1st UITP SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE

" Sustainable Cities and Public Transport Bringing Quality to Life"

Bilbao, 18-20 October 2006

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Thursday 20 October 2006, Session 4

Setting social goals for public transport

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1. Biographical note

John Stanley

John is Executive Director of Bus Association Victoria, a position he has held for seven years. His role focuses on the development of more sustainable transport systems. John works closely with Government and other stakeholders to identify the benefits from improved public transport services and this has led to substantial increases in bus service funding in his State.

Prior to this, John was Deputy Chairman of the National Road Transport Commission for 8 years. He has a masters degree in economics and had his own consulting practice for twenty years, specialising in policy work in transport, regional economic development and in environmental fields. John is a Board member of Metlink, the Victorian public transport marketing organization, and of the Victorian Alpine Resorts Co-ordination Council. He was awarded a Commonwealth Centenary Medal for services to public transport and conservation.

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Janet Stanley is a social researcher who specialises in understanding issues around people who are at risk of social disadvantage or social exclusion. She is presently Senior Manager, Research and Policy, with the Australian non-government organization, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne and is also a Senior Research Fellow with the Department of Social Work at Monash University. Janet's recent work includes work on child poverty, community arts, and outcome and process evaluations of place-based sites of major Federal and State government programs in the area of early childhood and disadvantage. She was co-author of a recent major study on social exclusion and public transport. Her work has been published in leading North American, British and Australian journals and includes a book, *In the Firing Line*, co-authored with Professor Chris Goddard.

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2. Full text

Introduction

Typical public policy goals for transport systems include economic, environmental and social outcome dimensions, with recent interest in a possible fourth bottom line 'governance' goal (which some might choose to include under the broad definition of social goals). Thus policy goals for an urban transport system (for example) might include something like the following:

1. economic – reduce the costs of traffic congestion; encourage a more dynamic urban economy (a policy goal frequently adopted in North America); ensure public transport systems/services are provided cost-effectively;
2. environmental – ensure vehicle emissions are consistent with air quality goals and vehicle greenhouse gas emissions are consistent with climate change targets;
3. social – improve the safety of the transport system; ensure that a decent basic mobility level is available to all and particularly for those people who have few mobility choices (and are, therefore, at risk of social exclusion);
4. governance – ensure that key stakeholders have the opportunity and capacity to contribute to transport policy/program development and that government structures are in place to facilitate and incorporate their input into a coordinated transport system approach.

Economic, environmental and safety outcomes of transport systems/services have generally been amenable to various forms of quantitative analysis for some years, cost-benefit analysis techniques (for example) achieving a degree of sophistication in these areas. The same cannot be said of outcomes in the area of social inclusion or, indeed, governance. For example, a value perspective on the need for basic levels of mobility (or accessibility) to be available to all does not take one far in terms of defining more clearly just what levels of mobility or accessibility are required in particular circumstances or what benefits might flow from achieving such levels of mobility/accessibility.

This paper contends that social goal contributions of public transport are generally poorly defined and viewed too narrowly. As a consequence, the potential contribution of public transport to individual and community well-being is undervalued.

The paper briefly overviews the landmark UK work on social exclusion and transport accessibility. It then reports on an Australian case study on transport disadvantage undertaken by the current authors. That case study identified some limitations of an accessibility-based approach to transport and social exclusion. Separate studies by one of us in the social policy arena have identified a range of examples where the neglect of mobility/accessibility considerations has undermined program objectives. These considerations in combination have stimulated the authors' search for a more comprehensive way to link public transport policy with social policy. The major focus is on the social policy issue of social inclusion and well-being and social governance is introduced as a prospective contributor in this regard.

Social Exclusion and Transport Accessibility

The Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) in the UK has related public transport service provision to social exclusion, a concept which provides a framework for understanding the impact of personal disadvantage (SEU 2003). The SEU has defined social exclusion in terms of the conditions necessary for it to occur. Thus it is:

> A shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, unfair discrimination, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown (SEU 2004, p. 4)

These linked problems are said to commonly become multiple barriers which compound adverse impacts. The problems tend to cluster within certain groups. However, in practice,
social exclusion is a fluid term with many operational definitions.

