**[Issues with BRT](https://www.dawn.com/news/1799069/issues-with-brt)**

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WHILE meeting an Asian Development Bank delegation earlier this month, Sindh’s caretaker chief minister said that 180 solar-powered buses will be introduced to support the operations of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system in Karachi. These imported buses are meant to provide urban commuters with a cleaner, more efficient public transport option.

However, questions arise: can these expensive buses operate as efficiently as promised, given the rundown state of our roads? Not too long ago, the government launched electric buses on three routes, most of which were out of service in less than a year. Issues of charging facilities and other operational difficulties were cited as the main reason.

In fact, one can question the financial model of the entire BRT system. Currently, the Green Line is operational. It was developed by the federal government-owned Sindh Infrastructure Development Company. Will this service continue when it has been unable to generate revenue amounting to even a fraction of the sum spent on its operations? The under-construction Red Line is a $503 million undertaking. Life in many neighbourhoods has been adversely impacted by the slow pace of construction. Besides, work on the Yellow Line, running from Korangi to Numaish, will soon start. The loan from the World Bank for this is $382m.

Do we need the BRT system? Five arguments justify a negative answer.

One, the proposed BRT’s cost and management needs serious review. According to a document prepared by the relevant au­­t­­horities, the total cost of the Karachi Cir­c­ular Railways and seven BRT corridors is Rs520.6 billion. An investment plan has also been prepared to justify the un­­d­ertaking based on the possible enterprises evolving from the BRT. However, the performance of local and provincial bodies is at a record low, and the level of professi­o­nal handling and follow-up needed for a project of such magnitude is difficult to expect from them. The BRT may also cause enormous physical displacement. Be­­sides, capable traffic management wou­ld be necessary during its construction.

Can the buses be run efficiently as promised?

Two, the BRT will cater to only nine per cent of total passenger trips, if all seven lines become operational. Such trips are currently over 30m per day. As Karachi’s population grows, the trips will expand proportionally. The net benefit to the commuter population would be miniscule.

Three, the BRT’s development and operations won’t reduce the existing congestion on the streets. The corridors are being built on the major arteries of the city. In many cases, exclusive right of way for BRT buses shall reduce available road space for other modes of transport. This will be a challenge for motorcycles, cars, delivery vans, water tankers, oil tankers and other vehicles, besides adding to air pollution.

Four, ordinary folk consider owning a mo­­torcycle or a car a social attainment. Thus it is very unlikely that people will stop using cars or motorcycles once the BRT becomes functional. In North Nazim­abad and adjoining locations along the Green Line, no visible reduction in motorcycles or cars has been noticed. Perhaps the absence of feeder services and long and inconvenient walks will leave people with little choice but to continue to use private vehicles. Many people have outdoor employm­ent, including delivery services where possessing a vehicle is necessary. Thus the BRT offers little solace to them.

Lastly, there is little interconnectivity between the existing paratransit and the BRT system. While those managing the BRT claim that this will be ensured, there have been no indications of this so far.

One must also study other examples. For instance, the Lahore BRT runs on a huge subsidy with a limited passenger trip load. The Peshawar BRT was hit by allegations of malpractice and corruption. Several investigations were carried out by various agencies to ascertain the charges of cost overruns and operational inefficiencies. Across the border, the Delhi BRT was dismantled by the state government due to rising congestion and its own relative ineffectiveness.

From a macroeconomic perspective, the government can focus on road development and maintenance, while bus operations are left to local bus operators without any subsidy.

The people of Karachi need short-, long- and medium-term solutions to their commuting woes. The immediate increase in buses and mini buses, and removal of encroachments from roads for the smooth flow of traffic should be undertaken as a low-cost, short-term action. The revival of ordinary Karachi buses on designated routes and alignment of larger rickshaw routes to connect the modes of mass transit with neighbourhoods may be undertaken in the medium term, while the planning and development of grade-separated BRT mass transit should be started as a long-term option.

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*Published in Dawn, December 19th, 2023*