Bestufs WP3 Rome roundtable - Issues Part 1

Why local decision makers are so reluctant to urban freight modelling and data collection ?

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Introduction

While traffic and its impacts in urban areas has received attention in recent years, much of this attention has been directed at passenger transport. Relatively little attention has been paid to urban goods transport.

Integration between passenger and goods transport is often difficult, since urban goods transport operate within integrated supply chain management whereas passenger transport serve individual needs. Ruled by the “Goods do not vote, passengers do” principle, passenger transport has received attention and priority in policy-making when competing for limited funds. Moreover, there is also severe competition between various means of passenger transport and goods transport because the limited space available in urban areas.

Countries are clearly in different phases concerning public policy development regarding urban freight transport. For instance, in France and there is a strong emphasis on research and analysis, while Belgium and Spain are in a more experimental phase.

The intensity of the policy initiatives and the research programs are closely related to the perceived urgency of the problems of transport in urban areas. Very often, urban goods transport tend to be seen merely as a cause for problems in cities, and the awareness of its importance seems to be low, not only among the general public but also among governments and city planners. If urban freight transport is responsible for negative impacts on traffic and environment (contributing to congestion, noise, pollution, fuel comsumption…), it is also a very important factor of the urban economy. This side of consideration is often neglicted by local governments and city planners.

Why urban freight transport does not seem to be a top priority item in the mobility research program and in the transport policies ? The previous round tables have shown that the lack of interest and use on urban freight data collections and models are related with methodological, intrinsic and political reasons. Related with the non use of urban freight data collection and modelling, the most common reasons which have been cited could be categorized as following :

1. **Common goals, different policies**

Despite the variety in size, population and circumstances surrounding each city, there are some common challenges. Several surveys in different European cities show that urban freight transport accounts for about 10-15% of total urban traffic in terms of number of vehicles, and 20-25% in terms of car-equivalents vehicle-km. The significant contribution of freight transport to total traffic and moreover the contribution of freight transport to problems of accessibility, congestion, environment and safety is leading to growing awareness of the importance of urban goods transport policies.

The main policy objectives for each country, region or municipality are not identical. Although the reduction of local traffic, the reduction of pollutant emissions and a better quality of urban lifestyle are important in all of them, there is a difference in emphasis.

The concerns about environmental issues and the quality of urban life are growing up. 20 years ago, the concerns about environmental impacts of urban transport activities on the quality of life in urban areas were not so present as today. The specific need for a reduction in acoustic pollution or in CO_2 and others pollutant emissions in built-up areas emerged in all cities.

Traditional urban freight models cannot reflect these environmental issues currently under discussion. That means that urban freight models should be completed with other models to give researchers and technicians an integrated tool and to give the policy makers a global solution.

2. Link between urban deliveries and the whole logistical chain

Urban freight transport is more complicated than regional, national or international transport. It is important to bear in mind that delivery of consumer goods is only part of the whole logistics chain. Measures concerning delivery in city areas have inter-related effects in other areas of freight transport and should therefore be considered from a broader systems perspective.

In spite of the fact that in many cases, goods often come from other regions or countries and therefore urban freight transport is more and more integrated with long distance exchange of goods outside urban areas, some models and current measures often only take account of the urban area itself. Little attention is paid to the supply chain as a whole which extend beyond urban areas.

Because the logistical chain do not stop at the urban frontiers, that means that local authorities and decision makers should have a common approach with their regional and national colleagues. Some countries have not only local initiatives but also national government initiatives for urban freight data collection and policy. It is the case of the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. But, in general, it is still a long way to a better communication between central and local governments, and between public and private actors.

3. Multiplicity of stakeholders

A important feature of urban freight deliveries and transport is their complexity and the multiplicity of stakeholders interested in. Policy makers have to cope with a lot of different actors (more than for passenger transport), all with their own specific goals. The different users of freight services have different requirements and different goals, some of them are even contradictory. What is good for the industry and urban freight transport sector may be wrong regarding public and environmental issues.

The policy makers have to manage with all theses stakeholders and to arbitrate the potential conflicts existing between.

4. Freight transport in the hands of the industry

Very often urban freight transport is only perceived as prejudicial to the urban environment. It is viewed as a problem rather than an essential activity to the economical and social functioning of towns and cities.

