



TOWARDS A NATIONAL LAND TRANSPORT POLICY FOR SRI LANKA'S SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTENANCE: REVELATIONS THROUGH RECENT POLICY STATEMENTS AND PROPOSITIONS

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ABSTRACT

The Sri Lankan transport system has been blamed for its inadequacies and inefficiencies, reflected in customer dissatisfaction on one hand and the obstacles it poses to the nation's socioeconomic development on the other. This is despite many efforts to develop national transport policies and strategies in the past. Although some of these policies were translated into implementable actions, many others failed to progress beyond the formulation stage. Consequently, it remains questionable whether the responsibility for the sector's unsatisfactory performance lies in the substance of the formulated policies themselves or in the gap between the policies formulated and their practical implementation. The present study was initiated to examine the salient features of each such policy initiative, identify which elements were effectively implemented and which were not, and the reasons behind this, with particular focus on policy formulation initiatives in the post-insurgency period. This article summarises the outcomes of that analytical exercise, including the essential elements contained in previously proposed policy frameworks, as well as key policy guidelines that may be considered in formulating a socioeconomically development-conducive and sustainability-oriented National Transport Policy framework.

Keywords: *Transport policy, national land transport policy, transport policy implementation gap, socioeconomic development, sustainable policy*

1. INTRODUCTION

Transportation provides mobility for passengers and goods, serving as an essential service input for social and economic well-being [1]. However, the Sri Lankan transport system is often blamed for its inadequacies and inefficiencies. This may reflect inappropriate policies that were formulated, lags in their effective implementation, or both [2]. The outcomes include persistent customer dissatisfaction and constrained socioeconomic development.

Among the recent policy formulation efforts undertaken to provide systematic and integrated solutions to these sectoral problems, the National Development Council's initiatives to develop policies and strategies for public transport service development in the late 1990s, including the proposed railway reforms through the establishment of a Railway Management Council (RMC) while retaining its departmental structure, the National Transport Policy approved by the Cabinet of Ministers in 2009 [3], and the inclusion of sustainable transportation in the Policy for a Sustainable Vision 2030 compiled in 2019 [4], are noteworthy. A national transport policy framework has also been formulated and submitted to the Ministry of Transport in 2020 by a committee comprising relevant officials in public institutions, transport professionals, and representatives of professional bodies such as the Institute of Engineers, Sri Lanka (IESL), Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport Sri Lanka (CILTSL), and Sri Lanka Society for Transport and Logistics (SLSTL), upon appointment based on a decision (Ref. අමප/19/3507/225/008) taken by the Cabinet of Ministers on January 14, 2020; however, the implementation record of this framework remains unsatisfactory [5].

In addition to these policy formulation initiatives, many strategic interventions were initiated in an apparent attempt to solve transport-related problems. Some such initiatives were oriented toward market-based and devolution-driven approaches, such as the unbundling and regionalisation of the State-owned Ceylon Transport Board (CTB) in 1978 [6], the liberalisation of public bus services paving the way for private-sector bus service provision in 1983 [7], and the corporatisation of the Sri Lanka Railway (SLR) through an Act of Parliament [8]. Some others were oriented toward reversing such market-based initiatives owing to their perceived undesirable consequences; the clusterisation of the "peopled bus companies" in 1996 [9] and the subsequent re-establishment of the Sri Lanka Transport Board (SLTB) by bringing back cluster companies under a single umbrella in 2005 [10], and the reversal of railway administration back to the department structure by repealing the Sri Lanka Railway Authority Act [11], being examples.

However, none of the above structural initiatives and investments appears to have been implemented as consistent elements of a coherent, farsighted strategic policy framework that could have guided action plans, strategies, or investments. Implicit policies reflected from projects implemented and public investments made lead to the question of whether the attention paid to developing public transport, particularly on railways, has been adequate compared to the impetus on road sector development in the post-conflict era [12]. Consequently, transport-related maladies remain uncured and further aggravated. The nation has felt the consequences in terms of a loss of economic competitiveness, deterioration of public welfare, and exorbitant budget deficits, leading to unbearably high foreign debts, especially with several high-cost transport projects proposed as solutions to these problems, which were likely to be indigestible [13].

