

*A Contribution from the Malaysian Institute of Planners (MIP) Sabah-Sarawak Chapter in conjunction with the upcoming International Urban Public Transport Conference 2010 – A Platform for Change (4-6 August 2010) at the Borneo Convention Centre.*

## ***Urban Transportation: Traffic Congestion***

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Traffic congestion is a universal problem. In the past, life was centred on the area where one lived, with work, shops, schools and other facilities available nearby. Today, nobody thinks twice about using the car to access all destinations –whether it is to work, sending the children to school or making a short trip to the corner shop. Today, the car has become the most desirable form of transport and will normally be used as the preferred transport, no matter how attractive the alternative transport might be.

Experiences of the west are being repeated in developing nations where jobs are being located further and further away from homes and this has meant longer journeys and travel time. In many poor cities of the developing countries, the uncontrolled intermixing of motorized and non-motorized transport is one of the key factors contributing to congestion. Efforts to improve transport often imply decisions that would thwart the use of the traditional mode of transport. Policy decisions on this issue often have wider political implications in some countries where politicians draw their grass-root support. In certain countries as in India and China, two-wheeled motorised vehicles played a crucial role as public transportation and local authorities have been quick to recognise the significance of such modes of transport. Nevertheless, the use of traditional modes of transport particularly in developing countries are often accused of being a hindrance to traffic flow in large urban centres as there are no regulations to enforce such uses.

The spread of car use in the developing world is also aided by the construction of car assembly plants in low-labour cost developing nations, resulting in cheaper cars being assembled. This factor does not preclude the fact that the availability of affordable cars in poorer nations has now meant that a wider income group can be netted in by finance companies to own at least one car. This has resulted in the status and value of the cars being magnified to such an extent that the car has simply become an icon – a product that is highly desirable; without which modernization and development seemed incomplete. Modernization and development is thus partly responsible for traffic and transport problems - problems that most developing countries now realise are costly.

The extent to which elites and highly-placed officials have influence over mass ownership of cars through the development of good infrastructure networks is quite profound in developing economies. As policies tend to be biased towards the car, people are being led to believe that private cars are the only main mode of transport – hence the need to purchase cars. However, the sheer volume of traffic in our cities today only points to one direction - to leave the car at home whenever possible and to resort to

public transport. Yet, many developing countries have not legislated laws and policies to encourage the use of public transport.

The primary reason is that cars can only take in a few passengers at any one time. In the more advanced countries, there is always more than one kind of public transport but in most developing and poorer countries, there is one type of public transport – the bus. The problem of expanding demand by the public sector would be greater if it were not for the fact that many people in poor countries could not afford to use public transport regularly. Many developing countries are now discovering this phenomenon the hard way, with the emergence and proliferation of an informal mode of public transport and ‘para-transits’. However, para-transit and other informal modes can only play complementary roles and cannot be substitutes to the public transport system in the long run. Nevertheless, the lack of control over such informal modes can spell an end of good and integrated public transport for many of the developing countries whose cities are now experiencing poor environment conditions.

*The Malaysian Institute of Planners (Sarawak and Sabah Chapter) is organising an International Public Transport Conference with the theme “A Platform for Change” at the Borneo Convention Centre, Kuching on 4-6 August 2010. A total of 10 speakers will be sharing their knowledge and experiences on this subject.*

*The focus is on the practical strategies, collaboration of the stakeholders and exchange of workable ideas that will assist the conference participants in carrying out the works - ranged from the planning of the urban transport strategies to the implementation of the urban transport projects. The Institute invites you to join us for this international gathering of experts, practitioners and campaigners dedicated to promote sustainable urban public transport.*

Please see the official website at [www.kuchingptc.com](http://www.kuchingptc.com) for details.

*The writer is a members of the Malaysian Institute of Planners. Opinions expressed are his own and information quoted are from various sources and literatures used by the writer in his academic research.*