

Soft Measures – Or Seducing Europe's Transport Users

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Introduction

This paper is a response by the European Federation for Transport and Environment (T&E) to the draft OECD report on “Policy Instruments For Achieving Environmentally Sustainable Transport (EST)”, and in particular to chapters 4 and 5 of this document. T&E welcomes, and has done so on different other occasions, both the EST process and its highly valuable outcome. This latest report on policy instruments supports many of T&E's own positions and arguments and represents an excellent scientific reference for environmental NGOs working on sustainable transport.

T&E welcomes the emphasis the report places on the social, cultural and political dimensions of transport, while still addressing transport economics and transport technology (from a social, cultural and political angle). This approach well illustrates the cultural role of mobility and the meaning that transport has in society.

The report also reveals that any partial (technical or fiscal) solution to contemporary transport problems will not reform the transport sector as a whole. Therefore, what the document implicitly asks for is a “Mobility Reform”, that is to say a transformation of the way people travel. This reform can only come about if OECD countries are able to agree upon changing the way in which they plan for, and govern, the everyday transport of goods and passengers.

By defining EST, addressing its barriers, and suggesting measures to overcome them, the report outlines the essential features of a different transport system, of another mobility regime. The kind of “New Mobility” that the document is proposing turns away from “automobility” as the dominant kind of modern mobility, i.e. the kind of individual transport that solely rests on the private car, and instead promotes a variety of other more sustainable and integrated ways of travelling. Because of both its visionary dimension and concrete suggestions, T&E welcomes this

report as a cornerstone in achieving a global sustainable transport system.

Apart from comprising a comprehensive catalogue of measures to implement environmentally sustainable transport systems in OECD countries, the report also contains a crucial chapter on possible barriers to attain EST (chapter 4). This chapter is important because it points at some problems that are often overlooked by transport planners and engineers – i.e. the rational and especially the irrational responses with which different communities react to changing their mobility patterns.

This and the subsequent chapter on how EST concepts and strategies can be translated into action, are a substantial contribution to making sustainable transport a reality. However, T&E feels that there are a number of issues in these chapters, which deserve a closer, and maybe even different look, than the one offered by the contributing experts. Hence, the purpose of this statement by T&E is not to question any of the suggestions made in the report, but to further stimulate the discussion on how to achieve EST in the OECD countries. Below, we turn to the three key terms of chapter 4 – the individual, the society and the technology – and address a few points, which, according to our view, deserve more scrutiny.

The individual – from advising transport users to seducing them

The report communicates a clear message by addressing the lack of awareness, concern, information, adequate professional advice, and rational behaviour within the transport sector. It points at the need to stimulate cognitive-rational responses of individual transport users to the environmental problems of motorised transport. The focus is on “explaining” why there is a need to change transport patterns, and that doing so is of benefit to the environment as well as future generations. Undoubtedly, this approach is an important step to achieve EST.

However, it should be emphasised that, because much of what underpins contemporary modal choice is simply based on habits, affection and emotion, providing information and hoping for so-called rational behaviour has its limits. Hence, instead of providing more “professional advice and public education”, as the report argues, we would also suggest offering more “professional co-operation and public seduction”. What does that mean?

Firstly, rather than trying to generate new (and thereby often merely reproducing old) professional/expert knowledge, it is necessary to facilitate co-operation between transport experts from different disciplines. Nowadays, each discipline has a number of experts dedicated to transport matters. It is no longer the case that transport is only an issue for economists, planners and engineers. Art historians are employed by car manufacturers, transport sociologists work for environmental NGOs, and behavioural scientists conduct questionnaires for public transport companies. It is vital to bring these professionals together and allow for exchange and co-operation between the different knowledge cultures.

Secondly, *helping the citizen to understand* the environmental problems of unsustainable transport behaviour is the precondition of changing it – but *seducing the car driver to use* a bike or take the train is the key to inducing change. Rather than changing the *transport attitude* of citizens, their actual *transport behaviour* ought to be addressed directly – since a specific attitude does not necessarily determine a specific behaviour.