In light of the above, the present study was initiated to (a) identify the salient features of previously undertaken policy formulation efforts, (b) ascertain which elements were effectively implemented and which were not, together with the reasons behind, and (c) propose a set of coherent policy guidelines, learning from all such previous policy formulation initiatives and implementation efforts. These guidelines would constitute important ingredients in a national transport policy framework that could effectively address the socioeconomic development needs of the nation and ensure the sustainability of development achievements.

2. METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The study adopted the approach of reviewing previous attempts at national transport policy formulation by examining all such publicly available documents, particularly those with effect from the National Transport Policy in 2009 [3], until the draft National Transport Policy document prepared in 2019 [14]. The proposed draft National Transport Policy of 2020 was not subject to this comparative analysis as it was unavailable for public scrutiny.

These policy documents were intensively examined to perceive the policy elements contained therein; the frequency of inclusion of such policy elements in multiple policy documents reviewed potentially reflects the recognition of their comparative strategic importance. At the same time, the analysis also enabled the grading of the relative completeness of the policy documents perused, based on the degree of inclusion of the identified salient policy elements.

Additionally, the track record of implementation of those policy elements was attempted to be fathomed by comparing the explicit policy directions with those that were practically implemented, as reflected in governmental actions over the years.

The contradictions, inconsistencies, and inadequacies (or "gaps") in policy and strategic directions were thereby revealed. This "gap analysis" was of particular importance, as it paved the way toward the identification of the common policy traits that were embedded in previous policy documents on a comparative basis, together with their respective implementation records and their impetus on achieving the targeted development objectives.

The outcomes of the study enabled the drawing of inferences pertaining to the most important policy directions that need to be included in the national transport policy framework and in policy directions pertaining to other related sectors for the nation to successfully address its future development needs.

3. ANALYTICAL FINDINGS

Numerous efforts have been made to formulate a national-level transport policy in Sri Lanka, with recommendations extended to successive governments. Even if the earlier efforts by transport professionals, such as John Diandas, in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s [13] are disregarded, (i) the initiatives undertaken by the National Development Council (NDC) in the late 1990s through its Transport Sector Working Group [15], including the Policies and Strategies on Railways in 1997 [16] and the National Bus Policy in 1998 was compiled with the participation of the Ministry of Transport [17], (ii) the Mahinda Chinthana document in 2005 [18], and (iii) the National Transport Policy formulated in 2009 [3] constitute noteworthy contributions. Since then, several other initiatives have been undertaken, including (a) the transport policy proposals submitted to the Government in 2019 [14], (b) Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour (සමෘද්ධිය සහ පුනරුත්ථානය) in 2019 [19], the sustainable transportation component in the Policy for a Sustainable Vision 2030, compiled in 2019 [4], and (c) the submission made to the Ministry of Transport by the National Land Transport Policy Committee in 2020. It is noteworthy that the latter is not yet available for public scrutiny, while only the National Transport Policy in 2009 [3] appears to have been formally recognised by the Government of Sri Lanka.

Having exhaustively perused policy drafts, statements, proposals, and the formally accepted policies from 2009 onwards, excluding those unavailable for public scrutiny, particularly the proposed draft National Transport Policy of 2020, 36 policy elements were identified, each included in at least one such document. The policy documents perused and their relative degrees of inclusivity of the identified policy elements are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: The relative presence of salient policy elements in the policy documents subject to analysis

Policy Document	Included Elements	Percentage of Totality
Draft National Transport Policy– 2009 (The most recent policy formally published)	34	94%
Sustainable Sri Lanka–Vision 2030 and Strategic Path	31	86%
National Transport Policy - 2019	22	61%
Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour - 2019	22	61%

Source: Author Compilation

Therefore, the 2009 National Policy on Transport in Sri Lanka appears to be the most comprehensive policy document available to the public until the end of 2019.