So the policy makers and some technicians also, only react taking action to oppose the bad effects of urban freight deliveries. The urban freight policy they build-up is often only a reaction to problems, usually apearing with complaints made by residents.

If very few of them have a proactive position with a real urban freight strategy, it is also because a lot of decision makers and authorities consider that freight transport is in the hands of the industry world. Freight and logistics activities is not a domain in which policy makers feel they should be involved.

Urban freight transport is mainly perceived as a pure commercial and business activity, and is not considered as something which should be featuring high on the political agenda.

It is difficult to convince public actors that urban deliveries have to be optimized and that they can contribute on it.

5. Lack of awareness and knowledge

There is a general feeling that within public local authorities there is not a good level of understanding about urban freight transport and deliveries. The business world thinks that the local authorities do not have a good understanding of modern logistic systems. According to the actors of the industry, that leads public authorities and decision makers to take policies and restriction rules without taken their requirements into account.

In the administrations, most cities are not adequately equipped to analyse and prepare for the challenges of the urban freight deliveries. There are very few specialists of freight transport in the administrations and the local authorities in charge of the mobility policy. For example, although municipality of Paris has two hundred specialists dealing with passenger transport and traffic planning, the first specialist in urban freight was appointed to the office in March 2002. This maybe reflects the poor interest on urban freight deliveries in comparison with passenger transport but also the lack of training and of information for technicians. There are a very large scale of different training programs in transport and mobility for engineers, economists …but very few of them are focusing on urban freight transport.

Because this lack of expertise, modeling is often considered by local authorities and decision makers as a “black box” they can not use it. So they refuse to investigate in modelling which requires a lot of time and investments.

Dissemination of results and experiences is important to develop the expertise. Companies or institutes are not always aware of the on going projects that could be similar. Nevertheless it has also been stated by some experts that the diffusion of expertise is not that simple. Objectives, available funds and data, involved partners, etc. differ. Results could e.g. rather be transferable, but it’s more difficult to transfer models e.g.

6. Poor data collection on local level

In most cities, city planning and traffic surveys are based only on passenger transport. This lack of awareness and knowledge has often led to transport policies being planned mainly from the passenger transport perspective, without adequate consideration of the needs of freight transport.

Adequate data is missing. In some cases statistics could be used to know more about freight transport within cities, but often these data collections are not executed with that purpose so that interesting/important data are missing in the data collection.

Some national initiatives exist to collect specific freight data but from these projects at national level, it is more difficult to extract city level information. In general it was not the first goal of such exercises to obtain freight information at city level. Data collections should be adapted to obtain better information from the model application at local level because at higher (regional, national or international) level data are rather available in an aggregated way.

Moreover, data collections at national level are often a legal obligation, while local initiatives are rather an attempt to respond to a problem. If the principal objective to make a diagnosis of urban transport is to fulfil legal requirements, there is not always a real motivation of the local authority behind the initiative.

New technology could give new possibilities to gather information (cameras, RFID-technology), but the appliance of these instruments could also be problematic (respect of privacy, commercial interests, etc.).

7. Costs of data collection and modeling

Costs and funding are important aspects. Collecting and updating the urban freight data required for the models are sometimes very expensive. Available funds to realise projects differs according to the partners and partner structure. In general, local authorities have very limited means and traditional data collection and modelling are too expensive for them.

Sometimes particular budgets (European contributions) e.g. are foreseen while for updating the data such contributions can't be expected. Special occasions like the Olympics in London 2012 could be an opportunity to collect certain data. Investments are then easier to find. It is obvious that available funds for urban freight transport analyses vary widely in Europe (depending on interest, involved partners and partner structure, political interest, etc.). Simpler data collections are cheaper and definitely interesting at short term, but for a mid and long term vision on urban freight transport tools like urban freight models could be more interesting.

8. Short term vision versus long term approach

The policies currently in place focus quite strongly on short-term problems and solutions. Little or no attention seems to have been paid to long-term problems. Modeling does not fit the short term local problems. Modeling takes a lot of time to collect the required data, to build and to calibrate the model, to give the decision makers an answer.

Current policies are dealing only with current conditions, and the expected effects of proposed measures on future situations are often missing. Few attempts seem to have been made to provide forecasts for future developments or to develop long-term policy options.