



Access All Areas — rural access, travel and mobility in developing countries and the footpaths, tracks and roads that make it possible.

Derek Sutton

The meeting convener Derek Sutton provided this seminar report before his untimely death in September. Derek was a long-standing member of the Appropriate Development Panel and his enthusiasm and genuine contribution to the panel and its events will be sadly missed by those who worked with him on the ADP.

The third in the series of early-evening seminars jointly organised on behalf of the Institutions of Civil (ICE) and Agricultural Engineers (IAgrE) and the Tropical Agriculture Association (TAA) was held at the impressive headquarters of the ICE in Great George Street, London in May. Some 50 participants were welcomed by Peter Cameron, chairman of the ICE Appropriate Development Panel (ADP), our hosts for the evening. The chairman for the event was Colin Ellis, Senior Engineering and Transport Adviser at the Department for International Development (DFID) who had returned that morning from a World Roads Association (PIARC) conference in Cambodia on rural transport. In his introduction Mr Ellis highlighted the importance of improving decision-making in the rural transport sector in developing countries. There had been considerable recent research and development work on rural access, intermediate means of transport, alternative road construction methods and related issues. However, effective means of incorporating the considerable knowledge on such issues into the decision-making process were often lacking. Also, more needs to be done in devolving the decision-making process down to local authorities in the communities that will be affected by any interventions. Donors have in the past often concentrated on project-level funding, which has resulted in considerable distortions and imbalances in the effectiveness of rural transport networks as a whole. The current trend is to take a more holistic, integrated view and provide sectoral support in order to get a better balance between all parts of the transport system. The movement of people and goods may be essential to economic development but personal mobility may also be considered as a human right and thus in some situations be provided as a social service.

The first speaker, Dr Peter Crossley from Cranfield University, touched on a wide range of issues in the provision of rural transport in developing countries. He presented fascinating data from research on tyre/surface characteristics; vehicle

performance modelling; local manufacture of rural transport vehicles; earth road maintenance and the role of transport in development aid and emergency relief. He demonstrated the importance of recording and understanding the full significance of vehicle performance and operating costs including road factors such as rolling resistance, traction, gradient, curvature and roughness and vehicle factors such as fuel costs, repairs, maintenance and depreciation. However, the focus of his presentation was a recent research project, funded by DFID, on the role of small-medium enterprises (SMEs) in the provision of rural transport services in sub-Saharan Africa. The project considered issues such as the effects of rural transport services of all types (buses, large and small trucks, taxis, bicycles, animal carts and other low-technology vehicles) on the quality of life and found that the poorest rural people often suffer from the lowest availability of reliable and affordable transport services. The project also looked at supply/demand issues in the provision of vehicles and locally-produced Intermediate Means of Transport (IMTs) and found that low levels of disposable income in many areas was a major constraint. This research has also highlighted the importance of improving the management, business and technical skills of rural transport SMEs in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa as well as improving their attitudes towards customers. A two-volume handbook has been produced on the role of SMEs in rural transport services details of which will be available through the World Bank (www.worldbank.com) or the author (see below).

The next speaker, Andrew Carling, an international specialist in sustainable footpath and trail management, also highlighted the particular transport and mobility problems for the poorest people in rural areas. He neatly summed up the importance of trails and paths for the poorest and most marginalised communities by emphasising that any rural transport strategy should recognise that people in these communities have only two options for travel—the left leg and the right leg! He described how he had used his many years of experience in footpath construction and maintenance on the Cumbrian fells to assist isolated villages in Tanzania to improve their mobility and access to services such as schools, markets and hospitals. He told a moving story of how with minimal capital expenditure (£15!) but a great deal of patience and tact he had

achieved the full and enthusiastic involvement of the local villagers; of how together they carried out improvements to footpaths and trails, linking remote villages at the top of the Rift Valley to larger villages with schools, markets and hospital facilities lower down the escarpment. He showed examples of the techniques he used and commented on the possible negative effects that can occur when improved access roads and transport facilities reach hitherto isolated communities, resulting in more rapid wear and tear on local footpath infrastructure. He emphasised the importance of using indigenous knowledge and fully involving local people in the process. He commented on the similarities in footpath construction methods throughout the world and the value of using well-tried and tested, sometimes ancient, methods. These have often been proven to withstand not only the normal wear and tear from people's footsteps, barrows and bicycles but also the onslaught from the elements and other natural disasters. He concluded by re-emphasising the importance of making full provision for sustainable tracks and trails in any rural transport development planning process.

Kenneth Mukura, the third speaker, continued the theme of developing rural infrastructure for access and mobility with an absorbing presentation based on his many years of experience as a road engineer in Zimbabwe. He reiterated the crucial importance of adequate access and mobility in rural areas in order to tackle the serious problems of extreme poverty and deprivation facing so many developing countries; the essential need to provide and maintain these facilities at minimal cost because of severe budgetary constraints; the importance of integrated, holistic thinking and planning, taking account of the fact that a new road or track is of little benefit without the appropriate means of transport (vehicles, carts, bicycles, etc) to use it; the importance of long-term sustainable solutions and the considerable advantages of using low-tech methods,

labour-based techniques and locally-available materials where appropriate; and finally, delegating management responsibility and authority to the local level. He concluded with a video of road development in Zimbabwe and a heartfelt plea for all the national and international individuals and institutions involved in developing better rural access to work much more closely together to avoid the many problems being experienced from uncoordinated efforts.

A lively discussion followed and continued after the meeting in the pleasant ICE Headquarters bar! Do come along next time! It was as usual, an enjoyable and thought-provoking evening providing a rare opportunity to share with fellow engineers from other institutions, rural development specialists and agriculturalists, insights into fascinating topics we perhaps know little about. Details of the next joint meeting will be available in due course—why not register with Ruth Dennett at the ICE (ruth.dennett@ice.org.uk) to receive details of these and other ADP events or contact the IAgrE and TAA websites for details of other events.

Contacts

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Speakers

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