EXPERTS DON'T KNOW EVERYTHING: GOVERNANCE ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH TRANSPORT AND DISADVANTAGE

Andrew Wear
Department for Victorian Communities

INTRODUCTION

Public transport planning in an urban context has a relatively straightforward objective: maximise public transport patronage, in order to minimise the economic costs of road traffic congestion and the environmental damage associated with particulate and greenhouse gas emissions. To a large extent, this can be addressed by 'experts' using a range of technical skills such as demand forecasting, service planning and contracting.

However, rather than patronage growth or modal shift, the objective of public transport provision in rural, regional and metropolitan interface areas is usually to address social disadvantage.

This paper argues that the role of transport in addressing social disadvantage - or social exclusion - can not be considered by transport experts alone, and needs to be considered as part of a broader discussion on social disadvantage.

The debate about transport and social exclusion is principally a discussion about social exclusion. Transport is an important input, but social inclusion is the outcome. Therefore, the discussion about transport and social exclusion has to be placed within the broader international debate about social exclusion. Governance is at the heart of any discussion about social exclusion.

If transport is to effectively address social exclusion, solutions must effectively draw on a variety of knowledge sources. In rural areas in particular, the capacity to develop and implement solutions resides with a large range of actors. This includes multiple government agencies, local government, community agencies, transport operators and community members. Consultation is not enough. Collaborative governance is important because relevant actors are motivated by range of factors and because innovative solutions demand collaboration.

In Victoria, in an attempt to address transport disadvantage, radical new governance approaches have been trialled through the Transport Connections program. In this program, local partnerships work collectively to respond innovatively to problems of rural transport disadvantage.

TRANSPORT AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Before we can have a discussion about transport and social exclusion we need to understand the nature of social exclusion, and familiarise ourselves with the literature in this area.

Social exclusion is:

> the 'inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life, alienation and distance from the mainstream society' (Duffy 1995).

Or alternatively:

> 'the dynamic process of being shut out ... from any of the social, economic, political and cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society' (Walker and Walker 1997).

It is a broader concept than poverty:

> Social exclusion happens when people or places suffer from a series of problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, ill health and family breakdown (British Social Exclusion Unit 2003).

Underpinning social exclusion is a sense of complexity; of multiple issues and problems intersecting and exacerbating one another. 'Place' is particularly important to the reinforcement and intensification of the processes of social exclusion.

Policies that tackle social exclusion are very different to those aimed at tackling poverty or disadvantage. Strategies to tackle the latter are largely focussed on the redistribution of wealth, or on the delivery of services. However 'policies aimed at ameliorating social exclusion… have to account for a whole host of other processes such as the global economy, political, cultural and social processes, as well as the different dimensions within these processes such as gender, age, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation if they are to be successful - a difficult task' (Leeming 2002, p68).

The complex nature of the problem inevitably means that a variety of people and organisations need to be involved in developing and implementing solutions. Multiple government departments, local government, community-based agencies, business and local residents all have something to contribute. It is the way this knowledge and expertise is harnessed and coordinated that ultimately determines the success of strategies to address social exclusion.

Experience internationally has shown that traditional, single-issue responses to social exclusion have not worked, and that local people need to be involved in developing responses.

Addressing transport issues alone is unlikely to make significant inroads into tackling social exclusion. A whole-of-community, joined-up approach is needed to make a difference to disadvantage concentrated within a particular neighbourhood or area.

GOVERNANCE

Governance is at the heart of any discussion about social exclusion. Because social exclusion is complex, and responses need to be multi-faceted, many people need to be involved in developing solutions.

Effective governance demands the asking of key questions such as: Who needs to be involved in the decision-making?; How are decisions made?; and Who can contribute to the solutions?

'One-size fits all' solutions are most effectively governed by top-down bureaucratic structures, while market structures are the best coordinating mechanism where price is the key differential. However, where responses to social problems demand complex, knowledge-intensive collaboration between government departments, agencies, business and the community, 'high-trust' institutional forms of governance are a much better way of coordinating activity (Adler 2001). This form of governance is based on mutual trust, collaboration, devolution of power and de-centralisation of decision-making. Experience internationally has shown that 'high-trust' forms of governance are most appropriate for responding to the challenge of social exclusion.

KNOWLEDGE SOURCES

If transport is to effectively address social exclusion, solutions must draw on a variety of knowledge sources.

Expert knowledge is certainly one relevant type of knowledge, but in the context of local communities with complex histories and issues, it is not enough to 'pour in programs to communities and sit back with our fingers crossed' (Adams 2004, p37).

Other knowledge sources include: the public; political representatives; opinion leaders; interest groups; media; and local communities (Adams 2004, p36). In practice, all of these knowledge sources have a role to play, and the development of public policy generally takes all of these knowledge sources into account.

