Challenges to the urban collective transport sector for the Brazilian sustainable development

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Abstract

A synthesis is presented of the result of qualitative research aiming at the analysis of the general marketing background of the Brazilian operators of urban collective transport in metropolitan areas and its organisational universe so as to identify the challenges they will have to face in the next years, particularly those related to the production of better quality service. This interpretation of the sectional reality has been developed through direct observation and field studies using as research instrument the TRANSCENDER procedure [1] with a view to bringing up opportunities for improving the quality of services. Challenges have been listed for several stakeholders. They are numerous and very relevant. Overcoming them calls for a radical change of attitude and behaviour of the different agents so as to achieve social negotiation for sustainable development of Brazilian cities, since the technical solution for each of them is well known.

1. Introduction

The chief aim of scientific work, whatever its level and theme, is to propose new approaches to old problems or to use those already known in order to solve new problems. In this article, the old problem of unsatisfactory quality of urban collective transport services in Brazilian metropolitan areas is approached through an angle different from the usual.

This new angle is the result of a process of reflection on field studies conducted to evaluate the quality of urban collective transport services in Brazil.
considering the viewpoints of users, directors and employees of the operating companies. As data were being collected, it was possible to interact with 25 organisations of several kinds (profitable, non-profitable, productive, some of them of an associative nature of entrepreneurs, employees or technical people, of different sizes and scopes, operating different technologies, state-owned and private, legalised or otherwise, and so on) during the 1980’s and 90’s in Brazil. Fernandes [1]

Such reflection is justifiable, among other reasons, for the intensification of the discussion on sustainable urban development, a definition of which could be the union of economical, social and environmental aims of the community living in the area under analysis. Thus defined, the sustainable development can be evaluated by a significant measurement parameter: the quality of life. Besleme [2]

Theoretically, the improvement of individuals’ quality of life has been a permanent goal of mankind. However, depending on the world view of decision makers, completely different actions are adopted, with varied results in the lives of those involved.

Considering that billions of unique beings inhabit the planet, with absolutely varied needs, wishes, expectations and perceptions of reality, it becomes important to understand the complexity of projects to improve people’s life quality in a non-excluding and sustainable way.

Besides, considering that life is a dynamic process in which “nothing is more permanent than changing” Heraclitus [3], it becomes clear that the growth of its complexity has been directly proportional to the growth in the number and degree of concentration of people in space through the years.

Thus, the high degree of urban concentration of the world population generates problems, which can be observed daily, including those related to the displacement of people to their activities. Such problems have not been adequately solved yet in most of Brazilian metropolitan areas in order to bring about this so constantly sought after improvement of the life quality.

In reality, if quality of life means to improve people’s life in an extensive way, it’s indispensable to put into effect a plan that might benefit the highest possible number of people. But how to determine which measures should be adopted, face to such a wide range of needs, wishes, expectations and perceptions about the meaning of improvement of life quality in contemporary urban societies?

It becomes quite clear that, for those directly involved, it is necessary to fully understand the expected pattern of life quality, in all its dimensions, so that adequate decisions may be taken on what measures to adopt. This necessarily implies the involvement of those affected in, at least, a consultation process.

Surely, this meaning is conditioned by the view of the world of those affected, which, in turn, is also conditioned by cultural, psycho-social, political and economic factors, among others, in an interactive and dynamic way, depending, therefore, among other factors, on the stage of socio-economic development in which they live.
Thus, the most likely reason for the endless attempts to promote improvements in life quality having not yet come to fruition, at least as far as humanists are concerned, lies in the fact of decisions on what must be carried out having not adequately considered the subjective and specific aspects involved in the understanding of the meaning of expected pattern of life quality for each social group in different societies.

Furthermore, such groups coexist in the daily life of urban areas, interacting according to their particular perspectives, playing their different roles and trying to optimise the cost-benefit relation in their lives, which does not apply only to the economic dimensions but also to the physical, rational, emotional, intuitive and spiritual aspects of their "existence".

Since the optimum of a system does not contemplate the optimisation of all its parts, it becomes evident that, directly associated to the need of understanding the meaning of the expected life quality pattern, there is also the essential need of designing a process for taking decisions which may stimulate an ample and authentic democratic social negotiation, which will guide decision makers in relation to what must be considered the maximum limits in terms of losses and gains. This could minimise social exclusion, which naturally occurs in countries under market economies.

