

Sustainability orientation of transport sector development in Sri Lanka

T.L. Gunaruwan¹ and Indunil Sannasooriya¹

Abstract

The quality of transport services in the country is not reflected by the private ownership of motor vehicles; but through the sustainability indicators of the sector, looked from three different angles namely, Economic, Social and Environmental sustainability. Cost effectiveness in investment and operations and a greater degree of national self-reliance indicates Economic Sustainance while equitable access and affordability of transport services would indicate Social Sustainance. Environmental sustainability is indicated through minimized negative externalities such as emissions, congestion and accidents. Literature reveals that private vehicle ownership in developing countries with high population densities would not contribute towards improving these sustainability dimensions; rather would worsen them. Market mechanism is known to fail in pushing sustainability drivers forward, warranting policy intervention to guide the sector's progress towards sustainability. The present research was conducted to examine how different sustainability oriented transport modes are used in Sri Lanka. Fuel intensity in different transport modes was analyzed as a proxy indicator of their comparative orientation towards environmental and economic sustenance. Public investment into Railways, Highways and State Bus Transport development were examined to perceive sustainability impetus of public policy. Secondary data used in the study were obtained from literature as well as from the Central Bank of Sri Lanka annual report from 1982 – 2017. Graphical representation, observing trends and political economic reasoning were used as analytical methods. Results indicated that the present trend of model share evolution is not sustainable. Model share of highly fossil fuel intensive private transport modes was found increasing, implying greater carbon emissions, pollution, congestion, accidents and worsened Balance of Payment problems on account of vehicular and fuel imports. The Government policies did not appear geared to reverse these unsustainable trends, as reflected by the increased public capital expenditure on highways development compared to what was channeled to railway development and state bus sector development. Study concluded with a call for re-orientation of public policy towards sustainability.

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¹ University of Colombo: Corresponding author's email: tlgun@econ.cmb.ac.lk