In the transport context, a variety of knowledge sources are necessary to understand the full extent of the issue, the intersections with other issues, and the available assets that might be harnessed to develop solutions. Without reference to other sources of knowledge, traditional transport data will provide only limited capacity to determine where transport services are 'needed'. The full suite of knowledge required to adequately address social disadvantage resides with local communities, networks, institutions and actors.

For example, forecast patronage will only tell part of the story about how a particular transport service addresses social exclusion. Different people and different communities will experience transport and transport disadvantage in different ways. To hear the whole story it is necessary to hear from community members, organisations, agencies and others working to address social exclusion.

SOLUTIONS

In rural areas in particular, the capacity to develop and implement solutions resides with a large range of actors. This includes multiple government agencies, local government, community agencies, transport operators and community members.

A common issue facing rural communities in Victoria is transport to specialist medical appointments. This issue serves as a good example of the need for collaborative development of solutions.

This issue could be considered a simple matter of inadequate public transport, or perhaps even of inadequate patient transport, if the person is unable to use public transport. Alternatively, it could be considered a matter of inappropriate specialist medical service delivery, because appointments are not made at the appropriate time or use is not made of available video technology. Transport problems do not necessarily demand transport solutions.

To develop a solution to this issue, it would be necessary to involve both the Departments of Infrastructure and Human Services, medical practitioners, community agencies involved in patient transport, and the patients themselves. A solution attempted by any single person or agency alone would be inadequate and would probably fail.

Consultation is not enough. Governance matters because the assets and other resources needed to implement the solutions are often beyond the control of government, and in the hands of autonomous actors driven by a range of motives. The local school bus might be under contract with the government, but the taxi service operates independently as a small business, the community buses are operated by local agencies, and volunteer transport depends on local goodwill.

TRANSPORT CONNECTIONS

In Victoria, in an attempt to address transport disadvantage, radical new governance approaches have been trialled through the Transport Connections program. In this program, local partnerships work collectively to respond innovatively to problems of rural transport disadvantage. Largely harnessing existing resources, the partnerships involve community agencies, other local networks, transport providers, local government, and a range of state government agencies. In this context, government transport specialists are just one actor amongst many, contributing their knowledge to a broader collaborative effort.

The Transport Connections pilot program was established in 2003. $2.1 million was allocated over three years. Nine pilot projects were funded and the idea was that local partnerships would be formed, and that the various local players would work collaboratively to innovate, making good use of existing resources.

Partnerships would be made up of local government, community service agencies, health service providers, public transport providers, community transport providers as well as other groups within the community.

This was a tentative step by government and it was not a substitute for mainstream approaches. It continued to support rural public transport, and it continued to support community transport. The pilot was an attempt to see whether this approach could achieve results.

The nine projects were spread out across Victoria, and one was on the outer metropolitan fringe.

Typically the partnerships selected an auspice agency to be fund holder, and to be employer. This was local government in some cases. In other cases it was a community health service, volunteer agency or community transport provider. The projects all employed a project coordinator to drive their initiatives.

The Transport Connections pilot program has been a significant learning exercise. The results across the 9 pilots were mixed, but the approach definitely showed a lot of promise.

Common areas of work amongst the pilots have included: Working closely with the Department of Infrastructure on public transport planning; facilitating access for the broader community to the school bus network; facilitating cooperation amongst community transport providers; and provision of local transport information.

A good example of the types of outcomes achieved by the project is based in Sea Lake, a small town in northern Victoria.

Sea Lake's nearest regional centre is Swan Hill, about 70km away. There was not any public transport between the two centres (although V/Line did connect the two towns via Bendigo – but it took 2 days each way). There was a community bus which operated once a month, available for specific client groups only. Sea Lake has an ageing population, and it was extremely difficult for those who couldn't drive to access medical appointments, fresh food and other services based in Swan Hill.

So the Transport Connections partnership brokered a solution that used existing transport assets with only marginal additional cost.

With a small subsidy from the Department of Infrastructure, a new public transport service was introduced between Sea Lake and Swan Hill (once a week) using a school bus during its down time. It isn't a low floor bus, but the partnership arranged for free electric scooters to be made available for passengers on arrival in Swan Hill.

For those in outlying communities remote from Sea Lake, the partnership worked with the local school, and arranged for those aged 60 and over to have access to school buses every day – travelling with the students into and out of Sea Lake. This is a first for Victoria. Ultimately, we may see this extended to the whole community.

The school bus that serviced the three small communities of Nulawill, Culgoa and Berriwillock had no spare capacity, so the partnership worked with the Sea Lake district hospital, which has a community bus. Again with a small subsidy from the Department of Infrastructure, the hospital runs a service on Thursdays which is open to all and connects these communities with the Sea Lake – Swan Hill bus.

It's only a once a week service, but in an area where once there was essentially no alternatives to the car, this makes a big difference. It's important to note that this result was made possible only through the collaborative approach of the Transport Connections partnership.

