

1. Crossed Perspectives



Mobility and conviviality in a rural environment

Between Marie Huyghe (Planner)
And Odile Proust (Conseillère municipale)

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Is there a place for public or shared transportation in a rural environment? How can the needs of an isolated person or with reduced mobility be met? How should the ecological issues be dealt with? Here are the responses of an engineer who specialises in such questions, and a local elected representative who has played a significant role in developing the Pilat Regional Park in France.

01. What are some of the issues related to mobility in rural areas?



Marie Huyghe

Being mobile is essential for access to jobs, services, shops, leisure activities and social life. However, rural communities are characterised by a scarcity of local services, longer commuting distances and weak public transport services that could potentially constitute an alternative to the car. Hence, the latter is the main mode of transport used by rural households, who use it for 76% of their trips (INSEE 2009).

For physical, financial, cultural or behavioural reasons, some households are rarely, if ever, mobile. Most notably, this results in a limiting of the geographical perimeter used on a daily basis leading to strong dependency on the local and on networks of family and friends.

Moreover, the rising cost of fuel puts an added pressure on “vulnerable” households with modest incomes, who are forced to succumb to long and costly daily commuting. What will happen if they can no longer afford their mobility budgets?

Most journeys are made by single-occupant cars, which are responsible for both air and noise pollution, and take up a great deal of space.

These changes in the conditions of mobility call into question the lifestyles of these communities and their futures: if people can no longer get about, will they still choose to live in these areas?



O. P

What we are also seeing here is the increasing impoverishment and even the dispersion of families that these increasingly restrictive flows lead to. This new focus on mobility exposes some of our society's deep-seated dysfunctions: individualism, not necessarily by choice (hence the term ‘single-occupancy’) as well as the deterioration of working conditions and work schedules. And these constraints are cumulative for the most disadvantaged.

A true and telling example: Mrs X, aged 30 and married with two children, works in industrial catering in Lyon, 60km from home. She earns the minimum wage working part-time five days a week and some weekends, in split shifts between 6am and 9pm. She can't take the train and can't do anything in her three-hour afternoon break between shifts. You can imagine how much time and money she has left...



Odile Proust

The first issue is social equity. Many people are unable to get about due to the lack of organized transport services. I am referring to the elderly in particular, but also women, who often have to take a back seat if there is only one car in the family. This makes it hard for them to find a job, leaving them 'stuck' at home.

What's more, cars are expensive when you're out of work or have no income. This obviously affects young people, but everyone suffers, and there's a serious risk of isolation. It's unfortunate that INSEE no longer monitors the number of households without a car. It would be over 10% in France.

The second issue is the waste of energy. That's what motivated Pilat Park's decision to launch its first transport study.

The third issue is an economic one. More than half of the workforce work in the city and is dependent on a car.



M. H

Odile Proust's response is an interesting example of 'traditional' arguments on mobility, which cite those who are deprived of mobility, but are less interested in what I call vulnerable households – those in danger of eventually facing mobility difficulties and who represent a significant proportion of rural populations.

02. What kind of social connections are needed to make shared transport work?



Marie Huyghe

When households are interviewed about shared modes, the issue of "the other" often comes up, and is sometimes regarded as an obstacle to the development of these 'altermobilities'.

Car-sharing between individuals works based on questions of trust. Its success depends on good relations between car-sharers, who must also have compatible lifestyles and a similar view of the car. Daily carpooling can breed a certain mistrust of drivers with regard to carpooling websites: preferring to know the person with whom they carpool, they tend instead to seek such individuals out among their network of acquaintances.

Finally, traditional hitchhiking always seems to raise the 'fear of others'. To quell these misgivings, local hitchhiking networks therefore function based on communities that bring together hitchhikers and drivers, who, even if they don't know each other, recognise a distinctive emblem chosen by the network.



O. P

For shared transport to become 'normal' modes, these networks must spread to milieus beyond the social or environmental activist groups that created them and move beyond just providing transport solutions for people 'with specific needs' (young people, the elderly, etc.).

