Changing behaviours to seek a better outcome for economies and societies

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Accessibility a pre-requisite of inclusive growth?

Dr Begley, J and Dr Jarvis, D

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Transport planning and investment is central to combating social exclusion, improving employment opportunities and ensuring access to core services for people living on the periphery. Where previously transport planning focussed on economic growth in urban areas over the last number of decades academics and policymakers have emphasised the role of transport in improving social connectivity and quality of life issues. Central to this premise is the role of local stakeholders and actors, offering important local knowledge to aid central planning initiatives. In this white paper the current landscape of transport planning in the UK is assessed and new approaches to regional development of transport systems posited. The paper concludes that a centric focus to transport policymaking only serves to foster social exclusion and ignores opportunities for dynamic expansion in relatively under exploited regions. Yet, to help combat social exclusion and create dynamic, sustainable solutions that reverse population drain by offering improved access to key services and employment activities within peripheral regions, the role of region and national stakeholders remains crucial.
**Introduction**

The importance of transport systems and infrastructure to the well-being of a territory has long been appreciated, whether it be at national, regional or at more local levels of governance. Transport is the means by which goods and services flow through an area, knitting together networks of operators and users, enabling labour mobility and facilitating business growth and communication. Yet the impact of transport change in whatever guise, infrastructural, technological, systemic, is more complex than seeing it solely through the lens of business and economy (Banister & Berechman, 2002). From a social perspective the advantages to improving transport are to improve access to core services for remote and vulnerable groups, creating social capital and strengthening communities.

In particular, what has attracted academic focus since the early 1990s are challenges of social exclusion, employment opportunities and access to core services for people living on the periphery (whether that periphery be spatial, both urban and rural, or societal) and the role transport, mobility, but above all accessibility, has to play in combating them (Lucas, 2012; Valega et al, 2012; Załoga & Milewski, 2013; Lucas et al, 2014; 2018; Begley et al, 2016). By adding a multi-dimensional focus to transport policy, the inherent complexity of transport planning has been brought to the fore for policymakers. Prior to this transport planning was typically appraised through cost-benefit analysis, which, while offering clear guidelines for investment and development, offered a very narrow perspective (OECD, 2002).

Even the seminal European Commission White Paper on Transport (EC, 2001) viewed transport through the optics of growth and business support, with little thought as to whether this growth was evenly distributed or offered equal accessibility to all. Nearly two decades later, while European transport policy now has a more social, sustainable and inclusionary component to it, with a strong commitment to cohesion policy, it remains dominated by thinking around economic growth and movement of goods and services (EC, 2018). With the UK’s decision to end membership of the European Union, such guiding principles as those outlined above are no longer relevant to transport planning nationally. While much of the policy focus in the UK to date has emphasised movement of people and goods being good for growth and prosperity, it is only in the last few decades that the social and environmental importance of transport networks has received serious academic attention.

**Transport and exclusion**

Social exclusion is a broad term, though it has a generally agreed upon meaning. The United Nations (UN), for example, sees it as a multi-dimensional problem, not limited to issues of poverty or material deprivation, but defined by barriers that limit individual participation in economic, social, political and cultural life (UN, 2016). In its latest report, the UN points to rapid urbanisation as a contributing factor to social exclusion (UN, 2020). In the UK, academic discourse around social exclusion similarly frames it in terms of quality of life (Mack, 2016; Barnes, 2019), work which has helped inform UK government policymakers, such the Social Exclusion Unit (1997-2010). An initiative of the new Labour government in 1997, the Unit aimed to reduce social disadvantage through redistribution of wealth, but also through improved public services and local government reform (NA, 2004). One focus, and a subject of intense academic interest, related to social exclusion and various barriers to access, with transport being just one of the dimensions coming under scrutiny.
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The idea that transport plays a key role in promoting inequalities first gained attention in the early 1970s, when US academics were the first to explore links between the two, while in the early 1980s UK academics Banister and Hall considered the impact of transport availability on vulnerable communities (Wachs & Kumagai, 1973; Banister & Hall, 1981). In the late 1990s and early 2000s key contributors to the debate included the likes of Gray et al (2000) who focussed on car dependence in depopulated areas of Scotland and how they would be affected by fuel duties. Gray would go on to produce a number of key texts considering how emission standards were impacting remote communities. Later Lucas also made explicit the connection between social exclusion and transport, helping define the challenges and make clear the need for multiple approaches to highly complex and inter-related factors (Lucas, 2012).

