



Equity on the road in Uganda: How do interface bureaucrats integrate marginalized groups in the transport sector?

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Social equity
Transport
Interface bureaucrats
Global south
Uganda

ABSTRACT

Research on road transport has paid growing attention to social equity objectives. However, little work has examined the role of the government officials that are charged to implement - notably how they make sense of and respond to mismatches between expectations and reality in their regulatory mandates. Drawing on a theoretical framing focused on interface bureaucracy and primary data from semi-structured interviews, this paper examines the agency of government officials in Kampala, Uganda. The analysis highlights how they take initiative to address social equity concerns, seeking to navigate implementation barriers through i) lobbying people in power, ii) seeking leverage in conditionalities of external funding, iii) alliance-building with civil society, and iv) proactive use of city level by-laws. This adds one of few empirical studies available on this subject within the transport studies literature and in the context of East Africa. It also offers a contribution towards conceptualizing what the agency of government officials might mean for the operationalization of key policy objectives in the transport sector.

1. Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced a rapid and large population growth, particularly in urban areas. This population is mostly living in small and intermediate size cities, increasing the demand for infrastructure – including general mobility, public transport and other services. Previous research has shown that there is a strong correlation between access to transport, on the one hand, and poverty and social exclusion, on the other (Lucas et al., 2016; Castro et al., 2022). It is generally the poor and low-income communities concentrated in the peripheral urban areas, who have limited access to transport services and mobility options.

Studies in Sub Saharan African cities such as Nairobi, Cape Coast, Cape Town, Kampala and Lagos have found that the burden of reduced mobility due to poverty is borne disproportionately by women, children, elderly and disabled people living in low-income areas and slums (e.g. INTALInC, 2019; Castro et al., 2022). Most low-income residents and the urban poor still rely on non-motorized transport (i.e., walking) and public motorized transport, which is often informal and characterized by poor service delivery. Lack of reliable transport services in turn limits

access to critical services such as education, healthcare, and employment opportunities.

Research on gender mainstreaming in public transport in Nairobi, Dar es Salaam and Kampala has showed that, historically, the planning and design of transport systems have not considered gender differentiated mobility patterns (Muhoza et al., 2020). Moreover, the sector has failed to incorporate not only the mobility needs of women but of other vulnerable users such as children, elderly and people with disability (see also UNWomen Uganda, 2021). Legal frameworks at national level in Sub-Saharan countries continue to show gaps both in their formulation and implementation. For instance, the policies tend to generalize across user groups without social differentiation to cater for diverse needs across multiple axes of discrimination, e.g., gender, disability, ethnicity, etc. (Muhoza et al., 2020). Lack of inclusive policies or poor implementation addressing the needs of different social groups may, in turn, jeopardise urban prosperity and increase discrimination and poverty (Lucas et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2019).

Despite non-motorized transport (NMT) being one of the dominant modes of transport for most of the urban population in the region, there is still poor provision of NMT infrastructure and facilities. Even where

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NMT infrastructure is provided, it is rarely accessible to vulnerable road users, increasing road safety risks (Mitullah et al., 2017; Porter et al., 2020; Appelhans et al., 2021). For instance, in 2019, pedestrians accounted for 38% of registered national road traffic crash fatalities, with over 52% of the registered road traffic injuries nationally occurring in the Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area (Kampala Capital City Authority, 2021).

Research on road transport has increased in the last decade, with growing attention to social equity concerns. Empirical studies on urban transport in East Africa have explored different dimensions of social exclusion, government responses through transport planning and infrastructure provision, as well as equitable and sustainable urban mobility solutions (e.g. Alando and Scheiner, 2016; INTALInC, 2019; Appelhans et al., 2021). Methodological studies have also explored the use of participatory approaches to engage vulnerable groups in transport planning (Jones et al., 2015; Giuffrida et al., 2019; Cinderby et al., 2021). Other studies have yet again focused on infrastructure and the links to prosperity and sustainability (Arimah, 2017; Lisinge and van Dijk, 2022).

