



The Egg Truck, Kathmandu, Nepal. All images © Debra Efroymsen

■ by Debra Efroymsen

Fighting the Current Carfree Activities in Low-Income Cities

What do the cities of Lusaka (Zambia), Manila (Philippines), Hanoi (Vietnam), Dhaka (Bangladesh), Kathmandu (Nepal), and Bangalore (India) have in common? Visually different as they are in many respects, any attempt to move about the streets makes it clear that pedestrians are not valued, and that the tiny elite minority in cars – or in some cases, the majority on motorbikes – rule the streets. Forget pedestrian priority or the concept of sharing the road with cyclists when you are in these cities; pedestrians and bicycles are considered obstacles to the movement of vehicles rather than valuable road users.

This despite the prevalence of high density, mixed use communities in which many facilities are available close to hand. Streets are lively, filled with people, formal and informal shops, tea stands, and vendors. Walking side by side with a friend maybe impossible given broken or absent sidewalks and the presence of a number of obstacles, from parked cars and motorbikes to construction waste and noodle stands, but the cities are vibrant and sometimes overpowering to the senses.

Another factor the cities have in common:

high transport expenses by the low-income and reliance for jobs on the types of transport and activities that are steadily being discouraged or banned. Be they rickshaw drivers, cycle repairers, or street vendors, their livelihood is threatened, and the ability of the poor to access jobs, schools and other basic services is increasingly limited and endangered by the growing presence of cars on the streets.

Given the low rates of car ownership in low-income cities, it may seem surprising that the carfree movement is not stronger. There are several likely reasons for this. People are generally too busy making ends meet to become involved in a movement that they do not perceive as touching them directly. Organizations seeking to improve life in cities tend to be dependent on funding, and it is difficult to find a funder who supports the carfree movement. Finally, those in the middle class dream of car ownership and often react strongly to any possibility of their dream not becoming a reality. A common line is that those in the West have had their chance to enjoy their cars before starting to reduce their use; low-income cities must also go through the

phase of car ownership before reaching car control. Meanwhile, powerful international agencies and corporations including the World Bank base their funding on car-centric “development”, and officials feel unable to refuse offers of help, no matter how destructive they are to their cities. (I will optimistically assume that corruption has nothing to do with this.)

And one final factor that cities have in common: people are not (entirely) passively accepting the changes. In each city, individuals and organisations are working to promote the value of walking and cycling as means of transport and the vital need for public space.

The ugly reality

Cities in low-income Asian countries are choking in pollution and congestion. The air stinks, the noise levels can be nearly unbearable, and trying to get around the city is a frustrating and time-consuming experience.

Consider the case of Lusaka. According to Muyunda Ililonga of the Zambia Consumers’ Association (ZACA), “Over-use of cars in Lusaka has put a strain on the economy because the country’s oil import bills continue

to sky rocket. The country continues to spend meagre foreign receipts from its exports on the importation of motor vehicles, denying other critical areas of the economy the resources for growth". Ililonga also observes "Traffic congestion is a daily occurrence in Lusaka. This has resulted in increased road traffic accidents, air and noise pollution. The planning of the city means there is heavy concentration of concrete buildings with very little room left for open spaces for the city residents to engage in physical activities. The consequences are that children are confined to indoor environments without facilities for playing, leading to lost childhood". What he writes of Lusaka could be written about any number of low-income cities around the world.

Although the majority of the population in Hanoi gets about by motorbikes, growth in car use is becoming an increasing problem. A recent initiative to reduce motorbike and car ownership was blocked by the Ministry of Finance, which said that the problem in Hanoi is not too many vehicles but too few roads. A similar attitude is evident in the other cities, which seek to resolve congestion and pollution by expanding roads rather than limiting vehicles.

Glimmers of hope

All is not, however, grim – at least not to the eternal optimists among the growing carfree movement. However limited the successes to date, they suggest the possibility of working successfully for change and the fact that not everybody shares the dream of car ownership and car-filled cities.

In Lusaka, workshops with media and city officials brought attention to and tried to build support for concepts of liveable cities. Urban planners have responded positively to comments on the need to include infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists in the plans. They invited members of ZACA to future meetings and organised free bus transport from different points of the city to get people to an exhibit to comment on the plans. Unfortunately the successes come at a price: the anger of bus and taxi drivers who fear loss of business, and even threats on the life of the Executive Director of ZACA.

Various initiatives in the Philippines seek to improve the condition of rickshaw drivers. One proposal that has been tried in at least limited locales is to allow taxis only for long-distance trips and on major thoroughfares, and allow only rickshaws, not taxis, in congested central neighbourhoods. Cyclists have also gotten together to discuss their problems and demands and prepare a manifesto for central government on ways to improve the situation for cycling.

Government initiatives in Vietnam have unfortunately to date been limited mainly to failures (such as trying to limit licenses of motorbikes) and motorised vehicle-focused programs (such as the successful effort to enforce motorcycle helmet use). But civic groups are working together to save parks and promote the importance of public space,



Typical Street Sign, Bangalore, India

and a few limited efforts are underway to encourage cycling. Most recently, the Mayor of Hanoi stopped a project to build a multi-storey building in a city park. The importance of parks and public places is gaining recognition as part of a new campaign by the Vietnam Urban Planning Association, Health-Bridge and other groups.

Various efforts throughout India seek to limit cars in the central city and to begin to consider the needs of children in urban planning. In Dhaka, initiatives by a range of NGOs include giving input to urban planners, fighting bans on rickshaws and vendors, teaching cycling to children, saving parks and canals, and working with urban planning students to create carfree city designs. An enormously difficult and challenging program in the most touristed part of Kathmandu temporarily succeeded in reducing motorised vehicle use. Ironically Maoists, who felt it would deter the ability of the poor to earn a living, opposed the problem. The long lines for petrol in Kathmandu as the country repeatedly faces fuel shortages, and the fact that most of the population gets about by foot and many goods are moved by bicycle would seem to make clear the need for and viability of carfree planning, but when does rationality ever win?

Lessons learned in Zambia are significant for other cities attempting to reduce or eliminate their cars. Fears of job loss are natural in any time, and especially during a

global economic meltdown. That carfree cities would mean job gains not losses is a vital point, but not one likely to be appreciated by those whose employment is directly related to motor vehicles.

The middle class, which lives in aspiration of owning a car, is also likely to oppose carfree initiatives, as is the case in Lusaka and elsewhere. This is countered by the increasing number of people who appreciate the value of a good environment with minimal air and noise pollution. That is, while those employed in the motorised transport sector and many of the rich and middle class may oppose the concept of carfree cities, many ordinary citizens appreciate and accept it. As for the media, given the prevalence of car advertising, it is hardly surprising where they tend to stand.

While in one sense it is too late to say that the problems of car-centric cities can be avoided in the low-income cities of the world, it is also true that the infrastructure in such low-income cities is far more supportive of carfree lifestyles than in wealthier cities. Challenging as the work is, cars are still the minority vehicles and one cannot silence or dupe the majority forever. And global justice could be just around the corner, as the lively low-income cities of today are well positioned to become the most liveable and vibrant cities in the carfree world of tomorrow. ■

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Other forms of non-motorised transport, Kathmandu, Nepal