The SEU has predominantly viewed the issues of social exclusion and transport through the lense of accessibility. This approach accepts the importance of a person being able to get to key activities such as employment, health services, shopping, school and leisure activities, and focuses on how such accessibility can be enhanced. Local area transport plans in the UK emphasise accessibility planning and require measurement of accessibility to selected activities. *Stakeholder involvement* and *data and indicators* are central themes in the UK accessibility planning approach (DHC and University of Westminster 2004).

Warrnambool Study

Following the accessibility-based approach of the SEU, the authors undertook a study of the transport needs of groups of people who were thought likely to be transport disadvantaged and at risk of social exclusion. The study was undertaken in Warrnambool, a coastal regional centre of about 35,000 people, in south-western Victoria, Australia.

The main purpose of the study was to both seek an understanding of the accessibility problems encountered by the target groups and engage them in identifying options to improve their situation (Stanley & Stanley 2004). The authors use the term *social exclusion* to refer to a person's inability to fully participate in society.

Figure 1 shows the current level of public transport route service provision in urban Warrnambool, compared to some other Australian locations. It indicates that Warrnambool's level of service provision is slightly less than that in Dandenong, a major outer Melbourne suburb, where service levels are generally recognised as being relatively

low, and less than one-third the level of Melbourne as a whole[1]. Australia's capital city, Canberra, stands out as having relatively high service levels.

Detailed interviews were conducted with individuals from groups thought most likely to be transport disadvantaged and hence at risk of social exclusion from an accessibility perspective. The relevant groups were young people, the aged, those on a low income, rurally isolated people, people with a disability and Indigenous people. Discussions were also held with others who may be aware of the transport needs of such groups, with various service providers, schools, local government representatives, transport operators and bus drivers being included in consultations. While all transport was considered, the major mode of local public transport used by the "at risk" groups was the bus system. This is in contrast with most people in the area, who were very car dependent. Figure 2 summarises the average number of daily return trip rates undertaken by some groups studied.
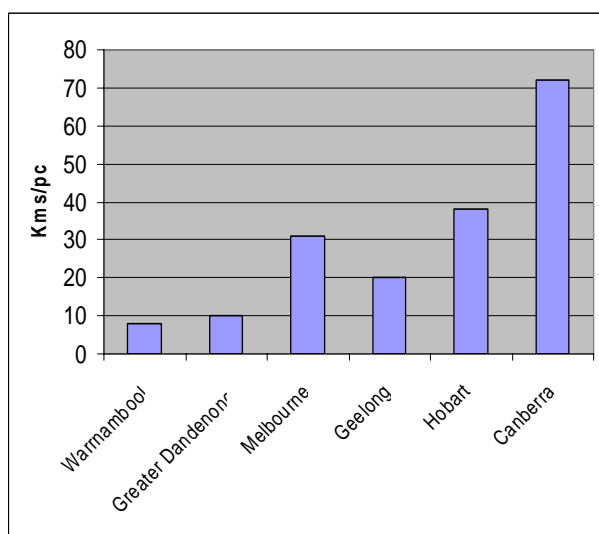

Figure 1: Public transport service kms/per capita
Warrnambool Study
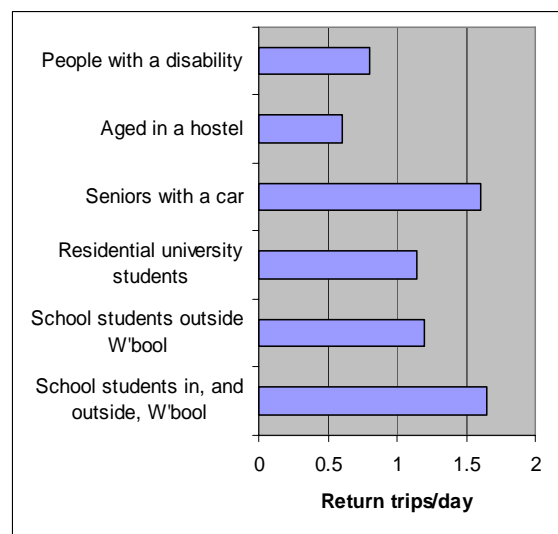In various Australian locations

Figure 2: Trips rates:

The research identified differences in trip rates between car users and others and also between various transport disadvantaged groups. While sample sizes were small for some of the groups, the findings were thought to be indicative of relevant patterns (based on the complementary consultations). The study suggested that groups of people at risk of social exclusion tended to have relatively lower rates of trip making than others, suggesting a lower degree of social inclusion. In each transport disadvantaged group studied, those without a car in the household typically travelled less.