Crucially, the corpus of research related to transport and exclusion seeks to marry causal factors, such as age, gender, spatial location and remoteness with structural problems located at local, regional and national levels, while also positing solutions derived from service provision and policy action (Lucas, 2012). Thus, such work has shown that although problems are complex and interrelated, solutions can be impactful if pursued at an appropriate level and with support and information supplied by key stakeholders and policy units. A range of research approaches have been deployed in order to better understand these issues. Though these will be covered in more detail in the policy section, it is worth noting that they include: GIS accessibility/activity spatial analysis; structural equation modelling; data analysis of travel behaviours including destination choice, mode choice (public and private), trip frequency and distance travelled; environmental analysis; built environment analysis; institutional frameworks of transport policy delivery; and stakeholder analysis.

A number of recent European projects have had considerable success in reversing negative trends related to accessibility and transport by using some of these approaches. Most recently the EU ESPON project ‘URRUC’ considered how to improve policy relating to transport and accessibility in peripheral territories (Begley et al, 2019). Other examples include the La Exclusiva project, an Interreg approved, privately funded social enterprise that enables residents in remote areas to access cost effective delivery services, as well as the Interreg RUMORE project which identifies best practice surrounding co-operation between urban and rural areas (RUMORE, 2019). ‘MICROPOL’ 2012-14 looked at how location independent working could be better supported in rural areas in a bid to retain young people and graduates with transport challenges in these territories (MICROPOL, 2019). The CITADEL project created a ‘transformative ecosystem’, including an assessment of best practices that generated more efficient, inclusive and citizen-centred services (CITADEL, 2019). However, while there has been an inclusionary method to many of these projects at a federal level, the drivers of change at a national level in the UK remain more business and growth orientated. As a consequence of the narrow focus of nationally driven policy, local solutions are likely to be more ad hoc and sporadic in nature.

The governmental body with the ultimate authority for transport in England is the Department for Transport (DFT)\(^1\) who work with key partners and agencies, such as Highways

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\(^1\) Transport is devolved so in Scotland, for example, Transport Scotland has the powers described. Clearly franchising and contracts for buses, ferries and aviation is different. Rail services come under Network Rail as in England but the Scottish Government lets the franchise - currently to Abellia under the name Scot Rail.
England and Network Rail, to support the development and maintenance of the transport network. The DFTs central mission is to create a “safe, secure, efficient and reliable transport system that works for the people who depend on it; supporting a strong, productive economy and the jobs and homes people need” (DFT, 2020). DFT provides policy, guidance, and funding to local authorities in England in order to help these bodies run their roads networks, improve passenger and freight travel as well as develop new transportation schemes. Through funding Highways England, DFT supports the development and maintenance of the motorway and trunk road network and helps set the ‘strategic direction’ for the rail industry via Network Rail. DFT also provides the regulatory framework and funding for local bus services, aims to encourage the development and adoption of low carbon transport solutions, maintains safety standards, and works with the maritime and aviation sectors (DFT, 2020).