It is the primacy of the car that is the issue here. A good symbolic measure would be to get rid of company cars (as opposed to service vehicles), which are considered a promotion, or even replace premiums on cars with tax reductions for carpoolers!



Odile Proust

The car has become a private space, almost like a second home. Hence this is a rather odd situation, in which it's not easy to offer someone a lift (unless it's someone who needs help) and it's not easy to ask for one—unless you have a chauffeur!

In rural areas, the car is the primary shared mode of transport. But to share a car, you need not only to trust the other occupants but also to move away from traditional ideas regarding the value of a car (as a status symbol or a sign of freedom, especially for young people in rural areas).

Hence the idea behind Pilattitude, which was founded based on a local social forum, with the idea of organising carpooling, with a network of volunteer contacts who help bring people together, providing a guarantee of safety and organizing meetings so that the members get to know each other. Mobility is facilitated through a better knowledge of others, solidarity among family members and community life. I think that all areas could offer the same thing.



M. H

Interviews with rural households lead me to a slightly different conclusion. While it seems difficult to ask for a lift (because the person is embarrassed, or doesn't want to feel they 'owe' someone), offering lifts is becoming more and more automatic. This is reflected most notably in the development of carpooling for all kinds of journeys.

03. What role do local policies play in issues of mobility, particularly in developing these modes of shared transport?



Marie Huyghe

In general, the support of local authorities doesn't seem to be necessary for the development of an altermobility. This can be seen in the numerous local hitchhiking networks and on-demand transport

services that have been set up by ordinary people, either individually or as part of associations. This independence seems to go hand in hand with their rapid development, allowing them to avoid bureaucratic complications. However, it is hard to ensure a long-term future for these networks, as the responsibility tends to fall on a few individuals, making it difficult to sustain. However, the involvement of public authorities can bolster these networks and the associations that run them. Thus we see that the most developed and oldest networks are those that have received the support of local authorities.

We can also see the government's role in the development of these alternatives when it comes to carpooling, which local communities have become involved in by setting up special parking areas. The 'formalisation' of these parking areas has had a strong impact on the development of carpooling. It shows the local authorities support for the practice and increases the visibility of these parking areas, which can trigger changes in practices among drivers.



O. P

If we think of mobility as merely a symptom or a lever for something else (jobs, local life, energy, access to services), then local authorities have a key part to play in developing alternative solutions. Carpooling networks are not directly responsible for urban sprawl, the fact that business areas are moving further and further away, or for the lack of public transport to these areas.

They can be involved by lobbying or raising awareness of needs that are often invisible in conventional analyses, but they alone cannot solve anything. Today, local policies should be based on the expertise of citizens, as opposed to continuing to conduct traditional transport studies.



Odile Proust

A central one. Local governments have a comprehensive vision of transport and access to services, as well as the necessary skills (in planning, educational and economic matters), and are therefore in a position to identify problems and offer solutions. AOT (a local French transport authority) transport solutions as well as planning solutions, solutions involving social organisation (to promote mutual support and carpooling) solutions based on economic innovation (by supporting local job creation, teleworking, mobile food shops) etc.

Local governments in rural municipalities have developed many services - day nurseries, libraries, sports facilities - and support local businesses. But they have little involvement when it comes to access and transport, as though this somehow only concerned the private sector. Look at whether children in a given village can easily get to school on foot to know whether transport issues are a local concern or not...

Work and mobility are rights that aren't taken seriously enough, instead, we're busy coming up with a universal right to broadband, resulting in astronomical costs for communities!

Finally, elected officials must themselves be exemplary in order to lend credibility to these indispensable changes in mobility. That's why we're always inviting them to meetings, for example, to encourage them to take part in carpooling.



M. H

I would add that it is local policies, which are reflected in particular in terms of town planning documents, which guide the development and structuring of villages. In fact, they influence the mobility needs of their residents and modes of transport that will be available (cars, in areas of urban sprawl), or may be available (soft modes in densely-populated cities).



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Mobility trajectories: a key notion for conceptualizing and shaping changes in the way people travel

Video by Laurent Cailly, Marie Huyghe, Nicolas Oppenheim



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