

POWERPOINT 1

Introduction

Transport issues affect all Territorians, and cut across all community service sectors and impact all geographical areas – urban, regional and remote - but disproportionately affect people who experience social disadvantage. There are a range of barriers to access to transport, such as cost, availability and physical access issues - which all impact on the ability of people to access work, health, other essential services, recreational and social activities and to fully participate in society. Access to transport is a vital contributor to the wellbeing of individuals and communities

International and National Perspective

International studies... provide a strong evidence base that a lack of suitable and affordable transport can be a significant barrier as many groups within society continue to experience, and be subjected to, what can only be termed as 'transport disadvantage' (Hine 2006, SEU 2003, Hine and Mitchell 2001). In Australia, 'transport disadvantage' is described as, people not having access to community services or where the costs associated with transport for low income households, or their physical location to access public transport services, is prohibitive. Australians who are most likely to experience transport disadvantage are from marginalised groups, such as those on low incomes, women, the elderly, Indigenous Australians, and people with disabilities (Dodson et al 2004).

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So how does the Northern Territory fare?

The Northern Territory may well be one of the most sparsely populated places on the planet. Roughly 220,000 people occupy an area of 1.33 million square kilometres.

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(Approximate width west to east: 950 km; Approximate height, north to south: 1500km). To give a bit of perspective, as a comparison – it is 1350 km from Vienna (in Austria) to Barcelona (in Spain).

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These figures give some sense of the massive task of providing services to those living hundreds of kilometres from regional centres in locations accessible only by dirt roads, some of which may become impassible for months at a time during the wet season.

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It is clearly impracticable to provide a full range of services in each small, isolated community, which makes it critical that reliable, affordable transport links are in place so people can gain access to the services that those living in larger centres take for granted. However the current system in the NT goes nowhere near ensuring this level of access to services. There are currently no public bus services between remote communities and major centres.

The NT has the highest rate of motor vehicle accidents for any jurisdiction in the country, and the worst among OECD nations. A 2007 report by the federal Infrastructure department found there were 27 deaths per 100,000 people in the Northern Territory. The next highest rate in Australia was in WA which recorded 11 deaths per 100 thousand people. Australia averaged almost eight.

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There has been a 250% increase in 'driving criminalization' excluding speeding offences (taken from stats from police reports from July 2006 onwards). This coincides with an increase in police presence (pre-intervention), with driving offences becoming a particular priority. Offences are mainly regulatory offences – such as driving unlicensed/unregistered/uninsured vehicles. Addressing regulatory crime would be through education not punishment (with the number of people in jail directly impacted by transport issues – 25% in for regulatory offences). There are also issues around people often being unclear of difference between driving suspended, disqualified- more assistance in court is required.

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We clearly have a transport crisis in the NT. But good transport services could reduce the risks that some people take on the road in terms of driving un-roadworthy or overloaded cars. We clearly have a transport crisis in the NT.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005), the two main reasons for social exclusion in Australia are linked to access and timing of public transport. *"Almost a third of people not using public transport (30%) reported that there was no service available in their area. Nearly a quarter (23%) said the public transport service did not suit their time schedule, while a fifth (21%) reported it takes too long to reach work or study via public transport"*.

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Temporal availability of transport was also a concern for many people who reported transport affected them when there was no 'public' transport available before or after working hours (Gray et al 2006), similar to the NT situation.

Findings from NTCOSS consultations in the NT

The issue of the inadequacy of transport systems in the NT has been on the public radar for a number of years. In 2008 NTCOSS conducted a survey of over 20 NGOs in Central Australia and in 2009, NTCOSS conducted regional transport forums with NGOs in Alice Springs, Katherine and Tennant Creek and the forums highlighted that transport links are simply inadequate.¹ A number of common themes are apparent, such as

- the prohibitive cost of travel from remote communities to major centres,
- time waiting for services,
- lack of accessibility for people with disabilities on many forms of transport;
- no public transport in Tennant Creek or Katherine
- the timing of the Commercial bus to Tennant Creek
- insufficient transport routes to outlying communities and between remote communities
- constraints of the Patent Assistance Travel Scheme (PATS)
- lack of plane service to Tennant Creek (now a new plane run happening – but very expensive \$600 one way which is prohibitive for most people – particularly low income and disadvantaged Territorians.
- lack of transport options for people escaping violence on remote communities
- infrequency of public buses in Alice Springs, lack of evening coverage, limited weekend coverage; lack of access for people on town camps
- public buses in Alice Springs do not directly link in with a number of social services and shops regularly frequented by people who need to access banking/food vouchers/identification/emergency relief).
- significant issues for people getting home from hospital, particularly late at night, especially if they have mobility issues
- lack of transport from places like Jabiru unless there were medical reasons – with issues identified in relation to 13 outstations with no access to public transport, which impacted on schools and education for children
- in East Arnhem, a lack of regional public transport from Gove to communities. With the ceasing of Aboriginal Airlines ceased - people have to rely on air charters – which cost considerable more

There may be a range of other issues - but I have just presented a snap shot of the issues across the NT – with a bit of a CA focus

In Tennant Creek (the fifth largest population centre in the NT with a population of around 4000 people), residents who use the commercial bus to Alice Springs (e.g. to attend a specialist appointment at hospital (cost: \$180 one way), must wait at a pizza shop for the 3am bus departure, where there are no toilets or public phones, creating obvious safety concerns. The return journey is no more palatable – arriving back to the same venue at 2 am. Residents of larger remote communities like Wadeye and Maningrida with populations approaching that of Tennant Creek, have even less choice.