The investigations into transport disadvantage suggested a range of social policy goals that might be assisted by improved public transport options. They also indicated the extent of social exclusion that can sometimes be experienced and suggested that well-being may, in some cases, be severely impacted by inadequate transport options. Some relevant examples are outlined below.

Young people in Warrnambool were largely dependent on parental capacities to meet their access requirements. Rural young people from low income households typically faced the greatest access issues, because of a lack of travel options. For example, some

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[1] The Victorian State Government has recognised these service shortcomings and recently committed to major service improvements in outer urban Melbourne and regional Victoria, partly influenced by the findings of the Warrnambool study.

rural young people had dropped out of post-secondary education because of a lack of public transport to/from their educational institution and other work/ training venues. Unemployment was not uncommon for such people and local welfare workers felt this contributed to the area's high youth suicide rate. A number of young people advised the authors that they were told by the local job procurement agency that there was no point them seeking work until they had obtained a car driving licence, due to their present mobility problems.

Seniors generally achieved high levels of accessibility, primarily through car use. Driving age often extended well into the 80s and there were a few driving in their 90s. The cessation of driving capacity appeared to mark a critical decline in perceived individual well-being. There was an expressed lower level of well-being (e.g. loneliness) among seniors who made the least number of trips. Some seniors saved for a taxi trip to a shopping centre, not to shop, but to be with other people and perhaps have a chance to talk to them. Others used the bus trip as an opportunity for social interaction. For example, an elderly lady with a mobility aid regularly undertook a round bus trip to get out of her house and talk to the driver and passengers.

People with a disability provided a very interesting contrast to other groups. Those in urban Warrnambool have typically not been part of a car culture. They have developed a variety of other mobility options, including public transport, community transport, walking, travelling with friends and using taxis. While Figure 2 shows a low average number of return trips per day by those surveyed in this group, these people tended to undertake more activities per return trip than others. They typically planned their mobility carefully. For example, one vision-impaired man walked to a day centre, was then was collected by a volunteer in a car to attend a centre for the vision impaired, after which a community bus from this centre drove him home. This pattern occurred three days a week.

These examples are most important. They suggest that the *benefits* of improved accessibility from public transport services provided to socially excluded groups can ultimately be very considerable, including flow-on dimensions not recognised in conventional user benefit assessments. The authors conclude that the value of an extra trip to a socially excluded person can be significantly greater than to an included person. This should be reflected in the conception and evaluation of public transport program initiatives, a matter to which we return below.

Very importantly, the study found that improved public transport service levels (defined as delivering reasonable *minimum service levels*) would benefit large numbers of people in most of the transport disadvantaged groups studied, providing improved travel options for many of their desired activities and, in consequence, enhancing their social inclusion and well-being.

Major Study Recommendations

The Warrnambool study put forward several recommendations relevant to this paper, including the following:

1. public transport service enhancements – the study proposed implementation of a set of minimum service standards for the route bus system in existing urban areas and in growth suburbs (hourly services on seven days a week, for at least 12 hours a day and longer on some days), to provide a reasonable travel option for most transport disadvantaged people at most times;
2. regulatory reform – greater flexibility in use of the area's school bus system by transport disadvantaged (and other) groups, to enhance accessibility and improve efficiency of resource use. This is particularly important in rural and remote areas, where there are no existing public transport services;

3. transport system planning – restructuring transport planning, to focus on needs identification for improved accessibility, rather than on individual transport modes, and (most importantly) to engage local and regional stakeholders in defining these needs and transport improvement priorities. Current needs identification processes were found to be primarily top down, with little local or regional engagement. This was an important social governance proposal from the study, which has subsequently been taken up by the State Government and local community as a demonstration project. This particular problem may be less of an issue in areas where public transport service provision is the responsibility of local government but, in Victoria, the State Government has public transport service delivery responsibility and the past planning focus has been predominantly top-down[2]; and,

4. research – improving understanding of the direct and indirect linkages between transport disadvantage, social exclusion and well-being is important to more fully understanding the most effective ways to improve individual and community well-being and to evaluate the merits of initiatives that achieve these results.

