

# Is Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) a quick route to sustainability gains?

*Sustainability is defined by the United Nations as ‘meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (United Nations, 1987). Sustainability is an equilibrium to be achieved. The term ‘sustainability gains’ is used to evoke any change which upholds this equilibrium: reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, lifestyle changes to privilege sustainable transport... How can BRT contribute to this objective?*

## A promising best practice for urban mobility

The transport sector is responsible for a third of CO2 emissions worldwide, and the shift to more sustainable mobility modes has become a priority (IEA, 2023). Cities have spearheaded this battle by inciting their citizens to switch to collective transport. To this aim, and in the hopes of improving passenger experiences and make their environments more liveable for citizens, Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) systems have been implemented in over 100 cities from the 2000 onwards (Hidalgo & Gutiérrez, 2013). Yet, it is important to inquire about the nature and magnitude of sustainability gains attributable to these transport systems.



Cape Town’s BRT system, the MyCiTi bus  
Picture: Fatoumata Diallo

## Questioning BRT’s impact on sustainability through qualitative data

One question structures the study: does BRT improve urban transport sustainability?



The present study stems from a larger dissertation project which analyzes three BRT systems: Cape Town’s MyCiTi, Lagos’ BRT(-Lite) and Île-de-France’s T-Zen.

## Results: minimal short-term sustainability gains, potential for long-term transformations

### Momentum, initial thrill and partial modal change: in their first years, BRT systems trigger sustainability gains

- BRT routes can substantially improve travel conditions and decrease travel time on critical axes.
- The initial enthusiasm surrounding BRT can foster modal shifts, encouraging passengers to switch from high-emissions travel modes to bus.

### Failure to capitalize on excitement around BRT hinders sustainability gains

- Numerous challenges tend to appear a few years into the operations: decreasing service quality, insufficient frequency, inadequate negotiation strategies with informal transport stakeholders, poor choice of route location among others
- These challenges often deter passengers and set back the potential for sustainability gains as passengers prefer other modes of transportation and turned away from the BRT.

**BRT implementation has medium and long-term outcomes which can favor substantial sustainability gains indirectly.**

#### 1. Issue salience

The status of collective transport in the local and national political agenda, can grow. In the decade following the launch of BRT projects, urban mobility often became a high-priority issue at local and national levels.

#### 2. Institutional capacity building

The implementation of the BRT was often concomitant with the creation or strengthening of a Metropolitan Transport Authority. These agencies are tasked with planning and overseeing transport projects, and the BRT granted them with new responsibilities and fostered learning and institutional change.

## Changing the scope of transport projects’ evaluation procedures

Understanding transport policies’ impacts requires to widen our foci and consider new factors.

#### 1. Timeframe

Evaluating beyond the short term is key to have a proper assessment of projects which are designed to be long-lasting elements of a city’s transport infrastructure, and which are implemented in phases.

#### 2. Beyond Key Performance Indicators

These policies’ impacts might not be found in the expected areas (ridership figures, modal shift shares). Qualitative data collection and semi-structured interviews can shed light on transport projects’ unexpected outcomes when they are coupled with the accurate timeframe for evaluation.

Programme Jeune  
Recherche  
2023-2024

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### Biography



Fatoumata Diallo is a PhD candidate in comparative political sociology at Sciences Po’s Center for International Studies (CERI). Her work investigates the implementation of urban transport projects and the international circulation of urban policy models. Her research is located at the intersection between public policy analysis and urban studies and aims at deepening our understanding of urban governance structures using qualitative methods. She has notably analyzed transport reforms in Cape Town, South Africa, Lagos, Nigeria and Greater Paris, France.

### Contacts and links to publications:



### Recent publications

Diallo, F. (2023). Défier la « bonne pratique » : stratégies d’appropriation du Bus Rapid Transit à Lagos. *Espaces et sociétés*, 189, 157-173.

Diallo, F. (2022). Conflicted translations: An analysis of the bus rapid transit policy adoption process in Cape Town. *Territory, Politics, Governance*.

### Poster references

Global BRTData. (n.d.). Retrieved November 28, 2023, from <https://brtdata.org/>

Hidalgo, D., & Gutiérrez, L. (2013). BRT and BHLS around the world: Explosive growth, large positive impacts and many issues outstanding. *Research in Transportation Economics*, 39(1), 8–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.retrec.2012.05.018>

International Energy Agency. (n.d.). Transport—Energy System. IEA. Retrieved November 28, 2023, from <https://www.iea.org/energy-system/transport>