

‘PEDESTRIANS DON’T BUILD THE ECONOMY’: WHY WALKING POLICIES DON’T MATCH POLICY OUTCOMES IN AFRICAN CITIES

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ABSTRACT

There is currently a limited understanding of the underlying barriers and enablers in African cities that may influence the development of walking or pedestrian policies and the implementation of existing policies. A recent review of institutional and political factors affecting walking and urban transport policy in Africa suggested that more insight is needed into the political processes and decision-making in transport in Africa. This paper contributes insight into these processes by sharing formative research around the gaps between walking (or NMT/Non-Motorised Transport) policy statements, and policy outcomes, in African cities. This research involved in-depth interviews with thirteen key informants from transport and planning sectors across the continent, undertaken to facilitate further engagement with policy and decision-makers in African cities as part of a training event in East Africa in June 2022. Through asking questions about how walking is currently valued as a transport mode in Africa, the authors identify five hypotheses for why walking policies do not match policy outcomes in African cities.

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1. BACKGROUND

Despite its importance as a major transport mode, there is not yet an extensive body of knowledge and scholarly work regarding walking in Africa (Behrens *et al.*, 2016; Jennings *et al.*, 2019; Loo and Siiba, 2019; Porter, Abane and Lucas, 2020). Much of the research and policy attention on walking resides in developed countries, especially in North America, Europe and Australia (Bassett *et al.*, 2008; Jennings, 2020). African countries have to rely heavily on developed country evidence and expertise, where the focus is on increasing the uptake of walking; this focus may not necessarily have relevance to African cities (Jobanputra and Jennings, 2021), where the challenge in Africa is how to retain the walking mode share in the face of poor road safety, marginal infrastructure, and limited other pedestrian facilities. Further, walking in Africa is uniquely affected by complex demographic, economic, social, geographic and historical conditions that differ from developed countries (Anciaes, Nascimento and Silva, 2017).

Much of the limited work that does exist in Africa takes the form of what Behrens *et al.* (2016) describe as ‘descriptive, epidemiological and demographic analysis of pedestrian crash causalities’ and the analysis of pedestrian infrastructure networks. There is little

social science, or qualitative work, undertaken to understand the political economy of pedestrian travel, and the majority of scholarly studies in Africa are within engineering or public health disciplines (Sagaris *et al.*, 2022). As a result, from a policy perspective, there is currently a limited understanding of the underlying barriers and enablers that may influence the development of new transport and urban planning policies and the implementation of existing policies (Figueroa, Fulton and Tiwari, 2013; Behrens *et al.*, 2016; Khayesi *et al.*, 2017; Jennings *et al.*, 2019; Tiwari *et al.*, 2020).

A recent review of institutional and political factors affecting walking and urban transport policy in Africa suggested that more insight is needed into political processes and decision-making in transport in Africa (Khayesi *et al.*, 2017). As Behrens *et al.* (2016) ask, 'in the face of the overwhelming statistical evidence of the numerical importance of walking and the safety risks with which pedestrians have to contend, [why] does [walking] receive so little policy attention and resource allocation in African cities?'

This is a question this paper begins to explore, during preparatory qualitative research undertaken to prepare for further engagement with policy and decision-makers in African cities as part of a training event in East Africa in June 2022. Through asking questions about how walking is currently valued as a transport mode in Africa, the authors aim to identify hypotheses for why walking policies do not match policy outcomes in African cities.

2. METHOD

Thirteen key informants, knowledgeable and experienced in transport-related policy and practice in Africa, were invited to participate in interviews designed to understand how walking is currently valued in Africa. Interviewees reflect a diverse range of expertise and professions, including stakeholders from government authorities, non-government organizations (NGOs) and universities (Table 1). In line with principles of purposeful sampling, all participants were selected because of their ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and insightful manner, and were willing to take part in the study (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015).

Participants were interviewed by telephone or remote online communication (one interview was conducted via email due to limited availability) in December 2020 and January 2021. Interviews were transcribed in real-time, verbatim, by the interviewer (GJ), who has previous experience of interviewing policy actors from low-income countries using these same methods (Jennings, 2015, 2020).

2.1 Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, which is a flexible approach involving the coding of frequently occurring themes across the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2008). Coding was initially completed by the first author of the project, followed by discussions with two other members of the research team with expertise in qualitative research and the topic area.