The study further examined the policy elements most commonly included in the policy documents that were available for public perusal until the end of 2019. It was apparent that, out of the 36 identified elements, 19 policy elements were included in all policy documents, possibly reflecting their significant perceived importance. These policy elements, in their respective categories, are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Policy elements included in all policy documents since 2009

Policy Element	Category
Improve the quality and reliability of public transport services and prioritise public transport use.	Public transport priority
Expand public transport network coverage by integrating available public transport systems.	
Goods are transported using public transport in rural and estate sectors.	
Ensure accessibility and equity of public transport services.	Equity and affordability
Attractive options and affordable fares for public transportation.	
Promote transportation services for persons with special needs.	Special needs
Improve and expand inland water and coastal shipping where appropriate.	Alternative mediums
Improve and expand domestic air transport, where appropriate.	
Ensure transport safety to minimise accidents, injuries, and loss of life.	Safety and regulations
Use ICT to promote the safe and effective use of transport services.	
Ensure adequate and effective enforcement of traffic rules to improve compliance with laws and regulations.	
Promote and facilitate private sector involvement in transport activities.	Private sector
Promote the use of energy-efficient, less-polluting vehicles with longer operational lifespans.	Energy and externalities

Policy Element	Category
Facilitate skills development to achieve efficient transport service delivery.	Human resources
Integrate land use planning and transport planning	Cost and demand management, development planning, and economics
Improve traffic and demand management to reduce transport cost and time.	
Provide connections among major regional centres with high-mobility transport links.	
Develop transport infrastructure to minimise transport costs.	
Enhance research and development activities and knowledge dissemination in the transport sector.	

Source: Author Compiled.

The study also identified 5 policy elements least frequently cited, as depicted in Table 3, while the remaining 12 policy elements identified in the policy documents were found to be recognised with moderate frequency, which are summarised in Table 4.

Table 3: Policy elements least cited in policy documents since 2009

Policy Element	Category
Existing transport infrastructure and equipment should be optimally used across all network modes and users.	Productivity
Ensure competitiveness among modes and providers while protecting the interests of State-owned transport services.	Competition
Systematically infuse capital, through government funding and private investment, to develop new transport infrastructure.	Investment, planning, accessibility, and demand management
Establish a national database to retrieve information on the service levels of public transport practices.	
Adopt a "minimalised approach" to mobility for increased accessibility and avoid "shift and improve"- based transport planning.	

Source: Author compiled

Table 4: Policy elements moderately cited in policy documents since 2009

Policy Element	Category
Ensure adequate availability of transport infrastructure and services to support the goals of sustainable economic growth and social development at all times and across all communities.	Availability and public transport preference
Promote public transport services to encourage public appreciation.	
Subsidies for concessionary travel to be targeted for specific purposes.	Targeting subsidies
Recognising the role of para-transit services in meeting diverse transport needs.	Alternative modes

Policy Element	Category
Promote non-motorised transport (NMT) where appropriate and provide pedestrian facilities.	Non-motorised transport and sustainability
Protect environmental sustainability via a better transport system.	
Establish regulations for transport services regarding quality, comfort, and hygiene parameters.	Quality and disaster preparedness
Incorporate natural disaster resilience into the development of transport systems and related infrastructure.	
Ensure the availability of qualified and competent human and physical resources needed to implement transport plans.	Resource inputs
Promote a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship as essential aspects of a progressive society.	Innovation and entrepreneurship
Establish a Presidential Committee on Urban Transport (PCUT) to coordinate urban transport development.	Planning and coordination
National priority to be given to the national economic enterprise.	National economics

Source: Author compiled

The above results reveal that many important policy traits have already been incorporated into numerous policy documents submitted for the Government's perusal, and some have even been formally recognised. Public transport priority policy, the equity of access and affordability, the need for demand management and for controlling externalities, as well as costs to enhance service supply economics, together with the importance of upholding safety and the expected role of regulation, have been included in all policy documents. In contrast, elements of productivity, targeted subsidies, a competitive environment, innovation and entrepreneurship, and the need for systematic, evidence-based planning in transport activities were less frequently recognised, despite their importance in terms of their potential influence on satisfactory operation and sustainable development of the sector.

