



**Transportation Research Forum**

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Book Review: [Public Transport in Developing Countries](#)

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*Iles, Richard. Public Transport in Developing Countries. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005. ISBN 0-08-044558-6.*

## **Public Transport in Developing Countries**

**by William Huneke**

Richard Iles has presented a comprehensive study on bus operation in public transportation service in developing countries. However, that is not what his book's title suggests is the book's subject. *Public Transport in Developing Countries* suggests that the book is broader, possibly including some discussion of rail service, both heavy and light rail. The reader will find only cursory mentions of rail in this book. Furthermore, Iles notes that water service is used for public transport in cities like Cairo and Sydney; but he spends scant space discussing water carriage in public transport.

Iles has presented a book that relies on his expertise and experience with bus public transport in developing countries. His topics range from vehicle types to physical structures to organization management. He discusses demand patterns and optimal route schedules. The author provides some useful insights: large buses should be used on high-density routes to offset their shortcomings of slow loadings and relatively poor maneuverability. He recommends putting bicycles on separate right-of-ways or outright banning them because bike riders generally ignore traffic rules. He even discusses personnel issues within cultural contexts. But the author is narrowly focused on bus transport.

The author's strong preference for bus over rail in public transport rests on the latter's being more expensive while water transport requires beneficial geography. Iles's view that rail is more expensive depends on a critical assumption: an existing highway system. For a developing country, that may not always be a safe assumption. He does note that poor highways can lead to higher bus maintenance, but if his book is aimed at discussing public transport and not just about operating a public transport bus company, the discussion should start with more than a cursory treatment of the basic geography, demographics and transport infrastructure.

It is ironic that Iles does not start more rigorously from planning fundamentals because he so often cautions that public transport cannot be left to the vagaries of the market and long-run equilibrium. In his view, public transport must be planned, probably by a government entity, although he is none too clear on that point. However, he does not begin to describe the planning inputs that should be gathered or how the planning authority is to prioritize its solutions. There is a further failing in that Iles does not discuss how the transport infrastructure should be upgraded from what already exists.

There is virtually no insight into the public transport infrastructure as a network that requires network modeling. He casually mentions that a tradeoff exists between highway construction costs and vehicle operating costs because more construction could relieve congestion, but this discussion is rudimentary. In a network system, more construction can simply relocate the congested points and not relieve the accompanying delay and increased operating costs. If the public transport system is seen as a network, the better solution might be to impose congestion fees. These would not even require Intelligent Transport System transponders but could simply be assessed via a license that permitted the vehicle to use a certain road or roads at a certain time.

By failing to start with fundamental issues, like what is the state of the current infrastructure, he neglects to consider other modal solutions. If the road system is so poor as to be virtually non-existent, it might be better to build a rail system, especially if critical raw materials like oil and rubber are expensive. A bus system is also more problematic if a country's culture does not embody

some respect for traffic laws. Bus service may be impossible if chaotic traffic creates gridlock. In this respect, a rail system has an advantage because it does not have to share its infrastructure with third party vehicles.

If the city is situated on a great river system or has a fine natural harbor, public transport must consider the role that water carriage could play. Water carriage avoids the traffic congestion, and the infrastructure is largely built and self-maintaining. There is limited discussion in this book on how to incorporate water carriage.

If a bus solution is preferred, Iles should have spent more space on how the highway infrastructure is to be funded in a more global sense than simply how a bus organization can cover its costs from fares or government subsidies. Highways, like railroad tracks, must be built and paid for.

Although he has a bias against private automobiles, he fails to discuss how their taxes can both discourage their use and provide funding for the infrastructure. He neglects to fully acknowledge and discuss that as people get richer they will tend to leave public transport for the convenience of private automobiles.

Iles avows how public transport is more environmentally friendly, which is no doubt true if the public transport system and its fare structure match the existing demand. If not, empty buses prowling the streets or stopped in congestion simply add to pollution. Any study of public transport should include discussion of how private incentives should be aligned with public costs through user fees. This is especially true when such user fees can provide funding for the transport infrastructure.

Furthermore, once highways are available for bus service, there will be temptation for automobile drivers to use the highways as well. A discussion about how to price such access would have been more useful than Iles's repeated rants about how free market solutions do not work. The author ignores the very real fact that a market does exist for passenger transportation unless the authorities issue transport vouchers and rigorously prosecute any black market activity in transport passes.

The back cover of this book promises to deal "with the planning, regulation, management and control of public transport in developing countries." That promise is largely unfulfilled in a book that provides a thorough discussion about public transport bus operations in developing countries but little else.

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