Learnings from Some Social Policy Fields

The Warrnambool Study identified several examples of poor policy integration between some social policy fields and public transport. For example, the local technical education facility struggled for students in some courses, because of poor transport to/from the centre. Examples from other social policy fields also highlight this gap between transport policy/programs and social policy/programs.

In Australia and elsewhere, considerable funding goes into neighbourhood renewal programs, yet there are suggestions from UK research that poor outcomes are being achieved (Smith 1999). The inclusion of improved mobility options for neighbourhood renewal sites may facilitate improved achievement of renewal goals. Mobility considerations are seldom well integrated with the neighbourhood renewal programs.

The Australian Communities for Children program is seeking to improve access to services by families with young children. However, while the full evaluation is yet to be completed, it appears that a lack of public transport accessibility reduces program effectiveness. Issues such as infrequent services, incomplete availability of ultra low floor buses (easy for prams), unwillingness of some bus drivers to assist young mothers with prams and other children, and the cost of travel can be restricting of use and discourage involvement in the activities at the hubs, reducing their prospective value.

Other social studies provide similar evidence. An exploration of the needs of young families in Dandenong, a Melbourne suburb with a high migrant population and relatively low car ownership when compared with other Melbourne suburbs, found poor public transport services led to difficulties attending English classes and isolation, particularly for women (Stanley et al. 2006). For example, one woman commented:

> I am single and have children. I get tired having to walk everywhere: to school, to AMES (a social service for migrants), to child care – I get so tired.

These few examples, among many, highlight the need for closer co-ordination between social and public transport policy and programs, which are likely to be relevant to the

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[2] Governance issues still arise, however, where local government has service delivery responsibilities, including intergovernmental governance issues (e.g. because of funding transfers).

participants in many such social programs. Improved service co-ordination would benefit both the social program and public transport.

Additional Learnings from the Warrnambool Study

A well-being perspective

Manderson (2005) argues that the social goals of government are to create, consolidate and ensure a sense of well-being in its citizens. In pluralistic societies, a political conception of well-being that respects individual differences and might be widely supported could be seen as the provision of '…fundamental human entitlements that are to be secured by society' (Nussbaum 2005, p.30).

A problem with the accessibility-based approach is that it views accessibility as the end point to be pursued, rather than seeing it as a means towards achievement of the broader social policy goal of improved well-being. Adding the concept of well-being clarifies *why* accessibility is important, rather than having it pre-defined in terms of a person's end-point desire to procure goods or services or reach a location for an activity such as shopping, education, work, health services and leisure.

Nussbaum (2005) argues that there are ten central capabilities needed to achieve well-being. The present authors argue that achievement of a 'reasonable' level of mobility is implicit in the attainment of many of these capabilities.[3,4] Thus, by implication, it can be argued that there is a need for provision of a basic minimum level of public transport to facilitate mobility for all (and therefore capability attainment), and most particularly for those groups of people who are transport disadvantaged. The actual definition of an appropriate minimum service level (MSL) is a political process informed by research and local community involvement (social governance). The Warrnambool study produced a clear indication of a suitable MSL in that community and similar Australian communities.

While economists have made much progress in quantifying many of the economic and environmental effects of transport policies, programs and projects, the same cannot be said for social inclusion and well-being. Some would go further and argue that it is inappropriate to apply the economists' marginal utility calculus to many such issues (Nussbaum 2005). Without debating the philosophical issues involved, the current knowledge and understanding gap on monetary quantification reinforces the argument for using a capability-based approach in the current social policy context. A *capability-based approach* to well-being relates to the idea that there are fundamental entitlements of citizens based on justice which lead to a good quality of life (Sen 1985). Our research suggests that achievement can be assisted through public transport minimum service levels, determined through community engagement and political debate.

Social capital and community strengthening

The Warrnambool study approached the issue of public transport and mobility from a needs basis, asking people when and where they need to, or would like to, travel. This approach is in contrast to some work on accessibility planning, where there is an assumption about what people need. In such accessibility work, transport is viewed as a means to get from A to B, (for example) to access education, work or obtain essential needs of life, such as maintaining good health by visiting a doctor. The Warrnambool

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[3] Some of the capabilities listed by Nussbaum (2005, p. 42) that have clear mobility implications include health, affiliation, play, political control (participation) and material control (work and enter meaningful relationships) over one's environment.
[4] Mollenkopf and colleagues (2005), reporting on the European MOBILATE project, have produced a detailed cross-country model explaining mobility variability among older people and show a high correlation between mobility and reported life satisfaction. Their analysis of various contributors to mobility could provide one fruitful basis for further work linking accessibility to well-being.

study, and subsequent research by the current authors, clearly shows that being mobile is often far less pragmatic. Mobility is used to conduct a vast array of activities that people see as being important for their well-being but which may appear to be individually unimportant or even seemingly trivial: meeting a friend to have a cup of coffee, visiting an isolated elderly person or even just 'getting out of the house'.

