EQUITY AND THE POLITICS OF SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT

Equity – both inter- and intra-generational – together with local participation in decision-making, are two of the cornerstones of a green philosophy and the essential foundation for sustainable development. For example, the imposition of a tax on the use of petrol or a pricing structure for heavily used roads, if implemented in isolation, would be regressive. That is, it would place a heavier burden on the poorer sections of society and widen the levels of mobility between poor and rich. Such policies without the development of public transport would be contrary to the principles of sustainable development. Sustainable development is possible only when policies are fully understood by the community and when they are legitimised through popular acclaim: 'The problems of "economic development" without democratic participation have been made manifest time after time. Unless individuals are able to share both in decision-making and in the actual process of development, it is bound to fail' (Elkin *et al.*, 1991b). Only by empowering people is it possible to improve the environment. Successful planning – whether for housing or roads – begins with the people, their aspirations and their perceived needs – it is a bottom-up process. Macdonald (1989) suggests that: '. . . unless people can, in some way, create, manage, change or participate in activities that affect their lives, dissatisfaction, alienation and even illness are likely outcomes'. Movement towards sustainable development will revive the idea of community, public provision of basic services and also planned intervention to ensure an equitable distribution of resources.

This agenda, however, requires the political will and commitment to make radical changes to the way in which society is governed and organized: it means a shift in power from central government to the regions, cities and, above all else, to the local community.

A progressive feature of development procedures is the 'community strategy' – a plan for the improvement of the economic, social and environmental well-being of residents that all local authorities are required to prepare under the Local Government Act 2000. How far such plans influence local transport remain to be seen. It is common practice to hold public meetings for the discussion of planning proposals and to mount planning exhibitions to inform the public about such proposals. There are, indeed, examples of residents engaging more actively in planning based upon games such as Planning for Real (Gibson, 1979). Many urban developments are funded by a combination of public and private finance involving partnerships between a number of collaborating authorities and organizations. Stakeholders in such ventures make important contributions to the development planning process, so widening the involvement of the community. Such widening of community participation is a welcome feature of development procedures.

CONCLUSION

Transport, in addition to bringing benefits to society, also involves large costs. Some of these costs, such as pollution and noise, are incurred directly or indirectly by the users or by those passively affected by developments. Other costs are the result of environmental damage. Many of these costs – particularly

from road-building programmes and the resulting increase in traffic – have fallen on the community rather than the developers of the transport system or its users. The price signals, such as road construction costs and cost of petrol, given by the transport market, because they ignore environmental costs, mislead the users into believing that personal mobility is cheaper than it really is. The depressed costs have therefore resulted in transport decisions harmful to the community. Individual transport users and developers will continue to make similar decisions – that is, they will continue to make greater use of the roads than real costs would support, until national governments increase fuel pricing and/or introduce road pricing to an extent where the price of road use reflects the true environmental costs. Tax measures of this nature should be preceded by, or accompanied by, proposals for improving public transport. Taxes gathered from road users should be earmarked for public transport initiatives. If tax proposals are implemented before public transport improvements, the effect would be felt by the poorer sections of the community – that is, those less able to pay extra taxes. Such a tax in that case would be regressive and counter to the main thrust of sustainable development.

In addition to measures outlined above, and in parallel with them, the aim of planning policies and urban design solutions must be to reduce the need for movement. Past planning policies and the resulting urban forms have been based on the notion of unrestrained movement and maximum mobility of the individual in his or her private car. Planning and designing urban forms for the reduced need for mobility is a longer-term solution to the problems facing society. It depends upon individuals gradually changing their lifestyle to one which is less dependent on the private car for mobility. The later chapters in this book aim to outline urban forms and policies which conform to the philosophy of sustainable development: they are directed towards exploring the new design paradigm for city planning where urban design is viewed as a component of a holistic programme of policies covering all aspects of the culture of city life.

The unrelenting growth of transport has become one of the greatest environmental threats facing the UK, and a great obstacle to achieving sustainable development. Thirty years ago it was already clear that it was dangerously complacent to ignore the possible environmental damage caused by increasing numbers of motor vehicles on the roads: it was becoming increasingly apparent even then that it was not possible to cater for the unrestricted use of vehicles without engineering works on a scale that was, and still is, socially unacceptable. It is as clear today as it was thirty years ago that limitations on the use of the private motor car must be imposed in order to safeguard the local environment from noxious fumes, noise and visual degradation, in addition to reducing the stress being placed on the climate by greenhouse gases.

The twin problems of congestion on the roads and environmental pollution refuse to go away: they are still with us in the twenty-first century, and conditions may get worse before they improve. The message – that creating more roads is not the solution to traffic problems in urban areas – has been known for many years: the problem, however, for a democracy is one of convincing the electorate that a painful solution is necessary. This requires the same