Motorised Mobility in Sri Lanka and the Effectiveness of the Conventional Tools in Addressing Sustainability Concerns

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Transportation and sustainability are two profoundly related subjects that are not often studied together. The interesting correlation between transport and environmental, social and economic sustainability remains segregated in the literature, and appears to be addressed in isolated compartments in practical policy making.

Economic sustainability, from a mobility perspective, calls for a transportation system that will live up to its expected role of being an efficient service provider to all sectors of the economy assisting their respective processes of value added growth. The benefits of income increase, as a result of this growth impetus, will ensure social sustainability if such is equitably trickled down to the masses. Moreover, social sustenance requires inclusivity of the masses, for which the availability and affordability of mobility solutions becomes necessary. Ensuring both the development effort and social inclusion therefore is necessary for socio-economic development sustenance, and expanded motorised transportation thus becomes an imperative associate of this process.

In the Sri Lankan context, transport provision by the State guaranteed social and economic sustainability during the post colonial period to the immediate post open economy in the late 1970's, thereby ensuring the country's environmental wellbeing. This same public transportation appears to have been incapable of sustaining its market share among transport modes amidst changing demand characteristics, both in terms of quality and quantity, driven by increasing per capita incomes and economic growth. The growing transportation needs of the society, since of late, have been met through increasingly letting the people source their own mobility solutions with the State sponsoring the infrastructure. This has resulted in the growth of private ownership of vehicles from a mere 200,000 in the 1980s to more than 2 million by 2011.

This method of responding to transportation needs to meet economic and social sustenance is giving rise to wide-spread negative externalities, by way of vehicular emissions, accidents and congestion, putting the third dimension of sustainable development, namely environmental sustainability, at risk. The conventional tool of attempting to mitigate this ill-effect has been through technological development, in terms of fuel standards, engineering advancements such as the introduction of catalytic converters, as well as through the imposition and enforcement of vehicular emission standards, aiming at enhanced efficiency of the usage of fossil fuels.

This triangular inter-relationship of the domains of sustainability in relation to transportation is subject to appraisal in this research paper. The methodology involves studying the historical trends of transport service provision and the role public transportation played in achieving socio-economic wellbeing, thus supporting development sustenance in the past. Changing development

paradigms and socio-economic perspectives are comparatively appraised in order to understand the evolving demand patterns and pressures, and also to project the resultant ambivalence between the need for growing transport supply to meet development imperatives and the negative impact such a trend is likely to have on sustainability parameters. The study focuses on identifying the conventional strategies adopted to address these sustainability concerns, and appraising in detail their adequacy and effectiveness, to examine whether a strategic re-orientation in transport policies is necessary to keep Sri Lanka from having to face a possible crisis in economic, social and environmental sustenance.

Keywords: sustainability, mobility, transportation, development, technology