However, whilst these concepts are enshrined in policy, the level of funding to support accessibility in particular remains comparatively low, with much of this investment being directed towards urban centres deemed to be engines of economic growth (DFT, 2020). In part this is due to the emphasis increasingly placed on city-regions and city-regional thinking within the UK (Harrison, 2020). This growing focus on ‘engines of growth’ stems from the perceived benefits of agglomeration that result from investing in dense urban areas; scale economies, shared inputs, labour availability, and reduced transaction costs are all advantageous to agglomeration (Quigley, 1998; McCann and van Oort, 2019). The question of whether city scale drives agglomeration gains, or the reverse as discussed by stressed by Marshall (2013) is moot. In the UK current policy perceives large cities as engines of the economy, leaving those on the periphery struggling for the same level of support from central government (Harrison, 2020; Begley et al., 2019). This is especially true for transport, as infrastructural investment is, crucially, dependent upon central government decision-making.

The nature of the assessment criteria for these projects is heavily weighted towards economic and financial factors concerning growth and value for money. Softer aspects, such as quality of life, have been a less critical component in determining investment decisions. As such, infrastructure developments are more likely to be those that generate an economic return for national government, with the emphasis on supporting business and enhancing productivity, a key concern for successive UK governments, and heightened since the financial crisis of 2008 (ONS, 2015). This is in contrast to other European nations where quality of life and place making considerations are, more typically, built into transport funding decisions. In the UK, significant implications for non-metropolitan regions are evident. Unless deemed economically valuable, they are less likely to receive levels of support enjoyed by larger, perhaps nearby metropolitan centres.

**Social and economic development in peripheral regions**

Studies of competitiveness and economic development have tended to focus on the nation as the unit of analysis, and on national advances and state level policies as drivers of economic activity. However, there are significant differences in economic performance across regions in virtually every nation. This suggests that many of the essential determinants of economic performance are to be found at the regional level (Porter, 2003). By extension it makes sense that to understand and improve the economic performance of a region, focus should be placed on actors and stakeholders active at this level. The active involvement of stakeholders
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at the closest level to those affected by policy actions is a principle embraced at federal level within the EU, resonating as it does with the idea of subsidiarity enshrined in EU law.

However, not all regions share the same advantages. Large differences in levels of development are a common phenomenon, especially when comparing metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas\(^2\). Taking into account the perspective of regional policy makers, development and funding typically concentrates in regional capitals (Soltys, 2015). Firms, especially large ones, may locate in more urbanised areas to benefit from agglomeration economies, the three main sources of these being matching, sharing and learning (Puga, 2010). Larger urban centres have bigger, more varied labour pools living in close proximity allowing better matching and learning by experience, better sharing of inputs and services supporting firms, as well as more concentrated infrastructure. This notion is supported by the profile of firms in the EU 15; those in metropolitan regions, particularly in capital city metropolitan regions, are larger on average in terms of employment than those in non-metropolitan regions (DG for Regional and Urban Policy, 2017). If a lack of endogenous growth factors creates a barrier to development, arguably external intervention through regional policy is needed.

In effect those on the periphery of metropolitan regions suffer due to proximity to larger, better developed regions. Discussions surrounding the challenges facing peripheral regions initially gained traction in America, when US academics identified the relative under-development of the American interior, highlighting an unequal relationship between the periphery and the core. They concluded that "Growth in and around these cores has drawn off the productive population, economic activities, and investment capital of the periphery" (Friedmann and Miller, 1965, p. 313). At that time Friedmann and Miller anticipated future growth would occur in the periphery, as the lines between urban and rural blurred, but the belief that peripheral areas were impacted by growth in the core generated further discussion.

In parallel to discussions around peripheral territories was the concept of the development of the city region; the practical limits of local government areas and how an urban-rural hinterland was defined by population concentrations at the core of a region. These ideas dated back to the early part of the Twentieth century and would garner attention throughout the 1930s and 40s from the town planning movement in the UK (Fawcett, 1919, Gilbert, 1939, 48). By the time Friedmann had come to write about urban transitions, the concept of the city-region as a driver of economic growth had become firmly established in policy-thinking (Leaf, 2016). What lay at the heart of these debates was the question of where a region’s true boundaries lie, what in effect was the true shape of a functional region? Are rural-urban areas best understood as integrated functional regions, located (sometimes only partially) within a mixed policy environment made up of a range of actors up to and including supranational, national, regional and local levels, as identified by EU policymakers (European Parliament, 2016) Whatever the answer, as Harrison (2020) notes "...evidence suggests that city-regions are unable to escape the existing territorial mosaic of regional and sub-regional political administrative units and boundaries".

