Basing transport policy on principles of social justice

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Every year, the national government spends over 10% of its total budget on transport.[1] The budget is meant to directly serve its citizens: to provide them with roads, with trains, with bus lines. Yet, hardly anybody asks the question which citizens benefit from all these investments and expenditures. New infrastructure is build 'to connect the north to the center of the country' (e.g. Road 6), 'to bring the periphery closer to economic centers' (e.g. railway lines to Dimona or Bet She'an), or 'to provide a more comfortable commute for the citizens of Netanya' (e.g. the extension of the Ayalon highway). But who are these people in the north that will be paying the toll on Road 6? Who will be reading her newspaper in the train to Dimona? And who will be enjoying the jam-free commute to Tel Aviv? Transport planners and decision-makers alike do not even ask these questions, let alone answer them.

Let us compare this for a moment with the field of education. Here, too, the government spends vast amounts of money to serve its citizens. Budgets are reserved for school buildings, for books, for teacher salaries, for program development, and more. But unlike the field of transport, the government knows exactly where the money is going too. Budgets are earmarked for public kindergartens, for high schools, for university studies, for kids with learning disabilities, for new immigrants, etc. And, what is more, there are clear criteria that determine which kids are entitled to enter the primary education system, which young adults can enroll in universities, or who is entitled to special education. The distribution of the education budget is guided by a clear set of criteria that define precisely who is entitled to what kind of education for what period of time.[2]

Is there any comparable criterion in the field of transport? Yes and no. Yes, because much of the transport investments are guided by one clear criterion: demand. Existing roads are extended and new ones build because there is a 'demand', bus lines are closed or frequencies lowered because there is a 'lack in demand', and train lines to the periphery are build because we expect to generate 'new demand'. But the answer is also 'no', because the importance of this criterion is not recognized, neither by the professional transport community nor by the political echelon.

The importance of the criterion of demand lies in the fact that it implicitly determines which types of citizens profit from government expenditures on transport, and which types of citizens do not. This is because demand is not a neutral criterion. Rather, demand

[1] Source: http://www.mof.gov.il/beinle/press2004-3.htm, last accessed November 2004.
[2] See e.g. Walzer, M. (1983) *Spheres of justice: a defense of pluralism and equality*, Basic Books and Elster, J. (1992) *Local justice: how institutions allocate scarce goods and necessary burdens*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

only encompasses those needs for transport that are backed by a *willingness* and an *ability* to pay.[3] Thus, the criterion of demand only 'selects' the needs for transport among the strong sectors of the society, the sectors that want to travel and have the budgets to do so. The criterion leaves out the transport needs of the poor and the weak, who would like to travel but lack the necessary monies to do so. Transport investments driven by the criterion of demand will thus serve the 'mobility rich' while largely ignoring the 'mobility poor'. It is this logic of demand that has generated the focus on road building over the past four decades in Israel.

The results of a transport policy driven by the demand criterion can be seen on the streets, literally. The policy has resulted in vast investments in road infrastructure over the past decades, with the total length of roads going up by close to 90% between 1970 and 2000.[4] At the same time, public transport services, especially bus services, have decreased substantially in terms of lines, frequencies and levels of service. The improvements in road infrastructure have hardly benefited all, but primarily those that have been able to purchase and maintain a car. In terms of settlements, rich suburbs like Savyon, Omer and Ramat HaSharon have thus benefited much more from past investments in road infrastructure than poor towns and cities like Kiriyat Gat, Sderot, or Rahat (Figure 1). In terms of population groups, the middle and high income groups have profited much more than the lower income groups, following the large differences in car ownership between these groups (Figure 2). And in terms of gender, men have benefited much more from the heavy investments in roads than women, given the higher levels of car use among men.

The combination of improved road facilities and the distribution of car ownership and use by income and gender, have resulted in large gaps in mobility between population groups. For instance, while Israeli men make 2.2 trips per day on the average, the 'average' Israeli woman makes only 1.7 trips per day. Likewise, higher income groups make much more interurban trips than low income groups. For example, while executives made over 2.5 interurban trips a week in 1994, service workers and secretaries made less than 1.5 interurban trips in the same time period (Figure 3). The higher educated profit thus much more from past and current investments in interurban highways, than the typical low income, blue collar worker.