However, little work has examined the role of the government officials that are charged to implement social equity objectives in the transport sector. This paper aims to contribute to fill this knowledge gap, examining the views and practices of the government officials in the road transport sector in, Kampala, Uganda. These officials have a mandate to implement social equity objectives but are constrained or entirely prevented from doing so due to a host of institutional, political, and financial barriers. The central question explored is: How do these interface bureaucrats seek to address inequities in a sector they have so little control over? In other words, how do they make sense of and respond to mismatches between expectations and reality in their regulatory mandates?

2. The agency of interface bureaucrats

A body of theory that we find particularly relevant for this study is the emerging literature on interface bureaucrats in sustainability governance. Drawing on recent anthropological scholarship regarding public service delivery (Olivier de Sardan, 2014), this concept refers broadly to the 'frontline' state officials that are tasked to implement lofty laws with limited means and in complex local realities (Funder and Marani, 2015). It builds, among other, on early work in public administration research recognizing that these 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 2010) have considerable discretionary space to interpret laws and regulations during implementation.

Interface bureaucrats in environmental governance or street-level, bureaucrats can be defined as "civil servants who operate at the 'street level' such as local planners, enforcement officers, technical experts and community engagement specialists, working across environmental domains" (Holstead et al., 2021, p. 1). In an African context, emphasis in this line of research has been on exposing so-called 'practical norms' and their divergence from official norms, often-times connected to understanding the underlying social dynamics behind issues such as corruption and weakness of the official state (Olivier de Sardan, 2014; Funder, 2019).

This rift between formal and practical norms – and hence the challenges faced by interface bureaucrats – tends to owe to a confluence of factors: First, post-colonial structures are known to deviate visibly from the formal administrative procedures patterned on the idea of a Western liberal democratic state (Olivier De Sardan, 2014). Second, globally, neoliberal ideology has contributed to dismantle earlier ideas about the welfare state, with it the presumption that state institutions should be solely or primarily responsible for service delivery (Lavee et al., 2018). Third, and interrelatedly, privatization is often enacted through different forms of hybridization in service delivery, public road transport delivery via private matatus and taxis being but one example (Abbott et al., 2017). Fourth, new public management, such as observed

in internationally funded infrastructure projects, contributes a performance-based policy-orientation that often leaves to interface bureaucrats to deliver outcomes, with much freedom to find their perceived 'best route' to implementation (Lavee and Strier, 2019).

A key argument emerging from this primarily sociological research tradition cited above is about the 'honest and competent officials who avoid [the systems of corruption but] in their personal professional practice are not currently in a position to reform them' (Blundo and Olivier De Sardan, 2006, p. 2). While we recognize this important body of work our attention in this paper is to how interface bureaucrats – despite their obvious limitations – in fact *do try* to enact practices aimed at addressing perceived system failures. In other words, we are interested in understanding how interface bureaucrats enact what could be called equity-centred practices, i.e. practices aimed at (re)infusing social equity perspectives inside the state apparatus, or at least in its performance towards citizens.

In so doing, the study also speaks to recent debates in the environmental governance literature, documenting the need to better understand the subjectivities and practices of interface bureaucrats (e.g. Holstead et al., 2021). For instance, if service hybridization increasingly distributes responsibility for transport services in the hands of both private and public actors – what are the implications for the agency of interface bureaucrats? As Funder (2019) has commented, attention has typically been devoted to global and national actors that formulate and shape policies, or the community-level actors that are impacted. Meanwhile, there has been less attention to the everyday practices and experiences of local state practitioners.

3. Case study: social equity in the transport sector in Kampala, Uganda

This study focuses on the public transport system in Kampala which is far from being inclusive or gender sensitive (Muhoza et al., 2020). To organize the inquiry, the study focuses on two concrete issues shaping social inequities in the sector:

A) *The design of road infrastructure to cater for NMT users.* The road transport sector in Uganda is governed by several policies, plans and legislation including the National Transport Master Plan including a Transport Master Plan for Greater Metropolitan Area (2008–2023), and National Transport and Logistics Policy (2021). However, the National Non-Motorized Transport Policy developed in 2012 is the key most explicit policy that addresses social exclusion of vulnerable road users namely, pedestrians and cyclists from the current transport system in both urban and rural areas in Uganda. The policy addresses three aspects of social exclusion in road transport, namely i) physical accessibility ii) road safety of NMT users, and iii) gender discrimination in relation to cycling. The NMT policy also clearly spells out the responsibilities of key transport actors, including those government offices involved in this study (Ministry of Works and Transport, 2012). The Kampala City Strategic Plan 2020–2025 aims to improve transport through planning and implementing integrated mobility infrastructure within Greater Kampala. This plan emphasizes the need to focus on "the vulnerable groups to ensure full inclusiveness in the overall development of Kampala" (Kampala Capital City Authority, 2021, p.31).

B) *The delivery of public motorized transport via private sector services.* The design of public transport logistics lacks design features to meet the needs of vulnerable users in terms of comfort and physical accessibility. Informal public transport is also characterized by unscheduled transport services, unregulated and inconsistent fares, as well as insecurity (e.g., sexual harassment), especially affecting women and other vulnerable users who tend to travel by public transport (IntalInc, 2019; UNWomen Uganda, 2021). Urban public transport has been neglected in East Africa by the national governments (Schalekamp and Saddier, 2019; Appelhans et al., 2021) and most large infrastructure investments in the transport sector have been funded by international organizations such as the World Bank and African Development Banks (Gabor, 2019). These

banks have had a focus on stimulating private rather than public motorized transport and non-motorized transport which is mostly used by low-income groups who cannot afford private cars (Schalekamp and Saddier, 2019; Porter et al., 2020).

This informal transport sector in East African cities is characterized by inadequate regulation by public authorities, absence of public subsidies, among other issues (Behrens et al., 2017; Schalekamp and Saddier, 2019; Venter et al., 2020). With regards to social equity, informal public transport services are not accessible in terms of comfort for vulnerable users (such as expectant women, children, elderly and persons with disability) and safety and security (INTALInC, 2019; Porter et al., 2020). These are, oftentimes, constrained by limited funds but also by policies and urban plans that are not socially sustainable (Grieco, 2015). In Sub-Saharan Africa national and local governments have demonstrated some effort to achieving inclusive and sustainable mobility promoting both more efficient NMT and implementation of mass transit systems, such as the bus rapid transport systems (Mfinanga and Madinda, 2016; Porter et al., 2020).

The Transport system in Kampala (Uganda) is characterized by inadequate funding for transport infrastructure, traffic congestion, an undeveloped system with high pressures from a growing population and urban expansion (UNWomen Uganda, 2021). With an estimated population of 1.6 m (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021), public motorized transport (minibuses) accounts for 41% of daily trips, walking accounts for 39% while motorcycle taxis ‘boda boda’ accounts for 10% and private cars 7.9% (2016) (INTALInC et al., 2019). A statistical study by UNWomen Uganda (2021) on women’s use and experience of public transport in Kampala showed that women are affected by cost, distance and violence while using transport.

4. Methods

Data generation took place via semi-structured interviews (e.g. Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015), with interview questions formulated based on the above literature review about the state of knowledge in the research field as well as the policy context in Kampala, and East Africa more generally. The interview questions were centred around three themes:

- i. *Subjectivities*: How do interface bureaucrats perceive social equity and their mandates?
- ii. *Structural barriers*: What are the key implementation barriers for interface bureaucrats?
- iii. *Practices*: How do interface bureaucrats exert their agency to try and navigate these barriers?

The study focused on government civil servants in the road transport sector in Kampala, whose role is to implement government policies and objectives regarding social equity; these are the people we in the paper denote as interface bureaucrats. Because of the existing institutional arrangement in the sector, some national institutions are also involved in the implementation at local level, e.g., in licensing of public transport vehicles (Directorate of Transport Regulation and Safety) or provision of national and regional roads that pass through the city (Uganda National Road Authority). The study addressed both the views of interface bureaucrats and civil society organizations representing vulnerable groups affected by inequities in non-motorised transport and public motorized transport (including women, children, elderly, people with disabilities, and people from low-income communities).