Table 5: Transport policy gaps that are proposed to be filled

Category	Proposed Policy Element
Demand Management through substitution and public transport preference	Substitute transport demand by communication, land use planning and settlements with a greater degree of economic self-reliance for essentials
	Explicit solicitation of a shift away from low-capacity modes to high-capacity modes, from private modes to public transportation, and from road to rail
	Improve the quality, accessibility, and affordability of public transport modes.
	Inter-modal coordination at public transport nodes, to facilitate public transport use

Category	Proposed Policy Element
Railway Priority Policy	Passengers and goods to be incentivised to shift from road to rail
	Taxation of road usage for private vehicles, so that the implicit untargeted subsidy is eliminated while stimulating demand for railway transport
	Eliminate all implicit and explicit policy biases against rail transport, including the burden of level-crossing protection.
	Railway preference in developing infrastructure, including highways
Bus transport service improvement	Resort to "performance-oriented and quality-based competition" among buses instead of "on the road competition"
	Reform bus service provision by using models such as "operator consolidation", "single operator-multiple owners", and "inter-operator coordination".
	Introduction of constitutional amendments to reunify the fragmented regulatory mechanism for road passenger transport.
National Economics must be imperatively assessed and sought	Promote Transport as a national value-adding industry, in addition to being a load bearer of economic activity, to be a driver of the national economy, in both the construction of fixed assets and the procurement of movable assets
	Derive economic linkages and multiplier effects at minimum costs to the economy from growing mobility activities and associated public investments.
	"Minimum cost of mobility to the socio-economy" to be an imperative guideline in developing transport infrastructure, and deciding public investment priorities
	Evaluate the foreign exchange impact of all transport development projects and alternatives to ensure their capital efficiency to the national economy.
	Pursue the reduction of foreign dependence in the transport sector, in which the private sector should also be oriented to seek maximum domestic multiplier effects when making procurements and investments.
SoE reforms to seek productivity	Re-engineer State-owned institutions in the transport sector, particularly the SLR and SLTB, to ensure (a) the absence of authority-responsibility mismatch, (b) their alignment to the national policy, (c) accountability to true owners (the public), and (d) their productivity, capacity, and commercial orientation.
Better logistics, waste reduction and protection of the environment	Expand the environmental impact assessment process to include traffic impact assessment and prioritise project alternatives that are least harmful to the natural environment, while seeking greater overall socioeconomic benefits.
	Promote green logistics practices, resource reuse and recycling, and reverse logistics in transportation-related activities.
	Modernise information systems, vehicles, and warehousing systems to reduce waste in perishable supply chains and enhance the capacity for last-mile delivery and just-in-time arrivals, including during disasters.

Category	Proposed Policy Element
Occupational safety	Ensure adequate working conditions in transport-related employment and enhance occupational safety by preventing unsafe activities.

Source: Developed by authors, based on study outcomes

Next, the study explored several important policy gaps, representing elements that appeared to be missing in the policy traits identified through the present analysis; the results are summarised in Table 5 (above). This exercise was undertaken by fathoming the characteristic shortcomings observed in transport sector decision-making, particularly regarding public investment productivity [20], in view of safeguarding and further strengthening the nation's economic sovereignty, financial and regulatory treatment received by the railway sub-sector [12], and management inefficiencies prevailing in the State-owned enterprises operating in the transport sector, particularly in the Sri Lanka Transport Board [21], and in the Sri Lanka Railways. These gaps may be proposed for inclusion in transport policy frameworks to explicitly bring them to the attention of policymakers.