The value of these activities to those undertaking them should not be under-estimated. An (unpublished) exploratory study in outer suburban Melbourne, which looked at what people did when given additional route bus services, found that people did just these things. While 16% of the people used the new bus services to access work and 8% to access health services, close to half of the people used the new services for 'leisure' activities. This is even though the new services did not offer a service on Sunday.

It is these activities which can be described in theoretical terms as facilitating the development of *social capital and community strengthening*. Social capital refers to the development of social networks and participation, which leads to the establishment of trust and reciprocity between people (Putnam 1993). Reciprocity is the process of exchange of goods or services within a social relationship. Community strengthening occurs where a sense of neighbourhood develops between individuals, families and organisations. This happens when people become actively engaged in the community. They feel socially connected, may become volunteers or leaders, and a sense of community pride is established (Vinson 2004).

Social capital has been a subject of considerable research in the past few years, particularly in Europe and Australia. Generally, this research indicates that the presence of extensive social capital is associated with good health, low crime and reduced fear of crime, economic growth, an efficient labour market, high educational achievement and more effective institutions of government (Gray, Shaw & Farrington 2006). Involvement with people and the local community is good for people and facilitates the achievement of broad governmental goals.

In general, people with smaller social networks are more likely to be poorer and have poorer health and general well-being than those with larger social networks (Crow 2004). Crow (2004 p.7) argues that the challenge for policy makers is to find ways to 'enhance disadvantaged people's access to social networks that will empower them'. The 'empowerment' occurs in many subtle ways and it is this link that has been overlooked in the accessibility model. For example, in an unpublished Australian study on long term unemployed, lack of accessibility to transport was said by case-managers to prevent 4% of their clients who live in inner metropolitan Melbourne, 14% of their clients who live in outer metropolitan Melbourne and 28% of non-metropolitan dwellers from getting a job (Perkins 2005). However, 56% of the participants in the study said social isolation/alienation (that is, the absence of social contacts) was a barrier to achieving the steps towards job procurement, such as education. Public transport can assist directly, by improving accessibility, but may also assist indirectly, through facilitating the development of social networks which (in this example) may assist the search for employment and the achievement of other intermediate steps towards obtaining employment.

The findings from preliminary research undertaken by the authors and colleagues suggest that providing people with increased mobility options serves to increase their involvement in networks and social participation, raising their potential to generate social capital and facilitate the achievement of broad governmental social policy goals. Mobility 'is central to glueing social networks together ...participation involves issues of transportation and mobility...' (Urry 2002 p.265).

Social Governance and Social Exclusion

Governance in relation to transport matters can be defined as the process of ensuring that key stakeholders have the *opportunity* and *capacity* to contribute to transport policy/program development and that *government processes* are in place to facilitate and incorporate their input into a coordinated transport system approach. This section briefly considers how social governance processes in public transport might contribute to reducing social exclusion.

Social governance (and related subjects such as community engagement/participation, associational governance) is commonly understood within a place-based context. Processes which involve citizens and the community are increasingly being talked about and experimented with, under such banners as 'capacity building', 'citizen participation' and 'community strengthening'. The method, and extent, of community participation varies greatly between programs, from consultation to far more active engagement. Fine, Pancharatnam & Thomson (2000), in their review of a number of social governance case studies, found that more effective outcomes were typically achieved in those projects that included active community involvement. Helliwell (2006, p.C43) found that quality of government has a large influence in explaining international differences in subjective well-being and that, among richer countries, the key elements in quality of government relate '…to the operation of the democratic process, capturing aspects of voice and accountability and of political stability'.

As with many other social policy goals, the concept of social governance, as it might apply to transport, has been little explored, nor the linkage(s) between such processes and the outcome goal of social inclusion.[5] Ironically, the UK Local Transport Plans, which emphasise stakeholder engagement as part of the accessibility planning approach, do not appear to link this engagement to building social capital and community strengthening.