Face to such complexity, instruments must be developed to contribute to widen the social awareness of the meaning of life quality and of all its aspects so as to make it possible to accomplish more and more complete evaluations of the perceptions of the different stakeholders, such as citizens, government and private organisations, profitable or non-profitable.

Such consciousness widening will eventually lead to the incorporation of particular meanings of life quality of each social group in the decision-making process, be it for a higher degree of social responsibility by some of their agents, be it for the opportunity of increasing earnings through the resulting growth of the consumer market, essential to the healthy survival of the reigning order which will occur in cities with a sustainable development.

But are the existing mechanisms for the evaluation of the meaning of life quality currently being used in Brazil and in most cities in the world capable of measuring that meaning in the least manipulative way, enabling its interpretation and its turning into concrete specific actions, considering the degree of social complexity we live in?

In Brazil, as in the whole world, accountability mechanisms have been used as a way of identifying that meaning as well as justifying to society in general those actions, which may be deemed responsible for the organisations to construct a better world. However, according to the FIDES [4], the consideration of the social aspects in harmony with the other aspects of the strategic planning of the organisations is only a first step in designing a process of accountability. However, it is still not used in Brazil with the desired frequency. Thus, the question remains of the convenience of creating, improving or spreading the use of this kind of mechanisms.

In order to answer these questions it is necessary to understand the specifics involved in each of the aspects that constitute the meaning of life quality.
spite of the fact that the ideal approach to matters of this kind is going beyond the subject matter in question, it has been decided to report, among the several aspects connected to the understanding of the meaning of life quality, the challenges to be faced by urban collective transport sector.

This sector's choice as object of study is due chiefly to the fact that its quality affects people's life quality as it alters the personal aspects as much as the free time remaining to the population of a given city, its users' health, the productivity of the several economic sectors and, consequently, the price-quality-quantity relation of the goods and services produced and consumed by people, since, according to Heskett, Sasser and Hart [5], quality and productivity are faces of the same coin and vary directly one with the other.

It should be added that the inadequate quality of urban collective transport generates economic holes that contribute to harm the quality of the service itself, since the worsening of its performance increases the number of cars in circulation, bringing on more traffic jams, increasing the energy consumption and causing a decrease in the quality of the environment and, consequently, of people's lives.

For this sector to improve the quality of its services rendered in a consistent and effective way, it is necessary that its directors become aware of the challenges to be faced and change their general attitude to them, especially since the problems of today cannot be solved according to the same logic that originated them. [6]

2. A Synthetic Characterisation of the Sector in Question

In spite of the fact that, in Brazil, the collective transport systems are ultimately a combination of all the means of transport, the predominance in metropolitan areas is of the highway system, which holds 80% of the total, followed by the combined metro-railway system, with 6%. ANTP [7]

There are approximately 20 Brazilian urban metro-railway systems, covering 15 cities – ANTP [7], most of them still operated by state-owned companies, five of them under the government of a state of the union and three of them under the federal government, the federal companies being currently handed over to the government of the respective state or privatised. These companies directly employ 20,000 people. It should be noted that, during the period under observation, following the government's orientation, all of them had the experience of implementing total quality programmes and were going through a profound institutional transformation.

There are approximately 2,000 companies in the sector of urban highway collective transport, most of them private. It is estimated that these companies directly employ an approximate 450,000 people, which places the sector as an important job generator. The companies are mostly small or average, with a fleet of approximately 50 buses. However, all the metropolitan areas, excepting Belo Horizonte, have companies with fleets of approximately 130 buses. In São Paulo, Brasilia and Rio de Janeiro, the NTU [8] reveals the existence of mega companies.
These companies evolved from an improvised administration, by the middle of the 20th century, to a more professional administration, directed mainly to production and productivity. These targets can probably be explained by the fact that the sector had its last cycle of economic growth between 1945 and 1975, without intense competition, but with the public power stimulating its concentration in an increasingly smaller number of companies in operation by stipulating a higher minimum number of vehicles per fleet. Pereira [9]. During the last decades, data processing started being used, without, however, reorganising the production process.

3. Challenges to the Brazilian Sector of Urban Collective Transport.

The biggest challenge in the sector is related to the directors or the people who hold the decision taking power in both private and public organisations. They must learn how to share and take decisions in the diversity of a quickly changing world, radically changing their current practices and demanding a new kind of attitude towards the other stakeholders.

To the directors of the conceding public power, the main challenge will be the transformation of the entities in charge of planning and controlling the urban collective transport service into agile organisations directed to obtaining transport results that may be defended socially.

