address transport poverty**

Making public transport services reliable, affordable, accessible and safe depends largely on the funding and financing capacity of national and local government to fund them.

[12] Klopp, J. Harber, J. and Quarshie, M. (2019) A review of BRT as Public Transport Reform in African Cities VREF Research Synthesis project, Governance of Metropolitan Transport https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jacqueline-Klopp/publication/333971452_A_REVIEW_OF_BRT_AS_PUBLIC_TRANSPORT_REFORM_IN_AFRICAN_CITIES/links/5d1031a0299bf1547c795056/A-REVIEW-OF-BRT-AS-PUBLIC-TRANSPORT-REFORM-IN-AFRICAN-CITIES.pdf

[13] Walk 21 (2024) *Integrating Walking and Public Transport* https://walk21.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Walk21-Intg-Walking-and-PT-Final.pdf

Institutional and fiscal weakness in the region constitutes a structural obstacle to the use of financial instruments geared toward public transport.

Currently, the resources that are available to local authorities to reduce transport poverty through public transport interventions is small, irregular and often simply not available. This means that the finance needed to improve the affordability of public transport at the point of its delivery needs to come from elsewhere. One of the main alternative sources available to LMICS to support public transport subsidies is the multilateral financing system, but which currently only offer loans to cover the capital costs of large-scale projects, and which do not include their operating costs or any fare subsidies. New financing options will be needed to make investments into the small-scale projects that make a real difference to reducing transport poverty. It is difficult for LMIC cities to raise the necessary revenues from local taxes to pay for these interventions.

Providing concessionary fares and free transport services to transport poor and vulnerable populations is probably the most targeted way to improve their use of public transport, but it is expensive[14]. Furthermore, publicly transport services simply do not exist in many cities in LMICs, especially in informal settlements, secondary smaller cities, towns and rural areas. In these cases, people without access to private vehicles must rely on privately operated informal transit services. In these cases, governments have little control over fare levels.

Implementing complementary funding mechanisms such as congestion charges, road infrastructure usage fees, parking charges or specific environmental taxes, which are hypothecated towards the improvement of public transport is one possible way to raise the necessary revenues. Another way is through land-value capture from private sector land use developments, such as new housing or business developments. [15] The Development Banks should also be encouraged to include the revenue costs of providing subsidies for large scale public transportation that they fund.

3. Fear for personal safety when using public transport, especially for vulnerable users

Many people do not feel safe using public transport and perceived safety can be a major barrier to people' perceptions of its accessibility and use. For example, Bangladesh's garment industry accounts for 80% of its GDP with its labour force mostly made up of women who not only cannot afford to pay for public transportation to work but are also regularly subjected to sexual harassment and gender-based violence whilst walking long distances from their homes in the slums of Dhaka to the factories where they work for minimal wages[16]. User transport experience is often shaped in part by the role of unions, not least when they come

[14] For example, London's older person's 60+ Freedom Pass will cost Transport for London £339 million to subsidise for 2025-2026

[15] Rivas, M. E., Calatayud, A., Hansz, M., Brichetti, J. P., Sánchez González, S., Rodriguez, J., Leon Gomez, C. R., Navas, C., Pereyra, A., & Alem, M. (2025). *Funding and Financing of Public Transport in Latin America and the Caribbean.* https://doi.org/10.18235/0013758

[16] Lucas, K., Mitullah, W., Nasrin, S., Rahman, F., Opiyo, R. and Tsoneva, E. (2025) "Talk the Walk': The co-design of socially sustainable mobility solutions in informal settlements, Journal of Urban Mobility, 7: 100112, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.urbmob.2025.100112.

up against intimidation and violence linked to union strikes and clashes between transport operators which can extend into street chaos.

TWUs could usefully be incentivised to encourage stronger, more sustained attention to the needs of vulnerable users. Transport consumer associations could also be beneficial in supporting user protection around issues such as route changes and setting fare levels. There is also clearly space for civil society organisations to participate in this planning agenda.

6. INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights commits States to ensuring an adequate standard of living for individuals, which includes the continuous improvement of their living conditions, for example transport, and to doing so also through resources made available by international cooperation (Art. 11). As the United Nations Secretary-General has noted, sustainable investment and planning in transport and urban infrastructure are also essential to address and strengthen climate and sustainability commitments, with a view to achieving a just urban transition to zero-carbon cities (§25).[17]

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities establishes that persons with disabilities must be ensured access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment and to transportation, as well as the need to identify and eliminate obstacles and barriers in roads and transportation and to facilitate their personal mobility at an affordable cost (Arts. 9 and 20).

This has a counterpart in the Inter-American Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities, which provides that States must adopt measures to eliminate, to the extent possible, architectural, transportation and communication obstacles in order to facilitate access and use by persons with disabilities (Art. III(1)(c)). The Charter of the Organization of American States also commits its Member States to the improvement and coordination of transportation and communication in order to accelerate economic development, regional integration, and the expansion and improvement of the conditions of commerce (Art. 41).

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women establishes that women must enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing, electricity, transport and communications, as well as the right to participate in the

[17] Report of the UN Secretary-General, Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes, E/CN.6/2022/3, https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.6/2022/3.

elaboration and implementation of development planning at all levels (Art. 14(2)(a) and 14(2)(h)).

As reflected in the policy text itself, its implementation would contribute to achieving SDG 11, particularly access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.[18] Likewise, in 2016 the General Assembly adopted the New Urban Agenda, derived from Habitat III, in which States committed to promoting access for all to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable urban mobility, through better integration of transport and mobility plans into urban and territorial planning and through efficient service provision (§114).[19]

REMARKS

This proposes an overarching framework to address transport poverty in LMICs in urban areas. It purposefully does not propose specific interventions to improve transport affordability and accessibility because appropriate measures will need to be locally determined. There are numerous examples of projects that have worked to this end in practice. Separate guidance should be published on how these projects have been co-designed and implemented with local communities to meet their mobility and accessibility needs in different social an urban contexts.

[18] United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), 70/1. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/70/1 (2015).
[19] United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), 71/256. New Urban Agenda, A/RES/71/256* (2017).