Demographic and Economic Changes: Impacts on Urban Transport

Strategic Considerations and Inputs for the Green Paper on Urban Transport

Demographic change is widely considered as one of the main challenges for Europe and its societies now and in the near future. Declining birth rates, an increasing proportion of older age groups, and, especially in thriving urban areas, ever larger migrant groups are not only numeric issues of demography, but they are also going to change societies across Europe on an unprecedented scale. In addition, economic changes fostered by globalisation, and social transformation, most noteworthy the diversification of lifestyles, interact with demographics, both the population structure and its characteristics as well as opportunities and abilities of individuals and groups. Irrespective of changes in the total population, the structure of urban inhabitants is likely to undergo changes, most notably with regard to age structures.

On a European and national level, and indeed within local communities, a number of institutions, both private and public, are discussing the course, the process and the impact of demographic change. At present, most of the concerns are pivoting around issues such as the funding of pensions, the provision of healthcare as well as – to some extent – labour markets.

Effects of Demographic Change on Demand for and Supply of Means of Public Transport

However, the societal shift that demographic change will bring about in most countries is likely to affect all spheres of public life, among which urban transport is an exceedingly relevant one. It can be attributed to the dual role transport is playing in the process of demographic change: First, mobility patterns and demands in cities will considerably be transformed due to ageing and further social diversification. Second, mobility and, moreover transportation, can also contribute to give rise to attractive urban centres in favour of a cohesive urban society thus enabling all of the citizens to have an equal share in social, economic, political, and cultural life.

Depending on general conditions prevailing in urban areas, i.e. the population structure, economic sectors, employment rates amongst others, the actual population trends might differ considerably. In this regard, it is an essential question of whether or not a city is going to sustain a decrease in population. On the evidence of recent developments it is mainly small towns and cities with weak economies and already high unemployment rates that will suffer a decline in population as a result not only from demographic developments as such, but moreover from migration flows. Large cities as well as conurbations and metropolitan regions will not stand to see a decrease in population in the short or even medium term. However, the increasing proportion of older age groups gives rise to a number of challenges, in particular as regards urban transport.
Safeguarding Mobility for Seniors

With the proportion of older age groups on the increase those responsible for transport planning and the provision of adequate means of transport have to focus their policy and strategy more on their needs than was done in the past. The elders have different activity patterns, and consequently different needs of mobility than those still belonging to the workforce. For them, leisure, healthcare and recreational activities replace work as their main travel purpose. Travel distances tend to get shorter as the elderly follow their activities in the immediate surroundings of their place of residence. At the same time, a decline in physical abilities that comes along with old age requires special provisions to be made in vehicles, along roads and at stops in order to allow free and unrestricted travel in a barrier-free environment.

In all probability, future generations of seniors will be markedly different from those of yesterday and even today. In fact, the boundaries between different phases of life with regard to education, working life and retirement have already started to become blurred. Better health, longevity, diversified ways of living, and probably even the need to earn extra money in order to increase potentially decreasing retirement pensions, i.e. old-age poverty, may all generate mobility patterns that bear more resemblance to those of ‘active travellers’ than to those of ‘traditional retirees’. It concerns residential areas, places of activity as well as preferred modes of travel. Whether or not a generalised possession of a driving licence among seniors will entail an increasing use of their cars remains to be discussed. Bearing in mind identified economic challenges to the elderly’s households accompanied by an anticipated increase in costs of individual transport as a result of rising crude oil prices, not all of the seniors will be able to satisfy their needs of mobility by car.

More Diverse Population Means More Diverse Transportation

Urban agglomerations are economic centres, which have been and will be centres of attraction for migrants. This is a particular phenomenon, since for economic and demographic reasons migration will gain in importance, and the proportion of people from a migratory background will rise. However, the needs of mobility felt by people from a different cultural background are usually not taken into consideration. Even more so, they are often not even known. Language abilities, norms of behaviour grounded in culture, varying activity patterns, driving skills and the ability to drive in large streams of traffic might lead to different attitudes towards and the use of transport.