Another example is in the Eastern Victorian region of Gippsland. More than 5000 trips are made each year from Gippsland to Melbourne to access specialist medical services. Most of these were conducted by volunteer drivers with one patient in each vehicle. It is a very long

way to Melbourne from many parts of Gippsland. This placed great demands on the often elderly volunteer drivers, and it meant that community vehicles spent all their time on the highway instead of doing work locally. It also meant that patients had a six week waiting period to access transport.

This was an absurd situation given that the Victorian Government had just developed a fantastic new high-speed train service.

So the local Transport Connections partnership worked with the Red Cross and others to come up with a common sense solution. Local community transport now collects people at home and takes them to the nearest train service, where they then have a comfortable ride to Melbourne. In Melbourne they receive assistance from Traveller's Aid and are met by Red Cross volunteers who take them to their appointments before returning to the train.
This frees up community vehicles and volunteers for use locally, and means there is no longer a waiting period for medical travel to Melbourne. Again, this is a solution that could not have been developed by any single agency acting alone.

These are just a couple of examples – there are many more. Importantly, these are initiatives that could be readily replicated elsewhere around the state. With 9 partnerships around the state, partnerships are able to draw on the experiences (including successes and failures) of other partnerships elsewhere.

An important element of the program has been the way government has worked closely with the partnerships. Without strong support from across government, success would not have been possible. The need to think outside of program 'boxes' was a key challenge for government officers, because solutions commonly traversed a range of departmental responsibilities.

Centrally too, addressing the regulatory and policy barriers that constrained the development and implementation of innovative local solutions was an important part of the project.

For example, the Government has now provided for increased flexibility of taxi operations in rural areas, by allowing country taxi operators to charge below the metered fare for contract work. This will open up new opportunities for taxi operators and allow them to tender for community transport work, or even to provide public transport services.

From the Transport Connections pilot program we have been able to identify several success factors underpinning good governance:

- **A good facilitator.** A highly skilled facilitator has been found to be critical in the success of Transport Connections partnerships. Relevant skills include knowledge of the local area, contacts within government, relationship building skills, and leadership skills.
- **The right decision-makers at the table with commitment and a willingness to contribute.** It is important to think carefully about who these decision-makers are – they could be anyone from a representative of a local residents group through to the Regional Director of a State Government Department.
- **A shared vision, clear objectives and good processes.** Having a common goal is an important factor which helps the project partners work effectively together.
- **Champions and early results.** Champions, such as MPs or local identities, have been shown to be an important resource to Transport Connections. There needs to

be a balance between short term outcomes and long term aspirations, to maintain enthusiasm for the initiative.

- **Flexibility**. Flexible administrative arrangements in the organisations that the partnerships need to deal with are the final success factor that successful partnerships have reported. Bureaucracy within state and local government can make it more difficult for projects to progress.

In 2006, as part of its Meeting Our Transport Challenges statement (DOI 2006), the Victorian Government announced a significant expansion of the Transport Connections program. $18.3 million was allocated over 4 years.

Approximately 30 projects are in the process of being funded across the state, and this will enable all rural, regional and metropolitan interface communities in Victoria to benefit from the Transport Connections approach.

The expanded program will build on the pilot program, adopting slightly to incorporate some of its lessons. The Department for Victorian Communities will be the program manager, and the Minister for Victorian Communities will be the lead minister.

The funding includes $4 million for a flexible fund that will provide start up funding for community-initiated projects. The Department of Infrastructure will manage this element of the program.

A strong emphasis on project governance will be at the heart of the program.

CONCLUSION

Transport exists within a broad social context, and it is a central piece of the social exclusion puzzle. However, if social exclusion is to be tackled effectively, a range of people, organisations and resources need to be mobilised concurrently, and it is important that efforts are developed in a collaborative and coordinated fashion.

Transport Connections projects have shown that through good local governance, significant results can be achieved. Collaborative governance structures are essential because tackling social exclusion demands coordination of knowledge-intensive activity, and market-based or hierarchy-based organisational structures are not effective mechanisms for organising knowledge.

This has been a brief overview of Government's experience with the Transport Connections program. It has shown us how government can act as enabler, empowering communities to develop their own local solutions.

REFERENCES

Adams, D (2004), 'Usable Knowledge in Public Policy' Australian Journal of Public Administration **63** (1) 29-42.

Adler P (2001), 'Market, Hierarchy and Trust: The Knowledge Economy and the Future of Capitalism' 12(2) Organization Science 215.

DOI (Department of Infrastructure) (2006), Meeting Our Transport Challenges, State Government of Victoria, Melbourne.

Duffy, K. (1995), Social Exclusion and Human Dignity in Europe, Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Leeming, K. (2002), '[Book Review] Policy Responses to Social Exclusion: Towards Inclusion' Global Built Environment Review 2 (1) 67.

Social Exclusion Unit (2003), Making the Connections: Final Report on Transport and Social Exclusion, London: Social Exclusion Unit.

Walker, A. and Walker, C. (eds.)(1997), Britain Divided: The Growth of Social Exclusion in the 1980s and 1990s, London: Child Poverty Action Group.