In the Warrnambool case study the current authors used various engagement techniques with socially excluded groups and others, in the identification of transport needs and proposed on-going processes for engagement at the Tactical or system design level (Stanley & Stanley 2004). The engagament processes were important in problem definition and in identifying possible options for improving mobility/accessibility. More co-ordinated on-going demand and supply side initiatives should help to improve the effectiveness of the way needs are identified and the efficiency with which existing transport resources are used to meet those needs. The Victorian Government has subsequently established the proposed approach as a demonstration model.

Conclusion: An Integrated Transport and Social Policy Perspective

A failure to integrate transport and social policy reduces the potential contribution of public transport to individual and community well-being, as illustrated above. This failure has been noted by Pickup and Giuliano (2005) who argued that:

> While the two policy areas [transport policy and social policy] are clearly interrelated, there appears to be an absence of dialogue between the transport profession (trying to clarify the link between transport strategies and social exclusion) and mainstream social policy makers, who currently pay scant attention to transport related issues (p. 40).

Figure 3 proposes an approach to integration. It shows a model which adds well-being, social capital, community strengthening, social governance and broad social policy goals

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[5] TRB (2004) outlines some of the issues to be faced in implementing effective local/regional social governance processes in the transport field.

to an accessibility-based approach to reducing social exclusion, taking improved employment accessibility as the starting point (by way of example). The vertical pathway from social exclusion, through accessibility improvement, to social inclusion, reflects the dominant social policy model used in the UK. Adding the other dimensions opens up additional opportunities for improving social inclusion and well-being. It also improves understanding about the potential social value of public transport.

The outcome is a more holistic, integrated framework for public transport policy development and implementation, recognising linkages to social policy goals (and indeed to economic policy goals). Its application requires governments and communities to cross functional agency boundaries, to engage in more integrated, place-based policy development and program delivery. This is not easy, but promises multiplied benefits for program beneficiaries and more effective programs for those responsible for program planning and delivery. From a public transport perspective, the approach offers a wider view of the potential benefits achievable from service provision and improvement, through the contribution to meeting social goals.

Jurisdiction-specific minimum public transport service levels emerge as an important means of reducing social exclusion. Further research on quantifying the links between transport disadvantage, public transport service, social exclusion and well-being should provide rich information to further develop this case.
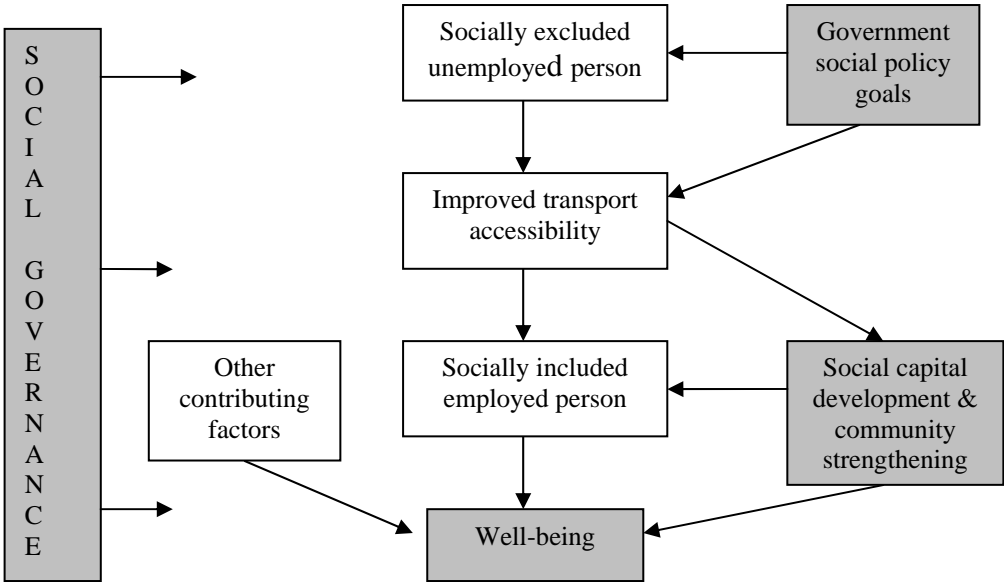
Figure 3: Transport Policy and Social Policy (an illustration)

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