But what are transport results that may be defended socially? Those obtained by conceiving and operating an integrated system of metropolitan transport aimed at reducing as much as possible the social costs of its existence while widening the benefits generated by it to the widest possible segment of the population.

To identify such costs and benefits, a process of social consultation must be conducted. It is now progressively easier to put into operation by using information technology. It is also important to feed a process of political decision where the directors of public institutions make such a process available to the participation of all stakeholders as well as transparent in such a way that any citizen may know and question it.

It is also necessary to revise the usual Brazilian model of evaluation and decision making on public policies since it favours the activation of public opinion rather than new decision processes that may guide the people in charge as to what must be considered the maximum limits of tolerance regarding one group’s losses and another’s gains in the process of choosing satisfactory patterns of urban collective transport service quality, or any other service of public interest, in order to minimise social exclusion.

The directors will also be challenged to learn how to deal with movements of the organised society that will call for a more systematic evaluation of the results of public policies related to the people in charge of decisions. Transparency of actions and, especially, the end of impunity, regarding decisions that directly affect the life quality of Brazilians will be more and more required.
The reader may be thinking: "This is all too subjective!" It is indeed. And the very fact that it is subjective and obvious makes this challenge even bigger.

The difference between a director of a city being traditionally administrated and another, whose administration has a view to the sustainable development, will be precisely his capacity of articulating the social interests to conceive an integrated system that does not favour this or that kind of transport taking into consideration just the investments previously made, especially by private agents. Such a system should favour the welfare state by helping to create a self-financing system oriented to the optimisation of the interests of most of society.

But how to incorporate this subjectivity while trying to specify something apparently technical like transport service quality? It may be said that the barriers to this incorporation have been eliminated, for now there are instruments like the TRANSCENDER [1] which facilitate the identification of the important requisites that must define the expected service quality to each social segments consulted. However, during its development, objective evidence demonstrated that the barriers for the use of this kind of mechanisms are merely political.

One of the political challenges to be faced is the necessity of articulating and deepening debates that, on the side, have been proposed, about the choice of market structure model and of the rules that must provide the guidelines for the concession contracts of the urban collective transport service, in order to revert the crescent concentration on the fare figures, the quality and the quantity of transport supply. If this kind of articulation does not happen, wrong decisions will continue being taken, especially by the government.

Another challenge associated to this articulation is the inclusion in this debate of all the stakeholders, such as the operators of several transport technologies, the conceding powers on several government levels and, unequivocally, the sector's users and employees, who have been historically excluded from these discussions.

This challenge brings another one with it: promoting the articulation of the interests of the several government levels, quite often held by widely different political parties. This will call for a change of the general attitude of the whole society in connection with the processes of choice and accompaniment of the actions of its political representatives in the all spheres. This way it will be possible to change political practices that still make room for the interference of "less distinguished" politicians in the formulation and accomplishment of public policies, aiming at obtaining privileges for specific social groups and, therefore, originating corruption and social decay.

There will also be the need of reverting the administrative discontinuity in the strategic planning of cities as well as changing the logic that subsidise it, in such a way that transport policies may be favoured, may be integrated to the other urban policies containing suggested systemic interventions through an integrated collective transport network that may optimise the accessibility and the mobility of the population and, simultaneously, may assure the environment's preservation.

Another must is the redefinition of the distribution of responsibilities among the operators of collective transport services and the granting power. It is
necessary to make it more emphatically clear to those in charge of each of the vital functions for its production with an adequate quality pattern like, e.g. the planning of the service's quality, the quantity to be offered, the itineraries, the fare to be fixed, the several possibilities of obtaining extra-operational resources, etc.

Another challenge is the redefinition of the approach of the agent roles. Since it is a public utility service, a certain lack of clear orientation on how it should be approached has been detected in most Brazilian cities. Since private companies mostly operate it, it is not clear if it should be viewed as public or private because of the nature of the service rendered. Therefore, all parties involved have something to lose, for decisions tend to be superficially taken.

The directors of both public and private organisations will have to learn how to make decisions based on facts and data, using adequate managing instruments that make it possible to evaluate the quality of the several above mentioned relationships in order to change the status quo.

The approach of the sector's experts also requires improving in order to incorporate concepts and managing instruments which may permit evaluating the differences among the characteristics of the expected service, the specified service and the service as rendered, discarding the sheer technical view in favour of a more humanistic one.