The study’s participants were identified through purposive sampling and snowballing. Many of these contacts were established during a previous study (Muhoza et al., 2020). The participants were contacted via e-mail, with interviews undertaken between August and October 2021. Due to the COVID19 pandemic regulations, interviews were conducted virtually via an online platform to ensure the safety of researchers and participants. With the consent from participants,

interviews were audio recorded. One participant provided written responses. A total of 13 interviews were conducted (Table 1). The study was conducted during the pandemic and hence might have been influenced by participants being in the midst of the restrictions imposed on government agencies, including limitations on public engagement. Yet, the interviews inquired into people’s experiences also before the pandemic.

Analysis was conducted using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), deriving categories or themes from the transcripts, guided by our research questions. Interview recordings were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using NVIVO software. The research team reviewed and cleaned all transcripts to ensure quality control. The software could not transcribe the proper wording in some sections of the interviews; these were hence typed up manually. Two researchers independently reviewed the transcripts and iteratively generated codes using deductive and inductive approaches. Four predetermined codes (theme nodes)

Table 1
Summary of participants in the study.

Organization		Activity	Code	Gender	
Interviewee category	Department				
Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA)	Directorate of Engineering and Technical Services	High level management Planning/ Public Transport	Interviewee 1 Interviewee 2	M F	
	Gender, Community Services and Production Directorate	High level Management	Interviewee 3	F	
	Ministry of Works and Transport	Department of Transport Regulation and Safety	High level management	Interviewee 4	M
	Department of Transport Services & Infrastructure	Economist planning Transport Planning	Interviewee 5 Interviewee 6	M M	
	Department of Transport Regulation and Safety	Management	Interviewee 7	M	
	Uganda National Roads Authority (UNRA)	Roads and Highways Engineering Division	Transport planning	Interviewee 8	M
	First African Bicycle Information Organization (FABIO)		High level management	Interviewee 9	M
Civil Society Coalition on Transport (CISCOT)		High level management	Interviewee 10	M	
Actogether/ National Slum Dwellers Federation of Uganda		High level management	Interviewee 11	F	
Women Foundation for the Transport Sector (WOFTS)		High level management	Interviewee 12	F	
Uganda Road Accident Reduction Network Organization (URRENO)		High level management	Interviewee 13	M	

were structural (based on themes explored in the interview questions including: actors; subjectivities of interface bureaucrats; structural barriers; and practices or coping strategies). Other codes were generated from the emerging themes in the data.

Through the analysis, we used the coding to generate key themes relating to practices or coping strategies employed by interface bureaucrats to overcome key implementation barriers that emerged from the data. These themes were selected through ‘data saturation’ whereby several respondents were supporting the existence of such a practice. However, we also strived to pay attention to how themes were represented across the interviews (i.e. both how many people supported a specific view and if insights were located with particular segments of the interviews – notably whether there was divergence or convergence between government and civil society actors. Practices that were mentioned by only one participant were not presented in the paper (such as building capacity of bureaucrats in mainstreaming social equity to raise awareness, or the level of prioritization of equity issues). As the paper focuses on documenting practices of bureaucrats, the results section below presents the four key equity-centered practices that we identified while highlighting the barriers they seek to address as well as relevant aspects concerning people’s subjectivity.

5. Results

Here, we present the findings from the interview analysis, beginning with an overview of the spread of views among the study participants and subsequently presenting the equity-centered practices employed by interface bureaucrats that emerged from the analysis. The coding process outlined above led us to identify four key practices (Table 2). As can be discerned, there was varying support for these practices across the government actors, but common to all was that at least two people supported the existence of a practice. When it comes to the views of civil society representatives the picture is more varied. For two of the practices, civil society actors neither confirmed nor disagreed with their existence (Lobbying the people in power; Seeking leverage in external funding). Here, the data hence tells us solely about self-perceived efforts of people inside government administration. For one practice (Alliance-building with civil society), civil society actors held both supporting and divergent views. The attention to this practice from civil society is perhaps not surprising, since it concerns the interaction that they directly have with government. For the fourth and final practice highlighted in government interviews (Proactive use of city level by-laws), civil society actors only provided dissenting views. We pick up on these patterns below, as we treat each practice in turn. Yet, while a lack

of support or even counterviews from civil society is important to consider, it does not necessarily mean that these practices are less valid – it can also mean that practices are simply less visible from outside the government administration.