One way to bring about this behavioural change is, for instance, to seduce car drivers into walking, biking or using public transport. Once the virtues of “not having to drive or park a car” are experienced first hand, a change of attitude will follow more or less automatically. Helping the citizen to “feel” and not just “understand” the advantages of leading a car-free life, will as well have repercussions on individual attitudes towards and cultural myths about motorised transport. Positive examples and best practices that support this approach are provided by research on the changing behaviour of transport users who “converted” from owning a private car to sharing a public car. More support can be found in research on the experienced gains in quality of life amongst the members of car-free households. Most important, though, are the insights into the aesthetic, emotional and non-rational dimensions of transport that are offered by the car industry itself. It could very well be argued that the ongoing success of the car is a result of an “awareness campaign” that seduces rather than informs and that appeals to an instinct rather than to an enlightened concern for health and the environment.

The success of such a campaign is illustrated by the continuous reproduction of “car-myths¹” like the one that a “car-based life can be extraordinarily rewarding. Those who live it travel with comfort, convenience, and privacy unknown in times past even to royalty” – a quote that could be part of a contemporary car-ad, but is unfortunately found in the draft version of the OECD report. It is equally important for any attempt to overcome individual barriers and attain EST, *to emphasise the inconveniences that come along with car-ownership and point at the personal benefits derived from walking and biking.*

The society – breaking the link between modernisation and mobilisation

According to the report, the second major barrier to attaining EST is society itself. Modern societies have given rise to solid political, economic and cultural institutions that frame and govern the current transport system. Examples are the structure of current administrative systems, the world-view of political decision-makers, the urban form and fabric, or a value system that equates more mobility with more freedom. These institutions are not easily subject to change – so states the report.

From a social-scientific perspective, the common feature of most modern institutions is that they are self-referential, that is to say they are able to constantly reproduce themselves. The best example is given by the automobile and the spatial formations it has given birth to: by reinforcing urban sprawl, the car has created the preconditions for its own reproduction – it creates its own demand by transforming space into “auto-space”, i.e. spatial formations that make it difficult to travel without a car. Similar mechanisms are in place when we look, for instance, at aviation and tourism. Here as well a certain form of transport is constantly fuelling its demand by providing mass-access to ever-more distant and exotic areas.

This self-sustaining process is indeed difficult to interrupt. Nevertheless, it is possible – as, for example the “blip” in air-traffic growth in the aftermath of WTC-Attacks has illustrated. Disregarding, for a moment, the tragic causes that led to a preliminary decline in air-travel demand, the incident has shown that economies do continue to exist – even with

¹ For demystifications also see the T&E publications on “car-myths” *Transport and the Economy* (2001) and *Transport and the Society* (forthcoming).
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less physical travel. Obviously, in certain cases and under certain conditions, change is possible.

In order to bring about a change in the way modern societies organise their mobility, the “mobility view” of decision-makers – or their world-outlook on transport, as the report says –has to change. What this essentially means is that we need a new social contract on mobility – a contract questioning the general belief that *modernisation means mobilisation*. Modernising the way we travel cannot automatically be tantamount with “speeding-up” and “moving more”. Especially not when personal time-gains as a result of faster means of transportation are continuously reinvested into ever-more travel, movement and mobility. If modernising individual transport means travelling more in less time – then social development enters a vicious circle that will eventually prove of no benefit to anyone.

A mobility view that seeks to break the current link between modernisation and mobilisation has already been translated into transport economics by emphasising the need to decouple transport from economic growth. The core measure to bring about this decoupling is “getting the prices right”, that is to say internalising the external costs of transport. But apart from using economic instruments to render the transport sector more sustainable, new socio-cultural visions and distinct political targets have to be devised. Already now, there are a number of available approaches upon which to hinge a more reflexive, i.e. self-critical, mobility view. They comprise instruments such as “sufficiency” and “transport avoidance” or more radical notions such as “slowness” (as, for example, employed by the “slow city” movement and “street reclaiming”).