\(^2\) Non-metropolitan regions are those areas with less than 250,000 that are not attached to metropolitan regions.
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If this is true for regions with large centres of urban activity driving growth, it holds even more so for peripheral regions in close proximity to these larger metropolitan centres, whose interests are frequently subordinated to wider strategic goals set at national and regional level. Figure one, below, captures the current challenges for policymakers in these peripheral regions, outlining the dominant ethos of current policy as set against the emerging and necessary emphasis in transport planning and investment.

**Figure One: Approaches to Transport Planning and Investment in the UK**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant ethos</th>
<th>Emerging considerations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost/Benefit analysis</td>
<td>Social and Environmental. Traditionally, investment was determined by economic cost and perceived value of return</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engines of growth</td>
<td>Social exclusion and transport. Now infrastructure increasingly perceived as means to connect communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamism</td>
<td>Accessibility. Planning increasingly seen in terms of connectivity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban focus</td>
<td>Peripheral need. Recognition now that urban focus is occurring at cost of peripheral areas where opportunities for growth and development are stymied by poor transport infrastructure.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Centric policy</td>
<td>Local stakeholder. Growing importance of local knowledge in decision-making</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So how can stakeholders in peripheral regions maximise impact on their areas of control, and what approaches will allow peripheral regions to optimise development? Recently Meijers and van der Wouw (2019) have offered three strategic approaches. Broadly, they see non-metropolitan areas either embedding themselves in supporting institutional frameworks located in metropolitan centres, to take advantage of agglomeration effects or, alternatively, focussing on internal development, through a single urban centre, or else, in a third scenario, through a network of smaller urban centres.

One area of opportunity lies in improving urban and rural connectivity in non-Metropolitan regions. Urban and rural areas are increasingly connected and integrated, socially and economically. This approach would support sustainable development opportunities by offering new opportunities to work together, for example, in the fields of traffic and transport, new technologies and business, food and nutrition, climate change, energy supply or tourism (METPEX, 2011). To be successful, there is a need for a better fit between national and sectoral policies and local development strategies (Tacoli, C., 2015).

**Concluding thoughts**

Ultimately it can be argued that peripheral regions are a lower priority than more populous city regions which are considered engines of growth for the national economy. They lack
representation even on regional agencies tasked with strategy planning for their territory. This is perhaps understandable as the economic opportunities for peripheral growth and development are less visible in these regions. However, this centric focus only serves to foster social exclusion and ignores opportunities for dynamic expansion in relatively under exploited regions. The question for those agents active in promoting these regions is what is the optimal economic developmental pathway they should pursue to bridge these social and economic gaps? When considering Meijers and van der Wouw (2019) three approaches for engagement by non-metropolitan regions with larger metropolitan centres, the first of these, embedding in larger policy-making networks, has had little success to date for small towns and rural areas. Arguably endogenous processes of change through community supported activities can help support the local transport network. However, for capital intensive investments in infrastructure, such approaches have their limitations. As such, to help combat social exclusion and create dynamic, sustainable solutions that reverse population drain by offering improved access to key services and employment activities within peripheral regions, the role of region and national stakeholders is crucial. What is required is greater cognisance of the transport and accessibility problems in peripheral territories and more opportunities for relaying solutions from a local level to regional and national agencies that can actually bring about change.

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Professor Lyndon Simkin, Executive Director of CBiS
Lyndon.Simkin@coventry.ac.uk.