The City for all People

Despite an increasing proportion of the elderly, all younger age groups ranging from infants to pupils, from students to the workforce, from junior to senior professionals, will continue to form large proportions of the urban population. There is need to anticipate potential conflicts of interests and demands with the aim of acting on them at the earliest possible stage so as to make the city a place worth living in for all of the generations. As regards transport, this means paying regard also to the activity patterns of youngsters. For example, school children and seniors have the frequent use of the bicycle and a focus on activities in the immediate vicinity of their homes in common. However, where they cycle to, and notably the way in
which they cycle (as regards speed, observance of traffic rules, behaviour) might be totally conflicting. Similarly, an appropriate public transport network available at night-time might not be of importance to elderly people, but to younger age groups. Clearly, transport is not the only factor that makes a city or an area attractive to young people and families, but an important factor nevertheless.

Demographic Trends and Resultant Spatial Patterns

As a result of urban sprawl, a process that has set in during the 1990s and is partly still ongoing, a great number of the elderly will reside in suburban and peripheral areas, which are not well connected to public transport. Therefore, their access to urban facilities might be restricted. Furthermore, concerns have been raised about probable age-related segregation, i.e. the splitting-up of urban areas into districts for young and old. Apart from social implications, this aspect too is of relevance to the transport sector for different demands in various districts require a supply of means of transport that calls for even greater diversification. Equally, migrants, and especially foreign nationals tend to live together in defined areas of the city. In conjunction with the foregoing, a varying mobility culture in the city, if not handled adequately, might render the system inefficient and inappropriate.

Economic Viability of Urban Transport at Stake

At this stage, planners and providers of urban transport are confronted with the need to ease the burden of transport costs on the budget. However, decreasing tax revenues due to the decline in the work force, and more expenditure for provisions induced by demography, health care, pensions, among others, will add to the pressure of cutting public spending. New forms of financing, mechanisms to increase efficiency, and more resourceful transport supply are all urgently needed. In the same way, the focus on transport grounded in the infrastructure should be replaced by one that centres around utilisation thereby taking into account the lifecycle of existing roads and railways. New infrastructure is not only expensive to build, but, in addition, requires continuous capital expenditure for maintenance, which might be better used for carrying out measures other than those of infrastructure. The construction of roads and tracks in excess of required capacity today might turn out to be an expensive legacy for future generations to deal with.

Appropriate Actions for the Transport Sector must be Defined Now

In addition, it is imperative not to postpone required actions in view of special characteristics inherent in the transport sector, i.e. the longevity of infrastructures, the often high costs incurred by creating a new system or adapting an existing one to new requirements, complex planning processes and their large number of actors involved, the need to cut down on costs while safeguarding mobility of citizens, companies and goods.

In conurbations special features of the population structure, notably the continuing gains from migration, both national and international, interact in such a way that demographic transition is slowed down when compared to rural areas and smaller settlements. This opens up an opportunity for official bodies to develop strategies to tackle the phenomenon of ageing and
of ever more heterogeneous inhabitants as well as possible population losses in the long term.

However, obviously, most European cities are not yet prepared for upcoming changes in the demand for and supply of means of transport. While most cities appear to be vaguely aware of the necessity to integrate the ‘demographic factor’ into urban, thus also transport policies, the overall perception can be characterised as one of uncertainty and doubt as to implications and the relevance of the demographic change to urban transport. A major difficulty appears to arise from the diversity of possible impacts on transport.

Nevertheless, communications between the city of Berlin and its twinned cities (e.g. within the framework of the project funded by the European Commission Pro.Mode – Prosperity, Mobility and Demographic Change in European Cities, for details see www.promode.biz) have revealed a great interest most cities have to be provided with relevant data and possible guidelines from European institutions on how to deal with forthcoming changes. In this context, interaction of demography and economic and societal transformation with changes in the population structure needs to be taken into account.

Need of Guidance for Cities and Actors

With regard to the complexity of all of these issues, cities need some guidance from the European Union to help them explore the relevance of demographic and economic change to their specific transport-related context. The upcoming Green Paper is an opportunity for cities to publicly discuss these issues, which will help them to find solutions in order to render their transport systems “demographically sustainable”.

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