



IMPROVING MOBILITY FOR THE RURAL POOR

ASIA REGIONAL WORKSHOP

Eliminating poverty requires the reduction of isolation and social exclusion. It means improving mobility and access so that poor women, men, and children can build their assets, reduce their vulnerability and develop sustainable livelihoods. Many of the world's poor live in rural areas of Africa, Asia and Latin America where there is a low density of demand for transport, rural infrastructure is poor, cash flows are seasonal, and transport generally arduous and time-consuming. If poverty is to be eradicated in these areas the vicious circle of poverty and transport deprivation must be broken, and replaced with a virtuous spiral of greater mobility, stimulating more productive activities and diverse, sustainable transport services.

The Asia Regional Workshop on Improving Mobility for the Rural Poor is one of four linked workshops being held in Asia, Africa and Latin America to discuss how this can be done. It's an initiative that builds upon the consultations that led to the publication *'Improving rural mobility: options for developing motorized and nonmotorized transport in rural areas'* prepared for the World Bank by P Starkey, S Ellis, J Hine and A Ternell (2002). The workshops are being organised by the International Forum for Rural Transport and Development (IFRTD) in collaboration with a range of partners including the World Bank and the UK Department for International Development.

Hosted by the Rajasthan Forum Group in the campus of the Birla Institute of Technology and Science in Pilani, Rajasthan, between the 23rd and 26th September 2002, the workshop brought together 19 men and 7 women, transport professionals, academics, and representatives of UNCTAD, NGOs and civil society groups, from Asia, Africa and Europe.

The workshop aimed to widen debate and deepen analysis on inadequate transport services for poor people, to share knowledge and practical experience, to develop strategies to increase rural mobility and to influence policy, and to propose realistic and collaborative actions. It adopted a participatory methodology and progressed through four consecutive stages of situation review and problem analysis, prioritising options for intervention, a field visit to consider local practicalities and priorities, and output oriented group work to develop realistic proposals for individual and joint action that could make an impact.

Participants explored several themes in depth that made important contributions to the debate on rural transport services. They took a detailed look at the **conflicts of interest** between different stakeholders and recognised that, unresolved, these would lead to inequitable and inefficient transport systems. Fundamental to any strategy to resolve such conflicts of interest is the need to decentralise decision-making and democratise the planning process. Decentralisation without democratisation does not bring benefits to the poor.

Gender and social stratification, geography and isolation, human caused or natural disasters, migration, extreme poverty, illness, disability and age, affect the way stakeholders benefit from rural transport systems in Asia, and create groups of **disadvantaged transport users**. Transport planners or decision-makers mostly listened to those with power and money and rarely consult the 'disadvantaged users'. Women were

singled out as particularly disadvantaged because their needs were almost always ignored; they had fewer means (than men) to acquire or use transport and had little support or security.

Participants also explored the issue of *governance*. In many of the discussions it was clear that in Asia a large part of the responsibility for improving mobility was assumed to lie with the government, but that this responsibility is being compromised by increased politicisation of the decision-making process and by corruption and lack of accountability. Advocacy and capacity building programmes are required to deal with such situations and in particular to enable disadvantaged stakeholders to organise and engage with the authorities.

At all levels there is little *information* about appropriate transport infrastructure and service options, leading to a mismatch between demand and supply. Lack of information also constrains effective participation and governance. Empowering disadvantaged stakeholders requires, among other things, arming them with information to choose, to make their case, and to understand the processes of decision making.

These themes were reflected in the five priority strategies identified and developed for the Asia region. These were: strategies to address the mismatch between need and supply; to improve participation and governance; to develop appropriate policies, regulation and planning; to increase access to information at all levels, particularly at community level; and to mainstream gender. At the end of the workshop these strategies were translated into proposals for Nepal, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, the East Asian countries of Indonesia and the Philippines and into a regional proposal for sharing information on gender issues. Participants made individual and collective commitments to take these proposals forward.

The participatory nature of this workshop which included a small number of good introductions, keynotes or case histories, field visits in small groups in the form of micro participatory appraisals, work in small discussion groups, and time for informal networking (stimulated by posters, exhibitions, publications or audio-visual displays). Provided participants with many opportunities to exchange knowledge and experience, identify best practice and critically review past and present initiatives. The evaluation indicated that everyone had gained some new knowledge on mobility issues and found the process constructive and enjoyable.

The workshop has already increased awareness and built the capacity of participants, facilitators, organisers and the IFRTD Secretariat. Lessons from the workshop will have an impact on their work, and will feed into the other workshops in the series, in Eastern and Southern Africa, in French-speaking West Africa and in Latin America. Links have been developed between participants, and small "communities of practice" established. By pursuing the implementation of the proposals they formulated at the workshop with colleagues in the transport and development sectors, some participants are already actively moving the agenda forward.

Further impact will depend on how far the outputs of this workshop (and those in Guinea, Tanzania and potentially Latin America) will inspire people and organisations working in transport and development to pursue these themes, and to invest time, money and effort in researching the gaps, sharing information, and influencing the agenda of decision-makers at national, regional and international levels.

Further Workshops have been held in:

Morogoro, Tanzania. 20-23 January 2003
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Kindia, Guinea Conakry, 24-27 March 2003.
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For a copy of:

The full Asia workshop report
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'Improving Rural Mobility: options for developing motorized and nonmotorized transport in rural areas'
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