In Central Australia, many residents of the 18 Town Camps, in Alice Springs (small communities of populations up to 100+ people) have traditionally not been able to access public buses because of the distance from Town Camps to the bus stops.

The current lack of affordable transport services means that families from remote communities often can't get back home after major events, increasing the risk of social issues (including incidents of family violence) arising through increased alcohol consumption and overcrowding of houses in town. There are also additional costs to agencies who end up filling the gap left by the absence of transport.

In the context of the national and NT Social Inclusion agenda, people on smaller remote communities, and the 10,000 Territorians who live on outstations, need effective transport links if they are to access medical treatment, shops and services. A transport strategy for the NT must be concerned with addressing issues of social exclusion. The population of remote Indigenous townships is increasing at a much greater rate than the larger regional centres, making it imperative that planning for public and other transport infrastructure be afforded the highest priority. If we are serious about ensuring access in relation to mainstream services like health, education, employment and essential services, it must include access to an efficient, affordable public transport and affordable regional transport options.

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Impact on poverty and the cost of living

¹ In 2008...Jodie Satour (Social Work Student on placement with NTCOSS) developed a transport survey which was sent to 20+ organisations in Central Australia (primarily NGO's) . *Time and resource constraints meant that it was only possible to survey agencies from Central Australia*

The limited availability of affordable transport options in the NT, forces many low-income people to rely on other more expensive forms of transport such as taxis and minibuses, to meet their everyday needs, meaning money is diverted from food, clothing and other essential services, further exacerbating poverty and social exclusion for people who are low income and already face significant poverty and disadvantage. This impacts particularly in situations where affordable public transport is not available. Yet in Darwin, and Alice Springs, if people can access the public transport, it is free for pensioners and heavily discounted for Health Care Card Holders. These inequities must be addressed or many poor will continue to pay more.

There are no public transport routes to outlying communities and between remote communities and town. For many communities there may be only one (commercial) bus run to a major centre each week. (refer to Powerpoint for costs)

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These prices impose significant burdens on those who can afford it the least – which suggests a focus as well on service provision to remote areas and not just transport solutions.

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In reality we have had a situation where the poor have been paying more because of the inadequate transport systems currently in place.

There are very few options that provide day trips to town for people from remote communities. This then impacts on the cost of living and social cohesion, with people traveling facing accommodation issues in towns – which further eats into scarce finances. Or people simply miss out on accessing services or attending funerals, or business or visiting family on other communities.

Transport difficulties can greatly hinder and at times even prevent people's access to medical and urgent dental care - particularly older people and people with disabilities. Wheel-chair users and people with other disabilities who have special transport requirements, find their mobility severely restricted even in the large regional centres because of the absence of suitably designed vehicles. This is a significant concern as it can further reduce people's independence,

Some people may choose not to have particular medical treatment because of the costs and logistics of transport – e.g. patients may choose not to undergo chemotherapy if it means a 5 hour trip on a bus from Tennant Creek to Alice Springs; and a five hour return journey, when they would be feeling physically sick. Such choices seriously compromise their health and wellbeing.

Recent developments

There have been some recent developments in the last couple of years...New school bus-stops were set up near Alice Springs town camps early in 2009, but intensive support is still required to assist children to access this transport.

There has improved bus services in the Greater Darwin area, including additional and much needed services to Palmerston, increased bus routes in Alice Springs - improving access for around 7 of the 18 Town Camps, with further funding to construct bus turnaround areas– which will see access further improve down the track. But much more has to be done to make the use of the buses more accessible and attractive. Some fundamental issues remain unaddressed such as bus shelters and bus timetables on display.

Considering the climate in both the Top End and the Centre – one would have assumed these things would have been a priority many years ago. We must make public transport something attractive for people to use. NTCOSS has received consistent feedback that: "People want to use public transport, but dissuaded because of the poor service"

And currently only 2% approx of the NT has access to public transport.

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Interestingly the new and expanded Darwin bus service will deliver a fast, frequent and reliable public transport alternative between interchanges, particularly for work commuters, ensuring a maximum wait time of 20 minutes. This needs to be compared with waits of up to 2h45 between in Alice Springs (with no timetable). There are clearly cost issues – but it is catch 22 – because an infrequent bus service will not attract as many passengers??

