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TGRG page

Report on the International Geographical Congress, Glasgow, August 2004

For the first time in 40 years, the Congress of the International Geographical Union took place in the UK, convening in Glasgow, Scotland in August 2004. Around 2000 geographers from around the globe came together to share ideas and visions on their research and the wider issues facing the discipline. The 2004 RGS-IBG* Annual Meeting took place as part of the convention, with a most intensive one-day conference session providing a first-class opportunity for dialogue between international colleagues.

The theme of the Transport Geography Research Group session (which was again jointly convened with our sister groups in the US and Germany), reflected that of the Congress as a whole, namely sustainability. Within this, the submitted papers addressed sustainability in two ways: the sustainability of transport activities around the world, and the sustainability of transport geography itself as a vital sub-discipline within the broad church of contemporary geography. This report focuses on the first set of papers; the next TGRG page will review the second collection.

Richard Knowles and Lisa Davidson (University of Salford, UK) presented research from Greater Manchester on the effectiveness of Bus Quality Partnerships, a regulatory device designed to overcome the negative impacts of free on-road competition. Despite more than 40 years of declining use, buses are still the main form of local public transport in Britain outside central London. Bus Quality Partnerships—agreements between highway authorities and bus operators to give buses priority access and invest in better quality buses—can reverse this decline and sometimes also attract car drivers to change modes and ease urban traffic congestion. Preliminary results suggest that Bus Quality Contracts, franchising or some other type of 'controlled competition' are needed to increase bus usage, encourage more modal shift and reduce traffic congestion.

David Bole (Slovenian Academy of Arts) again focused on bus transport, applying various behaviour modelling techniques to analyse the changing structure of public transport in Ljubljana. Variables included the rate of car ownership, modal split, employment changes and pricing. The paper discussed how with increased prosperity and accession to the European Union, Slovenia was facing many of the trends in public transport decline previously experienced by other EU states. Matej Gabrovec (Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts) developed this analysis, analysing how new structures of bus regulation in Solvenia were being designed to maximised the sustainability and accessibility of bus transport across the country.

Tomasz Komornicki (Polish Academy of Sciences) also addressed the transport impacts of liberalisation and increasing prosperity in a former Eastern bloc state. Although Poland is currently experiencing one of the highest rates of growth in car ownership in Europe, little research has been presented to date analysing the spatial implications of this. Tomasz therefore focused on the regional diversification of motorization at the county level in terms of its volume, structure and dynamics, revealing several significant variances.

Given the compact urban form of the cities in the former German Democratic Republic, planners and policymakers hoped by the beginning of the 1990s that with the preservation of the urban structure a sustainable transport system could develop and become a best practice showcase for other Western regions. However, reality quickly showed that both land use and travel patterns were developing along Western lines, with the suburbanization of shopping and housing leading to car dependency. Martin Lanzendorf (Centre for Environmental Research Halle-Leipzig) probed the underlying forces driving this change, including a number of "missing factors" such as policy leadership and re-imaging public transport that could have minimised the shift to the car.

Staying with Germany, Willi Loose, Mario Mohr and Claudia Nobis (German Aerospace Centre) discussed the role of car sharing as an important component in promoting sustainable transport. Even though car sharing has increased rapidly, only 0.1% of all persons having a driving licence in Germany participate in car sharing initiatives. The paper presented results from a comprehensive household survey, indicating a variety of barriers to the development of car sharing initiatives.

Holger Dalkmann (University of Duisburg, Germany) focused on the impacts of the European Directive on Strategic Environmental Assessment, which will oblige EU member states to integrate environmental aspects at an earlier stage of their planning processes

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than has been the case to date. Following a presentation on the legislation itself, Holger reviewed the different national interpretations of the Directive, the threats to its successful implementation, and how it could broaden its perspective on sustainability to include social and economic aspects.

Maria Attard (University of Malta) addressed similar legal issues arising from the publication of Malta's first Land Transport White Paper in early 2004, which marked the first efforts to promote sustainable mobility in the country. Increased focus on sustainability has developed due to a number of factors, including Malta's accession to the European Union in May 2004, and rapid increases in economic growth, incomes and car ownership. The paper reviewed the preparation of the White Paper and the approaches adopted relative to the local socio-political and economic situation, describing the influence of emerging policy networks as well the legacies of past informal policies. A number of challenges for Malta, specifically how to develop a modern public transport system, were analysed.

Two papers analysed political impacts on transport at the national and regional scales. Clive Charlton (University of Plymouth, UK) explored and questioned the evolution of an increasingly prominent and diverse 'voluntary', 'third sector' in Britain's rail system, in particular in the guise of community rail partnerships. Perhaps more than any other mode, the railways have long attracted a strong input of unpaid support and enthusiasm, with a variety of local 'rail user groups' operating, with varying degrees of influence, over several decades.

The validity and potential contribution of community rail partnerships has become widely appreciated. The paper reviewed the potential for devolving some responsibility for the management of rural branch lines, possibly including some form of 'micro-franchise' arrangement, and how the increasing involvement of the third sector in the rail system can be set within wider debates on policy design and implementation. management and the advantages inherent in a more integrated railway system, with its economies of scale, extensive and varied expertise and broader planning horizons.

Tobias Behnen (University of Hannover, Germany) presented a fascinating paper into the politics of airport planning in Europe. Although the demand for air transport has been growing, in many European countries there is no sufficient airport capacity where it is needed, and over-capacity elsewhere. While major metropolitan hubs are overcrowded the number of third level airports outside agglomerations has been growing. Some are completely new, others are enlarged airfields or converted airbases, especially in Germany. They are often dependent on subsidies from local and regional government, but many are unlikely to be economically sustainable. The paper therefore developed a scheme for airport capacity planning at the national level, discussing the reduction of avoidable traffic, emissions, noise and land consumption.

Moving to freight transport, Markus Hesse (Free University of Berlin, Germany) reviewed the efforts of planners in the region to develop a quality freight facilities to underpin economic development. Yet, despite broad practical experience, concrete effects in terms of significant transport shifts or environmental benefits seem to be limited to date, raising questions about both the strategy implemented and general limitations of regional logistics strategies.

Miguel Pazos-Otón, Rubén Lois-González (University of Santiago, Spain) and Pilar Alonso-Logroño (University of Lleida, Spain) presented the results of their research on two different transport management models for Santiago de Compostela, a World Heritage city. Specifically, they addressed the potential for non-motorized modes to play a greater role in overall mobility in the city, and how the city itself might be re-planned to minimize the intrusion of the car.

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