

# **Towards comparative, historically informed research on African urban mobility issues — call for participation in the formation of a research network**

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

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We are pleased to invite applications for participation in a 2-day workshop that will launch a research network on urban transport and mobility issues on the African continent. We seek applications from early career scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds in the social sciences who have established or emerging research agenda examining contemporary sustainable urban mobility questions on the continent from a historic and comparative perspective.

## **Background**

Urban transport on the African continent is arguably at a crossroads. On the one hand, there has been a recognition that in many contexts, especially in smaller urban settlements, environmentally-friendly modes of transport such as walking and cycling are dominant practices in people's daily lives. On the other hand, investments in some urban contexts enhance and develop car-dependent mobility systems (Mitullah, Vanderschuren, and Khayesi 2017; Sietchiping, Permezel, and Ngomsi 2012) with policymakers at a loss about how to invest in public transit systems. Unlike other urban contexts elsewhere in the world, private car ownership in Africa is low and many residents do not have access to motorized transport.

Against this backdrop, there is an increasing recognition that the continent is in a unique position to protect, enhance, and expand existing sustainable urban transport systems and practices (Candiracci, Schlosser, and Allen 2010). Thus, there is an opportunity to create new trajectories to a more sustainable mobility future that understand both path dependencies, pockets of persistence, and alternative routes (Emanuel, Schipper, and Oldenziel 2020). In doing so, African planners and policymakers may avoid replicating many of the mistakes that led to the current unsustainable situation. As the Paris accords and subsequent call for action recognizes the transport sector is one of the leading sources of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide: researchers reported that “in 2010 [the transport sector] was responsible for approximately 23 % of total energy-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions” (Sims et al. 2014, 603) across the planet.

In the path towards sustainable transport futures on the African continent, historically informed and spatially sensitive academic scholarship can be of immense value. However, existing scholarship on urban transport questions on the continent is predominantly a-historical (Pirie 2009; 2016), which is

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problematic, given the path-dependency of transport culture and infrastructure. A key insight from the literature in historical institutionalism about path-dependence is that history matters: “particular events in the past can have crucial effects in the future, and that these events may be located in the quite distant past” (Mahoney and Schensul 2006, 457). In this light, a further gap evident in historically inspired scholarship on urban transport on the continent (Pirie 2016; 2018) is the limited attention to such potential relationships between past decisions and contemporary urban transport dynamics on the continent.

These are significant shortcomings in the academic literature that also rob the policy agenda for sustainable transport on the African continent of valuable insights. For instance, if particular contexts are not appreciated as having specific histories which matter in contemporary planning, it will result in the tendency for policy borrowing (Peck and Theodore 2010; Wood 2015; Côté-Roy and Moser 2018) that ignores place. Historically-informed studies can also help disrupt normalised and accepted adverse mobility systems and practices, opening windows of opportunity for change. In the other direction, greater appreciation of ‘hidden in plain-sight’ sustainable urban transportation practices in particular contexts represent ‘pockets of persistence’ that have the potential for re-emergence and become dominant again (Emanuel, Schipper, and Oldenziel 2020). They can enhance steps towards ‘protection’ instead of ‘salvaging’, ‘reconstructing’ or ‘shifting’ mobility practices in retrospect.

In contributing towards such a vision where historically informed and comparative scholarship supports transitions towards sustainable urban mobilities on the African continent, we see a coherent network at the core. This network will bring together early career researchers from a range of disciplinary perceptiveness together to generate academic and policy relevant insights. Some of the key questions the network will address include:

- How do we understand and compare the historical production of the diverse urban mobility practices, policies, social-cultural elements and other features on the African continent?
- What are the ways (if any) that the diverse histories influence current mobility practices, policies, social-cultural elements and other features on the African continent?
- In what ways does the past shape contemporary attempts to embed urban sustainable mobilities and/or dislodge incumbent systems?
- What empirical, theoretical and conceptual tools can help bring new light onto the possibilities of breaking from unsustainable transport trajectories or embedding current sustainable ones?

## **Participation**

We invite scholars thinking about contemporary urban mobility issues from a historical and comparative perspective to an intimate 2-day workshop. Participants will exchange completed and ongoing research addressing some of the above questions and related ones pertaining to all forms of

mobilities whether ‘public’ or ‘private.’ Given the accent on contributing to policy agenda for sustainable transport, workshop participants will also work on short articles for publication in popular press. It is also envisaged that participants will agree, as relevant, to work on co-authoring joint academic pieces for critical peer review at a subsequent workshop to be held in 2020. Such pieces will potentially be published either as a special journal issue or as part of an edited book. Finally, participants will discuss mechanisms for ongoing network development into the future. Day 1 will focus on exchanging scholarship while day two will be allocated to authoring media articles and discussing mechanisms for network development. Participants will be expected to attend the entire 2 day-workshop.

To apply, submit the following in a single pdf document to [njogu.morgan@wits.ac.za](mailto:njogu.morgan@wits.ac.za):

- Extended abstract of a paper to be presented of no more than 500 words.
- 1-2 page motivation elaborating how current and future work relates to this call.
- Brief outline of a piece to be published for public consumption (250 words maximum).
  - This should relate to a contemporary transport question in your context considered in historical relation.
- A CV of no more than 5 pages.

The workshop will host a maximum of 40 participants with even geographical distribution of research agenda that covers all major regions of sub-Saharan Africa. Successful applicants will have their travel, accommodation and meals provided.

### **Process**

- 1 March 2020 — Deadline for abstracts, motivation and CV
- 15 March 2020 — Notification of acceptance
- 15 May 2020 — Submission of draft paper to be presented (3-5,000 words)
- 8-9 June 2020 — Workshop

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