What these themes have in common is that they advocate a mobility reform that is essentially social, because they question the way we interact with and relate to each other. As a result, they often reward the communities which seek to slow down and travel less, with a perceived increase in life quality. This sort of instant gratification must be seen as a crucial point when communicating EST in contemporary society. It is an important addition to the argument that sustainable transport is of benefit for *future generations*, because it as well highlights the immediate benefits from EST for *current generations* – a theme which is not fully explored in the draft report.

The technology – integrating transportation's Large Technological Systems

In modern societies, technological systems play an immensely important role – because they accompany and accelerate social change. In fact, within the transport sector, technological innovations have been a major driving factor. In the beginning of the 20th century, it was the automobile – at the end, it was telecommunications, which transformed and further mobilised society. Clearly, sustainable transport cannot be achieved without or even against technological innovations.

Current transport policies, though, often seem to favour technological developments, which run the risk of having an adverse effect on sustainability. Two examples may clarify this problematic relationship between transport and technology policies.

1. The technological improvement of the car that was brought about by tougher emission and fuel standards has improved air-quality in many European cities. Other technical interventions have increased fuel-efficiency and lowered GHG-emissions of the single car. Although these technical fixes are cherished by the industry as environmental successes, they have severe repercussions on the whole car system. The environmental gains from making the single car cleaner have been outweighed by a growing production of cars, leading to, for example, an increased land-take for transport infrastructure and rising noise levels in urban areas. Here, environmental success is only partial.
2. Another very dubious policy is to direct substantial resources towards the construction of “Large Technological Systems” that do not fit into the existing transport system. For example, the ongoing attempts to install a magnetic train in Germany (“Metrorapid”, formerly “Transrapid”) are questionable because similar results can be achieved more cost-efficiently by improving existing rail-infrastructure. Moreover, this project illustrates another problem of technological development within the transport sector, that is to say the creation of new demand. So far, most of the technical innovations within transport have generated their own demand rather than re-directed existing demand to more sustainable modes of transport. This policy needs to be revised if the long-term goals of EST are to be attained.

What is needed is a substantial shift in the development and implementation of transport-related technologies. On the one hand, priority ought to be given to technologies that enhance the integration of different modes of transport and hence promote more sustainable mobility. Examples of this are “integrated/electronic ticketing” or the use of so-called “smart cards” in relation to car-sharing. On the other hand, technological development must be coupled with demand management policies in order to avoid that they solely increase capacity and generate new demand for travel. Any new technology that receives public funds should be subject to an assessment that considers the overall effects on transport demand and volume – this will also help to question dubious claims such as the one that teleconferencing, teleshopping or telecommuting will essentially lead to a reduction of transport.

Recommendations

Against the background of the above comments, we outline a number of recommendations on the use of soft measures with respect to EST. Particular emphasis is given to the European perspective, which is to say the steps that are necessary at EU-level to enhance the use and impact of soft measures.

1. Develop more mid-term and long-term visions of sustainable transport and combine them with strict environmental targets. Such ambitious targets should resemble a political goal rather than scientific limit value (an example is the "vision zero" in road safety debates). Tough political targets may as well involve sensitive issues such as a "cap" on air-traffic volume or even on private car-ownership, in order to create awareness.
2. Provide for cross-cultural knowledge transfer, that is to say, let experts from different disciplines exchange their ideas on sustainable transport. It is important to realise that expert knowledge and first-hand experience is often already out there - but insufficiently recognised and integrated. In particular, include experts from disciplines that are normally placed at the fringe of transport studies. Social scientists, for example, are increasingly contributing to the knowledge production within transport science. Here lies a huge potential for knowledge-transfer.
3. Explore and test alternative technical innovations that will improve sustainable transport. Many of the current R&D efforts are "auto-

oriented" and seek to provide new technical solutions for the car and its complementary infrastructure only (examples are the fuel cell, or intelligent road guidance systems). Therefore, more technical applications, which will facilitate a better use of sustainable modes of transport (examples are "smart cards" and electronic ticketing) are needed.