It remains to be seen whether the recent shift in government policies towards more investment in public transport will close the mobility and accessibility gaps between those with a car and those without. Much of the public transport budget is invested into the improvement of interurban rail connections, and thus serves long distance travel. However, low income groups and blue collar workers typically make short trips within urban areas rather than long trips between cities. Their low salary levels also make it hardly worthwhile to travel over longer distances to a workplace, especially given the relatively high rates of train tickets. The problematic accessibility of many train stations for people without a car further adds to the problem.

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[3] See e.g. Hay, A. M. and E. Trinder (1991) Concepts of equity, fairness, and justice expressed by local transport policymakers. *Environment & Planning C: Government and Policy*, 9.

[4] הנסון, מ. (2004) מדיניות תחבורה וסביבה: לאן אנחנו נעים?

Likewise, the introduction of light rail systems in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv will not necessarily benefit the mobility poor. First, a prime goal of the light rail systems is to attract car users to public transport and the system will thus be designed keeping the needs of this groups of passengers in mind. This may result, for instance, in an emphasis on car accessibility of the light rail stations over accessibility by bus, bicycle or foot. Second, the introduction of given light rail system will go hand in hand with a re-organization of the existing bus network. This may result in the cancellation of bus lines on which low mobility groups now depend, thus depriving them of part of their current mobility and accessibility opportunities.

These examples point out that it is time to fundamentally change the way we think about transportation. It is time to adopt an approach common in comparable government fields, like education, health, welfare, and housing. It is time to start thinking on how we distribute transport facilities over our citizens. Transport has become a key service in our hyper mobile society. Citizens that do not have adequate access to transport will lack access, to jobs, to education, to health, to family and friends, and ultimately to society itself. It is time to develop a transport policy that will guarantee access for all.

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Figure 1

Motorization rates (number of cars per 1000 inhabitants) for selected cities and towns (1995)
Source: בראון, ר. ל.,מ רנר, et al. (2000) *2000 סימני חיים*. Tel Aviv, Worldwatch/Jerusalem Institute of Israel Studies/Heschel Center/Eretz VeTeva

