How to promote efficient use of road infrastructure in Kenya’s urban centres

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IN most urban areas in Kenya, particularly Nairobi and Mombasa, most of the traffic jams could be mitigated not by building brand new roads throughout the city, but by modifying existing road networks to accommodate rapid privileged public transit. This will slow down traffic and make travel easier from the dominance and inefficient use of single occupancy vehicles (SOVs) on roads.

Traffic jam similar to what is experienced in most urban centres today in Kenya.

The key Transport Demand Management (TDM) strategy here is the creation of managed lanes in order to promote the efficient use of existing infrastructure through a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system. A BRT is a transit system, often with right of way for mass transit vehicles which may include a regular bus or a guided bus way. Growth of a BRT can benefit from the adoption of a host of strategies including: exclusive High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes, introducing value priced lanes, separating of exclusive lanes, building separation or noise barriers, creating dual facilities and having time managed lane restrictions.

These strategies are people centred because they are intended to improve the travelling moving capacity rather than the vehicle moving capacity of selected congested highway corridors. The goals of these strategies are to:

- Increase the average number of passengers per vehicle;
- Enhance the people moving capacities of a congested highway;
- Improve public transport efficiency;
- Enhance mobility options for travelers.

It is typically intended that travel time savings and improved trip reliability of BRT and HOV facilities provide incentives for individuals to switch from driving alone to using public transport. Some of the current practices include:

1. Various HOV type lanes
2. Value Priced Lanes
3. Exclusive Lanes
4. HOV or Separation Lanes
5. Dual Facilities

However, between 1982-2002, Africa’s urban population grew at the rate of 4.7 compared to 0.8-4.0 per cent in other developing regions and 2.4 per cent worldwide.

The number of urban dwellers in Africa was expected to increase from 210 million in 2000 to 533 million by 2025 (UN Population Division, 2002).

As a result, today 33 per cent of Africa’s population is urbanised and poor. By 2025, 52 per cent of Africa’s population will be urban residents (Hast, 2002), a majority of whom will depend on public transport. Today, urbanisation rate in Kenya has exceeded that of Africa, at 6.3 per cent. This is more than double Kenya’s annual national population growth rate of 2.8 per cent. The majority of this growth is within Nairobi whose “Old City” boundary is 90 square kilometres with a metropolitan area of 690 square kilometre, only. Public transport is the number one mode of transport in Kenya, yet its growth capacity has been unable to keep pace with rapid urbanisation in major cities like Nairobi and Mombasa.

The liberalisation policy of the 1960’s, the Transport amendment rules however, known as (Midichek) service improvement of the 21st century and the massive individual investment in the transport industry recently has been unable to soak up the high demand for transport and has only created more transport inefficiencies. On a positive note, the industry has experienced rapid growth as a primary network serving the transport needs of land-locked countries in eastern Africa. It includes different types: bus, train, air, water and a jitney service locally known as “Matatu.”

Kenya’s first mass transit mode — The Kenya Bus Service (KBS) was established in February 1934, when Overseas Transport Company (OTC) of London started a bus service using 13 buses on 12 routes with a population of 50,000 people. But 40 years later, it faced competition. A Presidential decree, in 1973 allowed ‘matatus’ ferrying up to 25 passengers to operate without license. In 1986, the government launched its own “Nyayo Bus Services.” By 1973 Matatus carried 16 per cent of passengers in Nairobi compared with 84 per cent by KBS.

By 1990 their share was 52 per cent and KBS had 42 per cent, while NBSS carried 6 per cent. In 1991, Stagecoach bought shares in KBS, in October 1998, a consortium of investors acquired KBS and in 2006, KBS collapsed due to unsecured debt. Today KBS still operates through a franchise arrangement. Nairobi, as the business and political capital of Kenya is not short of transport vehicles.

What Nairobi needs today is better time management of its transport capacities through an efficient and effective people centred public transit planning system that caters for the transport needs of its population, economically and socially. Its transport system also needs to reflect its status as the major economic powerhouse in Eastern and Central Africa.

Currently, Nairobi’s population is estimated at 2.2 million, within an area of 685 square kilometres. Due to a growing middle class, ownership of single occupancy vehicles is significantly increasing and seriously choking the road network system.

Heavy traffic jams daily lead to numerous accidents especially by Matatus, which typically attempt to avoid delay by driving on sidewalks, jumping opposite lanes and driving directly onto on-coming traffic.

According to a research done by Obudho and Adwio, Matatus are the most involved in road traffic accident, as well as noise pollution, traffic jams, congested roads and driving directly towards on-coming traffic.

Kenya Times Tuesday, March 17, 2009