Final Report Summary - TRANSANTIAGO2008 (Constructing Users for Public Transport: The Case of Transantiago)

In the search for more sustainable forms of urban mobility the increase in the use of public transport has consistently appeared among the top priorities of current transport policies. One of the key factors for their success is their capacity to attract growing amounts of people to use public transport. This research looked to contribute to this task by analyzing a particularly relevant case: Transantiago, a new public transport plan started in the city of Santiago (Chile) in February 2007. This plan had the aim of improve the use and quality of public transport in the city, but the results were exactly the opposite. Not only did the journeys by public transport become longer and highly uncomfortable, but also almost every aspect of the system seemed not to be working properly. In this context this research project looked to understand how the way users were considered by planners before and after the plan started played a part in this crisis.

After carrying out fieldwork in Chile between 2007 and 2009, with funding from Chile's National Council for Science and Technology, the funding period (5. 6. 09-4. 3. 11) was spent by the beneficiary researcher Dr. Sebastian Ureta at the Centre for Technology and Society (ZTG in German), Technical University Berlin, under the supervision of Dr. Hans-Liudger Dienel, current director of the centre. First the information collected during fieldwork was transcribed and organised in topics regarding different aspects of the place of the user in the planning and implementation of Transantiago. Then each one of these topics was analyzed in depth making a special emphasis on what can be learned from this case to implement successful public transport policies in the European Union and elsewhere. By the end the year several drafts of research papers were produced, and then presented and discussed with colleagues at the ZTG and in seminars elsewhere. After this, during the second year, the research started to work on the first draft of a complete report on the case including the complete outcomes of the project. The contents of this draft were shown and discussed with members of the ZTG and other institutions in the European Union and abroad. After that, and based on the research report, the first draft of the proposed book in English was written.

Regarding the research objectives the analysis concluded that the main problems of Transantiago were twofold. On the one hand, the planning period was marked by unresolved struggles between contrasting ways to enact the user of public policy in Chile. On the other hand, external consultants hired to design several key technical devices (like new buses or the passenger information system) worked in almost complete isolation, thus ending up creating contrasting versions of the user. As a consequence in order to be able to use Transantiago the inhabitants of the city had to perform several different and contrasting roles, some of them quite demanding and/or highly uncomfortable. In relation with the lessons that this case could teach us to design successful public transport policies in the European Union and elsewhere the project arrived to three conclusions. First, especially in contemporary societies were policy implementation is largely outsourced to third-parties, there is a pressing need to constantly coordinate and make compatible the multiple kinds of user scripts developed in the process. Second, the claim that policy implementation has been “democratic” or “participative” is not enough. In parallel there should be an openness to incorporate transformations made by people when using the system, even if this implies going against the original plan. Third, the implementation of large and complex public transport policies increasingly needs the development of hybrid versions of the user that are more fluid and open to the mess and surprise irreducible to such process.
Such conclusions were discussed with colleagues in Berlin and in conferences such as the “Modeling Spaces-Modifying Societies” conference in Darmstadt, Germany (7-9. 10. 09) and the Annual conference of the Society for the Social Studies of Science in Tokyo, Japan (25-29. 8. 10). As a result of the first analyses and the discussion with colleagues a full draft of a book based on the case was written. Also several research papers focused on issues particularly relevant to policy were produced in order to contribute to the debate and improvement of current public transport policies in the EU, Chile and elsewhere. This material was sent to journals and academic publishers form mid 2011 and disseminated among colleagues.

Finally regarding the career perspectives of the fellow his participation in the projects had two main effects. In the short term, he was invited to act as a research fellow for a year with the research group “Innovation in Governance” funded by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) of the German government and jointly based at the Center for Technology and Society and the Department of Sociology, Technical University of Berlin. During this period the fellow applied the conceptual approach developed during the fellowship period to the comparative analysis of environmental policy in Chile. In the long term, his participation in the project will be central to his future development as researcher in the area of policy analysis in Chile, especially in terms of developing future projects in collaboration with EU-based colleagues met during the fellowship period.

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**Last updated on** 2013-07-05
**Retrieved on** 2019-07-22

**Permalink:** [https://cordis.europa.eu/result/rcn/61565_en.html](https://cordis.europa.eu/result/rcn/61565_en.html)
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