Interview quotes are presented as the type of organization the participant works for and the country where they work. For example, '(Local NGO; Kenya)' indicates that the participant works for a Local NGO in Kenya. Interviewees are only quoted when illustrating a particular point.

Table 1: Interviewee characteristics

Interviewee	Organization Type	Sector	Region	Country of Work
1	University/ Research	Transport	West Africa	Nigeria
2	Local NGO	Health	East Africa	Kenya
3	Local NGO	Transport	Southern Africa	Zambia
4	Inter-governmental agency	Transport	West Africa	-
5	University/ Research	Health	West Africa	Ghana
6	City/ Local government	Environment	Southern Africa	South Africa
7	University/ Research	Transport	East Africa	Uganda
8	City/ Local government	Transport	West Africa	Senegal
9	City/ Local government	Transport	Southern Africa	South Africa
10	International NGO	Health	International	-
11	City/ Local government	Transport	Sub-Saharan Africa	-
12	International NGO	Land use planning	East Africa	Ethiopia
13	City/ Local government	Transport	West Africa	Nigeria

3. FINDINGS

Five hypotheses were identified, outlined below.

3.1 Walking is Seen as Irrelevant to Economic Progress

Interviewees perceived that transport modes that can create an income or attract investment are prioritised over walking because of the perception that “pedestrians don’t build the economy” (City/ Local government; Senegal). For example, investments are prioritised in transport modes that seemingly have clear economic impacts, such as “commuter trains and road systems that enable transport of goods and services that have an economic rationale” (International NGO; International).

Therefore, interviewees said that walking is not perceived as making contributions to these economic drivers, so priority is given to motorized transport modes that fit into existing conventional transport value systems based on perceived economic drivers rather than human and societal contributions (e.g. Health and wellbeing, sustainability).

“How does 3 metres of walking paths help me generate economic wealth? This is the kind of calculation that decision-makers are undertaking.” (International NGO; International).

3.2 Walking Does Not Fit Traditional Success Criteria

Many interviewees believed that walking is often not perceived as something to be respected. Interviewees believed that the lack of respect stemmed from the perception that only poor people walk and that poor people have less value than those with money.

“And because of this dreaded concept of the value of time [time savings are traditionally a key metric for the appraisal of transport schemes], we need to monetize things. We look at the value of them, the value of life – and then the average pedestrian, even a pedestrian in a multi-modal trip, has a lower value of time than any car user.” (City/ Local government; SSA).

Walking “is not considered aspirational” (City/ Local Government; South Africa) and is not even perceived as a transport mode, as ‘transport’ implies the mode choices beyond walking. However, some interviewees highlighted that the perception that only poor people walk is misconceived, as walking is required for almost all trips.

“There is this perception that only poor people walk. But we know that is not true. We know that 30-40% of public transport trips start with walking – everyone is walking at some point. Even if you park your car and walk, you are walking.” (City/ Local government; Nigeria).

Despite these challenges, interviewees were optimistic that “changing the narrative of how we measure success” (Urban planner; Ethiopia) would result in walking being better supported and invested in. In particular, interviewees often talked about the many human, societal, and environmental benefits of walking, and believed that strengthening these links would help better support walking in practice.

“Rather than developing facilities for walking as being seen as anti-development, even anti-poor, we need to link it to development, to decongestion, people walking is good for health and environmental reasons.” (City/ Local government; Nigeria).

Some interviewees specifically mentioned that African aspirations should not borrow from those in the developed world, instead suggesting that Africa should appreciate walking as an asset that should be embraced.

“We need to play to our strengths; we do not need to emulate what is in the west. We can also keep our own traditions. We have been walking, why must we eradicate this? Of course, roads are good for industry and business, but that should not mean we must act as if we should all have cars. That is the American dream, it is not our dream.” (Local NGO; Kenya).

The importance of collecting data was emphasized as a way of demonstrating success, including baselining and demonstrating impacts on walking outcomes. Interviewees said that data needs to be relevant for transport decision-makers, as data on other aspects such as health was perceived as less important for decision makers to take notice.

“I do think, and this is another barrier – there is a lot of walking research, but not in the right places; it’s all from a public health perspective, looking at affected life years, walking more, and eating less, life years saved. But it is not translated into transportation.” (City/ Local government; SSA).

3.3 Walking Policies Exist for the ‘Wrong’ Reasons

Most interviewees worked in countries where there were existing NMT policies. However, interviewees unanimously recognized that any existing NMT policies were ineffective in delivering action to support walking.