The change of attitude of the directors of transport operating companies will include the challenge of making most of them stop acting like organisations that do not respond to the market, being oriented only for production, and start acting like organisations that strongly respond to the market by having an efficient complaint service, by checking the expectations and degree of satisfaction of the several segments of stakeholders and by having their employees oriented to see users as the prime factor.

The state of the economy and the Brazilian political situation may affect the transport operators' capacity of investing in the service quality. The so called "informal" transport, having appeared in this context of crisis, will tend to grow and will probably be regulated, which is desirable in order to protect the users but not to create new market share protection.

Also, part of the sector will no longer have Brazilian capital only. Among other changes, national companies will become transnational. These changes call for a re-evaluation of the structural conceptualisation of the metropolitan transport system in order to raise conditions for the operators to render the service as desired by society. A natural consequence of operators being no longer strictly Brazilian is the incorporation of new values and beliefs that will interact with our culture, thus establishing new ways of managing the sector.

According to Kondratieff apud Lambin [10], the retaking of economic growth can be expected to happen as from 2005 and will propitiate the strengthening of the users' buying power, especially in the lower income social groups. In fact, it can help stopping the generalised decrease in the demand for services of urban collective transport observed in the last few years. Therefore, since transport being a means activity, it becomes a challenge for the directors of the sector, as much as or perhaps more so than for any other sector, to fight recession in Brazil.
One of the possibilities for the operators to try to get back the number of passengers they used to have in the past must be the creation of a customised service to be offered to the segments used to travel in their own cars, for attractive fares and with a quality of service making it as comfortable as travelling in their own cars. Another possibility is the creation of alternative collective services that may improve the comfort of the market segment willing to spend more with them, thus trying to get the user's loyalty in an operation area that is becoming more and more competitive. This customisation must take into consideration segments that are usually "forgotten", like handicapped users, thus, calling for new models of relationship between users and the frontline people, who must be ready to serve users efficiently and courteously.

The necessity of service customising is corroborated by observing the demographic changes that happen in the world, causing a fragmentation of the mass markets which are turned into micro-markets, the differences among them being determined by life-style, geographic placing and education. An indication of this process in the transport sector is the appearance of the "alternative transport" [11], which becomes successful for fulfilling the wish of a choice to be made and of "customised supply".

This example also illustrates the competition's influence on the improvement of the transport service quality. Since the appearance of the "informal transport", traditional companies started to offer, besides of a better service quality, an upgraded supply. This is an aspect to be considered in an innovative way while conceptualising transport integration, since, traditionally, the "market share protection" concept has been favoured under an economical point of view.

Taking this example as the starting point, it becomes evident that it is vital for this Brazilian sector to admit clearly that this service operates under the logic of competition, unlike countries that still adopt welfare state as a way to orienting public services rendering. The regulation of its degree of competition will help a more objective discussion of a new integrated concept of each metropolitan transport system, the modal distribution of which may favour the collective means as well as those with lower social costs. The new sector structure may consolidate a progressive increase in the rivalry among intra and intermodal competitors, sharing responsibilities according to their vocational trends.

Such a proposition is plainly acceptable considering that the low competitiveness detected in this field has been held responsible for the unsatisfactory pattern of quality, since the sector operates under conditions of regulated monopoly, or in situations where substitution seldom occurs, with the same domination of brands being detected among all the operators, with high exchange cost for users—at least in time.

Another point to consider is the fact that one of the most frequent substitutes is the individual transport that is not operated by any competitor. To have it replaced by public transport calls for a major change of the car users' habits and they will naturally demand to have quality, cost and availability in public transport similar to what they presently have in their transportation.

The users will demand the services rendered to be compatible with what has been promised and with the fares, a respectful treatment and the certainty that the
operator will take full responsibility for failures, recovering the service in time, or making amends for any inconveniences in accordance with the consumer's rights legislation.

In order to provide it, creativity in the service specifications and flexibility of its operation will be indispensable requisites for the organisational success, face to the possibility of having crescent competition. On the other hand, once this tendency has been recognised, it will be up to society and, particularly, to the transport sector to educate users, since pre-elementary level, so that the citizen participates in the construction of a better quality of transport service and does not behave inadequately while travelling, mainly because the unsatisfactory quality of services has generated behaviour disorders in users, who may act like "terrorists" or "vandals", if they are not very faithful and if they are unsatisfied.