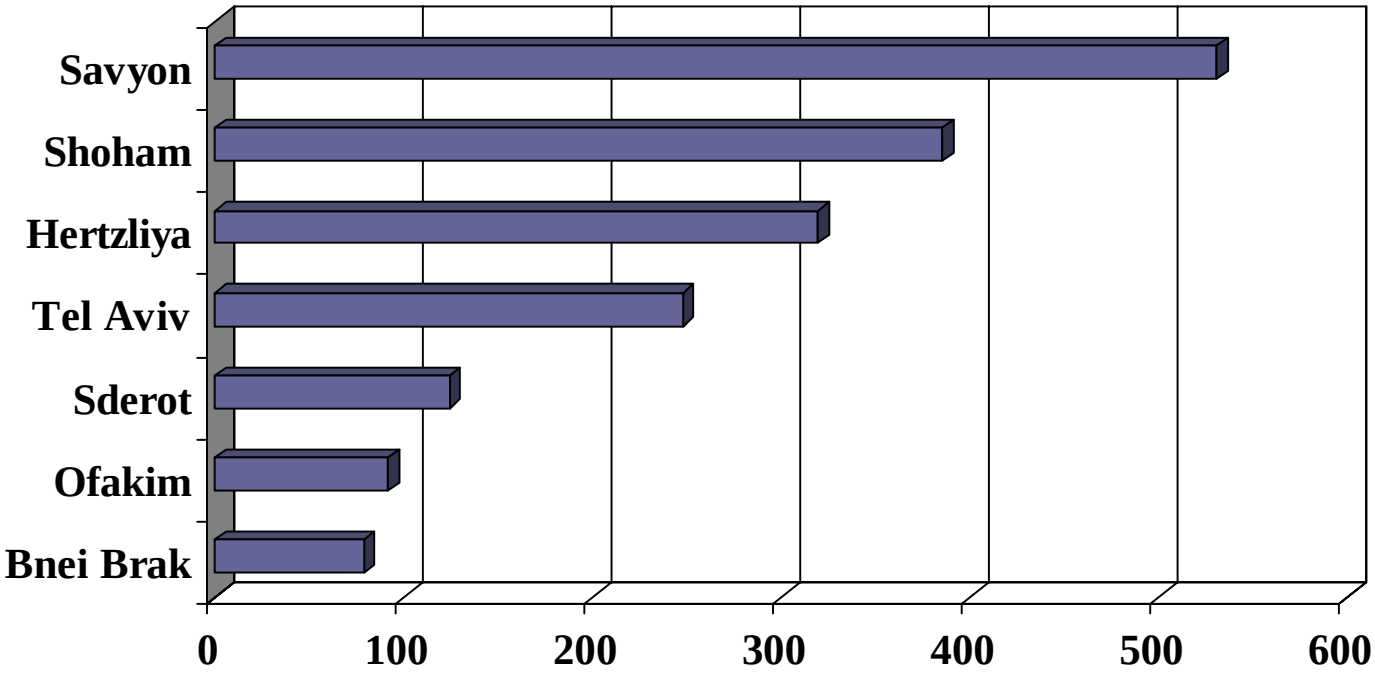

Figure 2

Number of trips per day by gender (1998)
Source: Central Bureau of Statistics 1999

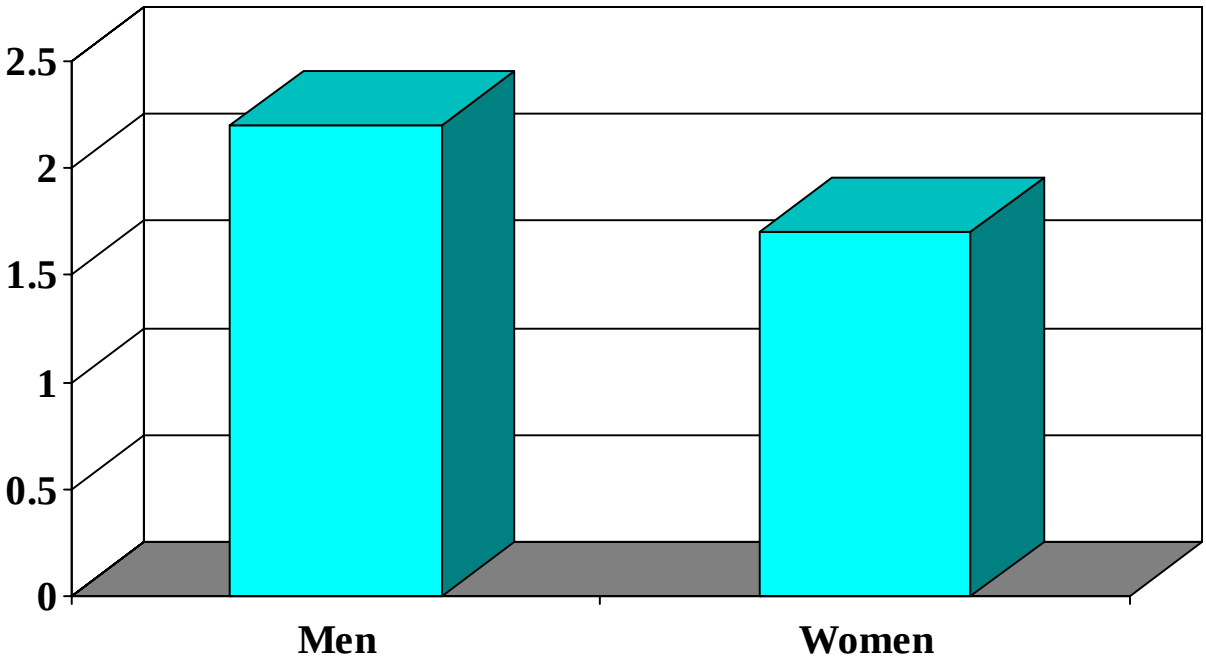

Figure 3

Interurban trips per week by profession (1994)
Source: Fletcher, E. (1999) *Road transport, environment and equity in Israel* .Tel Aviv, Adva Center