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Additional funding has also been put into the trial of remote passenger transport services in Katherine and Yirrkala and More however needs to be done and done urgently. Transport for remote community residents, between communities and to major centres, remains a prime concern, as well as transport within towns such as Tennant Creek and Katherine.

There has also been an increase in the bush bus service between Tennant Creek and Alice Springs. There is now an express service from Tennant Creek Hospital to Alice Springs Hospital, which does drop offs and picks at various point along the way. One drop off point is 20 km from the Ali Curung community – so people have to rely on someone driving in to pick them up. The other bus takes nine hours – and goes into remote communities. But there are locations

like Epenarra and Canteen Creek which still have no service.

Integrated Regional Transport Strategy

In 2009, the NT Government appointed a consultant to begin work on the development of an 'integrated regional transport strategy' for the Territory. The tender document notes that "transport to connect remote communities with major regional service centres is critical for the social and economic development of the NT". However, it is disappointing to note that more than 12 months later, the NTG's 'regional transport strategy' report has not been placed in the public domain.

Possible solutions

Potential transport solutions include:

- In Tennant Creek, there was a specific call for the provision of a local public bus service; or funding for the non-Government sector to run a transport service in the town.
- Agencies in Alice Springs identified that more bus routes and a greater frequency of services are needed for the public bus system to be fully effective.
- In Katherine there was a call for a flexible, reliable, affordable, sustainable bus service and improvement of roads out to remote communities.
- There have been calls for a Community bus model to assist people from low income and disadvantaged groups to access medical appointments, shopping, social and recreational activities (and at times medical) like those which exist other jurisdictions in the country, where they provide special care based on small group transport for the Home and Community Care target group (e.g. frail aged, people with disabilities and carers) needing transport.
- Also suggestions for agencies to use their own buses on a rotational basis (requires resources) – link to community bus model)
- Also calls for Scheduled (mini) bus runs into Town Camps
- Use of remote community buses (often under-utilised because of constraints placed on them by the Shires) to be coordinated to operate regional transport.
- NT Government to explore a range of flexible and innovative options (e.g. shuttle buses from train to major centres) to make better use of the railway line – which is one of the single largest pieces of infrastructure in the Territory (running from Adelaide to Alice Springs to Darwin). The railway stations in Tennant Creek, Katherine and Darwin are located some distance from the city centre and designed principally as freight terminals.
- The NT Government should also explore options for restoration of the air link between Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek, and Alice Springs (a plane from Darwin to Tennant has been introduced recently).

What an improved public transport system would mean for residents of Town Camps in Alice Springs

Some quotes from Alice Springs Town Camp residents about what access to public buses would mean for them and how it would make their lives better.

"... if the bus comes to town camps, we don't need to humbug workers for lifts, we can catch the bus at the right time to do things for ourselves, and let the workers finish their work. You could put up a notice telling people the bus times, so we know when we can catch the bus to the hospital, or Congress and town for meetings and shopping. Maybe the bus could go to the Gap and all around the town camps to help people with no motor car and some people really need to go to the bank and to meetings and shopping for tucker. Then the bus could go around and take those people back home again.... and it's really hard for sick and old people to wait."

"The mini bus and taxi takes too much money out of our pockets. Money we could be spending on tucker for our families. It would be so good if we could catch a bus, it would be so good. We would really like that."

CONCLUSION

It is clear that a lack of accessible and affordable and regular transport options significantly disadvantages many Territorians, adding to costs of living and limiting access to health, education, employment and other services. It seems incredible that public buses, until recently have effectively bypassed the overwhelming majority of Town Camps in Alice Springs and that towns the size of Tennant Creek (and Katherine) have no access to public transport at all.

When the NT includes a population group which already face a 17 year difference in life expectancy, the current state of affairs of transport is totally unacceptable. And when the Territory has been experiencing a period of sustained economic growth, it is unfair that many Territorians continue to miss out on access to basic services. Our lack of an adequate transport system for the majority of the Northern Territory simply perpetuates poverty and disadvantage for thousands of Territorians. We will not have a fair Northern Territory until we establish affordable transport services which meet the needs of all Territorians, so we all can participate fully in social and community life.

NTCOSS has also called for social impact statements in the developments of new cities or suburbs – and this must include transport considerations – to ensure access to services for all. In addition improving transport services represents an enormous opportunity to address environmental issues and reduce our carbon footprint

Some good attempts are being made – but we have started from such a low base – because of the neglect of some very basic things for the last few decades. What we see now reflects a lack of planning, vision
This is not about laying blame – but it is about portraying the reality. Part of the reality is that we may never get the frequency/cost of public transport available in the major urban areas of Australia – but clearly we can do better. And that is all we ask.

We must ask ourselves what will be the long term economic and social costs of not improving the standard of transport services across the Northern Territory.

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