Another kind of challenge is to be faced by the operators: the shortage or rise in prices of some of their basic input production items without the possibility of making up for this by raising fares, thus having the opportunity of re-evaluating their production processes as well as using new technologies in order to make these processes more efficient.

It's also expected that the operators' directors will pressurise the authorities to change the legislation that currently grants free admission to certain users. The change will aim at maintaining the benefit only for people who cannot afford transport expenses, since all segments of society have been claiming for more justice regarding taxes and fees.

The operators' employees will have more courage to demand their rights as citizens, an increasingly more respectful treatment and adequate working conditions, honesty regarding the sharing of profits deriving from their contribution and the rendering of services with a level of quality acceptable for the users so as to obtain a sense of harmony at work.

A more multifunctional view of job descriptions will be required so that all the stakeholders may sense the benefits that can be obtained with the use of new technologies. The operators will face difficulties in selecting, training and recycling their personnel, especially those employees who need recycling more badly in order to give a more adequate performance in their respective positions, due to the lack of interest in studying, according to research carried out by Datafolha [12].

It is also necessary to change the relationship between most of the operating companies and most of its employees in order to promote the development of individuals, groups and organisations in a wider sense, permitting them to increase profits and to improve the pattern of life quality, thinking of life at this point as physical, emotional, mental, intuitive and spiritual.

It is very important to widen the knowledge of relationship involving both the users' and the employees' satisfaction and loyalty, one being a consequence of the other, in order to obtain the exact measure of how necessary it is to invest in this relation.

The process of communication on pattern of transport service quality to be offered to users calls for transformation. The operators must make their
commitments with it more explicit. They should also stop being afraid of stimulating users to expect and demand results.

From the operators, society will demand special measures for the protection of the environment and the recycling of materials or the adequate disposal of useless materials. Besides, it will demand from the government – which will have to change its general attitude and behaviour- the control of the levels of the pollution generated by them.

With the intensification of the economic difficulties, it is probable that the directors of the other economic sectors start forcing the costs, direct and indirect, deriving from the transportation of their workers to be reduced in order to improve the productivity and quality of their business and, consequently, its competitiveness.

It is urgent to get to know better the relation between public and private operators and the degree of co-operation or competition among these operators in order to avoid many ill-natured conflicts that generate problems, especially for the users. The concept of chain of value and of narrowing of the relationship web of producing urban collective transport, aiming at improving the quality of the service ultimately offered to the user, still lacks investment in order to become a generalised reality in the sector.

A prime condition for all the transformations suggested on the basis of the observation of the state of the Brazilian practice is a change in leadership style. The new leadership style should adopt the ethics of respect and social responsibility to promote specific changes not only in the way of service production but, mainly, in the organisational culture, aiming at orienting the sector's organisations, so as to satisfy the existing and potential consumer market (beneficiary citizens).

4. Final Considerations

In brief, striking environmental transformations can be observed and they reverberate on the organisation and management of the urban transport operating companies and other agents in different sectors.

A new world order consolidates itself every day from the socio-economic transformation generated by the globalisation of the economy, inter-linking, through the financial system, each society with the world in a still quite unstable way.

It should be noted that all the interpretations in this article are of a temporary nature, serving only as reference for further discussion as well as starting point for future research or for setting the scene for subsidising sector planning.

Taking the human being as central to the theory, an attempt has been made to gather discussion topics that, until now, have been approached separately in this sector in Brazil. They need integration as they need to be included in the discussion of the quality of the service being studied, as an important dimension of the construction of life quality in a more human world.

In short, it is necessary to change the sector ways of exerting power, to reformulate the notion of integrated systems of metropolitan transport, its
financing ways, the distribution of responsibilities among the public and private agents as regards the planning, operation, evaluation and inspection of the transport service quality and, last but not least, the education of citizens enabling them to learn how to exercise their rights and perform their duties more consciously.

Lastly, it is necessary to adopt a holistic and humanistic approach, thus rescuing the connection between discourse and practice of all the stakeholders and associating the ethics of respect and social responsibility to technique and then technique to politics for all the agents.

References:

[3] HERACLITUS, Greek philosopher of the Jonic School who lived in Ephesus from 540 to 480 BC, stated this at that early time, when social and economic changes occurred much more slowly than now.
[11] The main Brazilian capitals, like other cities in the world, have seen the appearance of transport services by vans, motorcycles, kombis, “ghost” or “pirate” buses, operated mostly by unemployed people.