

Transport and Society Network

Ageing and transport in Africa: a neglected issue

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As the recently appointed full Professor of Transport and Society, Napier University, Edinburgh (an appointment initially funded by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council), my remit is to frame the relatively new area of Transport and Society. Historically transport experts were concerned primarily with the engineering and modelling aspects of the profession; increasingly however it is recognised that the social aspects of transport are equally important to transport organisation, operation and provision.

My previous experience as Professor of Sociology at the University of Ghana, Legon, West Africa, resulted in an awareness of African transport circumstances, most particularly, the transport circumstances of Africa's women who often operate as a means of transport carrying the loads that are borne elsewhere by vehicles and beasts of burden.

Whilst in Ghana, I worked with Professor Nana Apt, presently visiting you here at the University of North Texas as visiting Professor of Applied Gerontology, on the transport circumstances of older women. We researched and reviewed the circumstances in which older women in Ghana transfer their working businesses to their daughters. Transport difficulties figured in the account of the many problems which caused them to transfer working businesses to offsprings in exchange for continued inclusion in the greater household (Apt, N., Koomson, J., Williams, N. and Grieco, M., 1996 Family, finance and doorstep trading: the social and economic well being of Ghana's elderly female traders. Southern African Journal of Gerontology). We also undertook a larger study of women's transport circumstances for the Transport Research Laboratory, U.K. in which older women's transport circumstances were once again found to be a source of difficulty in the maintenance of well being (Grieco, M., Apt, N. and Turner, J. 1996, At Christmas and on rainy days: transport, travel and the female traders of Accra. Ashgate).

The work in Ghana revealed the importance of transport issues as a key dimension of older women's well being but the existing world literature on age and transport in Africa is scant. A search on the net for a literature on ageing and transport produced a virtually empty field. Yet it is clear that transport is critical in accessing the range of services and activities necessary for survival: older persons may be involved in a process of exchange with kin where goods and services are brought to them, or they may be isolated from kin and have to either make strenuous and debilitating journeys to services and activities, or they may be unable to achieve either of these circumstances and simply have to do without that which is necessary for their well being. Development agencies and governments of developing countries have been slow to adjust to the increasing isolation of older persons that occurs in the context of ageing and have thus overlooked the accessibility issues in older persons well being. Transport is critical and has been neglected too long.

There are a few fragmented materials on ageing and transport presently available and this page will be used as a tool for updating and better organising these materials in the coming months. But let's start with what we have. One source of hope is the policy work currently being undertaken in South Africa where in the context of a social inclusion policy agenda 'age' coupled with 'transport' has received explicit mention and attention:

- [Launch of 'Moving South Africa - The Action Agenda'](#)

South Africa has developed an analysis of those who are mobility disadvantaged which includes able bodied, township dwellers who experience separation from economic and social activities as consequence of poor transport provision. This has been termed 'stranded mobility'. Inside of this structural understanding of impaired mobility, the government has understood the need to pay attention to the circumstances of older persons. Talking of the new Action Agenda, the Minister of Transport states:

"At its core it builds a new platform for a genuinely customer focused public transport system that caters for the needs of historically and currently marginalised users. These include those we call the 'stranded' and 'survival'

segments, as well as children, the aged, persons with disabilities and those users who currently rely mainly on cars but would prefer public transport."

This focus on the older person, albeit very limited as of yet, has already had visible impact on the development of appropriate innovations for meeting the needs of older persons in Africa. A wheelbarrow chair has been developed for the elderly and disabled in rural areas. The details of this chair, its design and utility can be found at http://www.natex.co.za/f_mobilechair.asp but it is worth providing a simple idea of what this entails. An indestructible plastic invalid seat has been designed for fitting into a common agricultural wheelbarrow. The wheelbarrow can be used in normal circumstances for ordinary load carrying and in crisis circumstances for the transportation of the sick to medical services along rural pathways which will not support motorised vehicles. It is a best practice which could be replicated elsewhere. By ensuring that the seat plus wheelbarrow or within the ownership of the older person, the older person will be in a better position for the trading of favours - essentially able to exchange travel for use of the wheel barrow. It is not clear from the literature on the 'wheelbarrow site' whether issues of ownership and development of trading structures which better empower the old have been discussed at the policy level.

The South African materials give cause for hope that 'best practice' on ageing and transport in Africa will develop. Other materials available are indicative of a need for the development of this area rather than a major contribution to it.

At www.oneworld.org/odi/speeches/killick.html, Tony Killick, an acknowledged expert on Africa, notes that infrastructure issues and transport costs affect the well being of those not well integrated into the modern economy such as the aged. Under the title, Poverty in Africa - why economic growth will not be enough, he pushes us to think more deeply about the match between social and economic organisation. Left out of the traded and tradeable sector, transport within a monetized transport sector is a negative experience for the old of Africa.

At http://www.toda.org/conferences/durban_conference/durban_papers/wahlqvist.html Wahlqvist, Kouros Blazos and Savige in a presentation on "Food security and the aged in development: Its governance" recognise that access to transport has consequences for food security. The literature however on the access of older persons to transport in the context of disasters and emergencies is still absent despite this important recognition.

Similarly, in a recent UNFPA technical meeting on ageing in Brussels in 1998 the importance of special transport for the elderly in the developing context was raised and hit the public relations cover for the meeting but no major action has resulted <http://www.unfpa.org/news/pressroom/1998/agerell1.htm>. The absence of detailed research on ageing and transport in Africa is mirrored by the lack of voiced accounts of the arduousness of the transport experience in the Africa context. Nevertheless, faint traces are to be found:

[The Voice of an African widow](#)

I travel by public transport minibuses etc and its not very easy. I am getting used all the same. I lost 20kgs throughout the deaths last year and I thought I was not well. I had to change clothes...

To pull this session to a conclusion, as we meet here today April 2001, the policy environment has failed to separate out the needs and experience of the aged in relation to transport in Africa. There has been no clear identification of the consequences of an impaired access of older persons to transport in terms of wellbeing and survival. The analysis of older persons' transport circumstances is buried in the policymakers' adherence to the model of a benign functioning household. It is clear from other materials on aging and Africa there are problems in assuming the continued applicability of this model. It is time for a discussion of older persons' access to the full range of services and activities necessary for survival in Africa.

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