“...in transport plans, you see priority statements, that priority will be given to NMT, and they highlight this. But the contradiction is in the effort, the real practice, to actually make sure that the positions advanced in the policy statements are indeed carried through.” (International NGO; International).

“Everyone seems to have an NMT policy, but we need to examine the budget. It's the classic issue: check where an organization is spending its money. You know that pedestrians are not a priority when you see where the money is being spent.” (City/ Local government; South Africa).

Political commitments were perceived by interviewees as a way of attracting investment from inter-governmental organizations, rather than as a means for long-term commitment to action.

“I could compare our government to a dating app – where there are the best pictures, the best selves, to attract investors and the nods from the WHO and the World Bank, that Kenya is really doing their bit. But on the ground, like with the dating app, when you meet the person in person at a cafe, you wonder if this is actually the same person.” (Local NGO; Kenya).

One interviewee highlighted that “competition for funding is also a barrier, so infrastructure takes preference to long-term monitoring and evaluation” (International NGO; International), which suggests that limited funding prevents the delivery of other actions beyond infrastructure that would increase the value of walking, such as data collection.

3.4 Road Engineering is the Dominant Knowledge Rather Than Street Design

A lack of capacity was recognized by interviewees as a key barrier to successfully implement adequate walking infrastructure into street design due to insufficient knowledge about designing the approaches to cities. Interviewees particularly emphasised the lack of applied design knowledge from engineers. Some participants talked about pedestrian crossings as an example of the lack of street design knowledge, suggesting that pedestrian crossings are inappropriately used by engineers as a road safety solution.

“Urgent actions include not doing certain actions: there needs to be an internalization and action that pedestrian bridge crossings do not work. They are almost always in the wrong location, they are completely unsafe from a security perspective, they are strenuous.” (city/ local government; SSA).

One interviewee highlighted that the issue of capacity is exacerbated beyond major cities, especially in the smaller or rural areas, and “there is little knowledge about designing the approaches to cities, the linkages from dense urban areas to rural” (Urban planner; Ethiopia).

3.5 Pedestrian and Communities are Not Involved in Planning

Interviewees wanted to see more involvement of communities in government decision making processes, suggesting that governments lack representation of people who are doing the walking and therefore do not understand their needs.

“It is very important to involve the target groups, to capacitate them, the women, the disabled people. We sit down with them, and say, this is what the policy says, what do you want them to do?”(Local NGO; Zambia).

Interviewees believed that there needs to be more focus on understanding how pedestrians perceive their walking environment. There was a sense that there is a complete discrepancy about what decision makers think a pedestrian experience is, and what the people who are walking actually experience. Interviewees suggested that we need to empathize with the needs of pedestrians to better provide for people walking.

“They [the government] are humans, and if they can understand viscerally the importance of pavements, of street lights, drop kerbs, they would be informed when they have to insist on changes and contracts.” (Local NGO; Kenya).

4. DISCUSSION

These interviews indicate that financial motivation is a key driver of the prioritisation of motorised transport modes, as walking is not perceived as a mode that makes any contribution to the way that transport projects are currently appraised in terms of cost or benefit. Walking is not necessarily understood as a transport mode in its own right, and therefore something that a transport department should be spending funds on to facilitate or improve. Further, biases in the current funding system towards motorised transport lead to inadequate resourcing of building walking infrastructure interventions, but also of key delivery processes such as data collection, monitoring and evaluation, and public engagement.

Despite these barriers, participants were optimistic that it is not too late for African cities to address the urban and policy challenges around walking. Participants suggested that a key enabler to effectively increase the value of walking is to change how success is defined, toward a conceptualisation that enables Africa to embrace walking as an asset, rather than aspire to an unsustainable motorised future as witnessed in developed countries.

Participants often were of the view that to change the approach toward walking will require increased responsibility and leadership from national government – as is often the case in cities that have made the most progress towards equity and sustainability, the relevant authority has made bold political decisions to shift the process forward (Venter, Mahendra and Hidalgo, 2019). However, there was recognition that actors in institutions outside of national government must also take responsibility to ensure improved coordination and collaboration across the many disparate entities involved in urban transport. Most importantly, communities’ involvement was perceived as key to ensure that context-sensitive solutions are developed that address the real needs of the people walking, and ultimately governments held to account so that they deliver a quality experience as a priority, that makes walking an aspirational transport mode.