While proposing additional policy traits for consideration, this study recognises the importance of focusing on the actual implementation of policies that have already been formulated and even formally considered, the track record of which has already been questioned in the literature [22]. The unsatisfactory conditions and evolution of the transport system in Sri Lanka further substantiate this concern. In addition, the draft National Land Transport Policy report of 2020 (an unpublished document) has diagnosed the following as policy formulation and implementation mismatches:

- (a) There has been a clear regulatory mismatch that has prevented the meaningful implementation of any “national policy”. The fragmentation of regulatory powers (as opposed to implementation powers) into provinces under the 13th Amendment to the Constitution appears to be a serious stumbling block that needs to be re-amended to have hierarchical powers.
- (b) The policies in place have rarely been used in the preparation of annual budgets or in the recommendation or approval of transport sector projects. The absence of a mechanism that is practically implemented to ensure that the activities, strategies, and investment projects conceived, appraised, and implemented by agencies under the Ministry of Transport, by the ministry itself, and by other relevant ministries and agencies conform to the national policy was observable as a major weakness. Even the methodologies developed for policy analysis and project feasibility appraisal have hardly been put into practice [23], [24], [25]. Consequently, although policies and procedures have been documented, very little of their content appeared to have been translated into action.

- (c) Any prevailing policy at a given time, having been prepared by the Ministry of Transport, did not appear to have guided other associated ministries, such as those handling highways, urban development, and vice versa. The high-level inter-ministerial coordination committee mechanism had been practically defunct for at least two decades, resulting in conflicting actions by different agencies.
- (d) The absence of an appropriate administrative setting or a dedicated office staffed with officers who thoroughly understand transport and preferably have relevant professional expertise or qualification to monitor the degree of conformity of implementation plans and programmes with the national policy framework appears to have been a bottleneck. This deficiency could also have constrained the adaptation and revision of the national policy framework when updates became necessary due to changes in the socioeconomic conjuncture and the overall policy environment.
- (e) Although the Parliamentary Consultative Committee mechanism has prevailed, there has been no mandatory requirement for annual reporting on the level of policy alignment in ministerial and/or inter-ministerial activities, plans, projects, and strategies.

Therefore, it is of paramount importance to recognise that consistent and coherent translation into action of already formulated policies, strategies, and action plans, not only by transport authorities but also by all other relevant policy-making and implementing bodies, is equally, or even more, important than policy formulation itself and further refining and expansion their coverage, if the desired development outcomes are to be realised effectively and efficiently.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Having analysed transport policies by paying due consideration to the stated "vision" for the transport sector articulated by the line ministry, which encompasses the key attributes of a public-centric transport system, the outcomes of the present study led to several important revelations and conclusions. First, it could be perceived that a series of policy formulation efforts in the transport sector in Sri Lanka have been undertaken in the past, particularly in the aftermath of the internal armed conflict; however, the sector's progress and performance have often been described as dismal. Second, a significant difference could be observed between what has been proposed as policy and what has been implemented as action over the years, which could well be the primary cause of this unsatisfactory evolution of the sector. Third, several important gaps in the policies hitherto formulated have also been identified, particularly along the axes of national economics and the creation of domestic

effective demand through transport-related activities. The absence of which could have caused sub-optimality in the sector's progress, even if the hitherto formulated policies were fully and effectively implemented. Therefore, it can be inferred that a national land transport policy framework containing several important policy directions is necessary for adoption and implementation, including, inter alia, (i) public transport priority policy, (ii) railway preference, (iii) environmental and social sustenance in service provision, (iv) mobility demand management, (v) economic and financial viability of mobility supply, (vi) inter-modal integration, (vii) appropriate use of information technology, (viii) investment efficacy, least forex intensity, and maximum domestic multiplier effects in transport-related public investment, and (ix) developing transport-based industrial linkages. Such a framework could be proposed to be adopted and implemented in seeking the realisation of a better public-centric and development-oriented land transport sector in Sri Lanka with the essential attributes of equity, accessibility, affordability, safety, reliability, efficiency, and sustainability.

It is further recommended that the Ministry of Transport encourage other relevant ministries and agencies to recognise these policies once formally adopted in the formulation of their own policies, strategies, and action plans. This is particularly relevant for sectoral policies pertaining to ports, shipping, airports, aviation, highways, and rural, regional, and urban development, as well as for the appraisal of public investments by central planning agencies to facilitate the effective implementation of this policy framework. It is also recommended that the Ministry of Transport prepare implementation strategies and detailed action plans in close consultation with stakeholder agencies operating under the ministerial umbrella, as the success of policy implementation will largely depend on a coherent set of strategies and action plans.

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