5. STUDY STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

By focusing on key stakeholder groups working within Africa’s complex urban transport institutional system, this study has begun to unlock the nuances and identified key levers of change in the system. As a result, the findings have helped to identify what might be necessary to make substantial progress in terms of providing adequate implementation

of walking infrastructure and services. The approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of the nuances using rich qualitative data from one-to-one interviews.

The study had a number of limitations. Although this research shares insight from a diverse range of stakeholders from different organisations, sectors and regions, it is likely that most participants were already engaging with walking issues and therefore may not represent the views of regions doing less for walking. Further, the research did not examine the perspectives of communities who are doing the walking. This could have provided additional insights into the most effective solutions, particularly around the inclusion of community groups within transport planning, practices and governance systems.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

While this research cannot be generalised across the whole of Africa, these findings do have implications for future policy and practice in this field. Importantly, these findings suggest the implementation of walking policies in African cities could potentially be delivered within existing resources: broadly speaking, the requisite staff, funding, and space seemingly already exist, but it is not equitably allocated. Solutions that enable the mobilisation of such resources more efficiently and equitably through the exchange of data, methodologies, training, knowledge and best practice, could therefore provide the most effective approach to enable walking. For example, there are stakeholders within governments and other organisations who are primed to provide for better walking experiences but lack the support, knowledge, or particular skills to do so. Similarly, there are substantial funding imbalances between investment for motorised transport compared to walking infrastructure and services, which indicates that solutions should be viewed as reprioritisation of budgets and funding allocation. Hence, reframing solutions to address the urban challenges in Africa as the mobilisation of existing resources that are currently inequitably allocated, rather than as a complete overhaul of the system, may be the most optimal approach to facilitate the rapid deployment of suitable solutions.

Stakeholders recognised that the direct participation of low-income citizens and citizen groups in policy and practice is critical to address the daily dangers and struggles that the majority of people living with low income have to put up with when walking is forgotten in the decision-making process. The arguments for citizen engagement in urban governance (i.e. Inclusive governance) are widely known (Wolfram, 2016; Herrmann-Lunecke, Mora and Sagaris, 2020). New relationships are therefore required to ensure that citizens are actively involved in decision making for both quick-win improvements and longer-term transport solutions (Venter, Mahendra and Hidalgo, 2019). Mechanisms to facilitate these relationships between governments and low-income communities will require new types of training for those working in governments, as well as new modes of governance to empower communities to have more influence over the environments in which they walk. Such tools could include ways for communities to share their dissatisfaction with the existing walking environment, which could also provide an impact feedback loop post works.

Lessons can also be taken from other fields and other locations to explore context-relevant examples of how local governments can effectively engage with local citizens to collaborate and shift towards more equitable and sustainable planning and practices (Ziervogel, 2019) – but guarding against an uncritical adoption of ‘best practice’ (Jennings, 2020; Jobanputra and Jennings, 2021). The environmental justice framework

provides a conceptual framework that is relevant in this context, in that community groups bearing the load of environmental and health burden should be actively involved in the design, analysis and implementation of solutions to reduce such inequalities (Corburn, 2004).

Agreeing on a more robust Africa-relevant framework for monitoring success could potentially help rebalance prioritisation of funding. That is, to influence governments and external agencies to commit the necessary financial and technical resources to prioritise walking, there must be measurable targets in place for specific indicators to target Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but which are relevant to the African context. This indicator framework should be developed locally within existing resources and with feedback from communities to ensure that the issues identified in this study around a lack of community engagement are adequately addressed. Crude measures which reduce risk and increase the number of kilometres of constructed footpaths are a good start, but an increased focus on the quality of the walking experience is needed, so that safety, accessibility and comfort levels can be integrated into understanding the walking level of service. Such measurable targets will help to ensure that the significant investments required can be appraised to ensure they are effective in delivering value and creating change. Establishing this framework for success would enable investment towards training and capacity building to develop the technical expertise and know-how to implement policies and effective solutions on walking.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study found that stakeholders perceived walking as undervalued by stakeholders and by those who do not have to walk. Barriers to change were ineffective policies and limited capacity and knowledge to affect change. Importantly, a major constraint for African city authorities to support walking is the imbalance of funding, rather than just the overall availability of funding. A redefinition of a successful mobility system was perceived as necessary to transform the way that walking is valued, but taking joint responsibility across stakeholders is critical.

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