5.1. Equity-centered practices

5.1.1. Lobbying the people in power

Lobbying political leaders and policy makers has been used by interface bureaucrats to overcome two key implementation barriers, namely political interference, and poor prioritization of social equity issues. Whereas people did not openly discuss this in the interviews, such efforts to play the system from the inside must arguably be viewed in relation to the Ugandan political context. The ruling party and President have been unchanged since 1986 and no signs of readiness to democratic elections are visible. Moreover, tribal groups have much informal influence, with people in power oftentimes favouring people within their tribes (Stiftung, 2022). Interviewees described how politicians make promises when they are under pressure to secure votes, mobilizing support from informal public transport operators, especially motorcycle taxis, in return for turning a blind eye:

I’ll give an example, we opened up the NMT corridor [Namirembe Road], it’s there, it’s functioning, but we are battling with the public transport motorcycles, what we call boda bodas. But then a directive comes and asks us not to enforce. OK, so if we cannot enforce the removal of these boda bodas from the cycle lanes and the walkways, what are we doing? Whereas we want to do the right thing, if we are not supported by the political system, we cannot do that (Interviewee no. 2).

Interface bureaucrats similarly highlighted that the limited prioritization of social equity objectives from political leaders and policy-makers is reflected in a lack of allocation when budgets are drawn up for the road transport sector. As one person stated: “Sometimes there are no dedicated budgets for such gender issues. They do not consider them so much.” (Interview no. 6).

To address this perceived lack of prioritization, some interface bureaucrats seek to sensitise political leaders, capitalizing on social and professional networks to reach the people in power. One important approach was to identify a politician, who could be a champion for social equity in transport and, therefore, could influence other political leaders, even the highest level:

The best way... is to find someone who can go to the president and explain... the importance of a certain project. [...]. We navigate them [the decision makers that undermine social equity goals] by going to the Head of State. [...] Sometimes actually most cases, ministers fail even when they are

Table 2
Overview of the spread of views in the interviews.

Practice	Implementation barrier it responds to	Key equity issue being aimed at	Government officials talking about this practice	Civil society representatives talking about this practice	Civil society representatives stating divergent view
<i>Lobbying the people in power</i>	Poor prioritization of social equity issues,	Poor design of public transport services	Interviewee 2 Interviewee 7		
<i>Seeking leverage in external funding</i>	Political interference leading to poor enforcement Inadequate funding for provision of adequate and inclusive NMT infrastructure	Encroachment on available NMT infrastructure and facilities Inadequate infrastructure and facilities for NMT and which are not inclusive	Interviewee 2 Interviewee 3 Interviewee 4 Interviewee 7 Interviewee 8		
<i>Alliance-building with civil society</i>	Inadequate public participation in transport planning	Poor design of NMT and motorized transport infrastructure	Interviewee 1 Interviewee 2 Interviewee 6 Interviewee 5	Interviewee 11 Interviewee 13	Interviewee 9 Interviewee 10 Interviewee 12
<i>Proactive use of city level by-laws</i>	Inadequate policies and regulations to enforce social equity in public transport	Poor enforcement of social equity in public transport/ Poor design of public transport services	Interviewee 2 Interviewee 4		Interviewee 12 Interviewee 11 Interviewee 13

convinced by technical people, they failed to convince cabinet. Unless the man himself [the president] says I want this, that's when it goes ahead (Interviewee 7).

Interviewee 7 provided two concrete examples of other interface bureaucrats lobbying the president, perceived to lead to the implementation of two projects, which had otherwise stalled in Uganda. Note, though, that the equity aspects in these interventions were not evident from the interview:

"There are two projects for example, where the president came in later. The current Uganda Airlines which has been set up, the first time it was brought up at the technical level, it was shot down [dismissed], but someone reached the president. The Standard Gauge Railway was shot down until someone reached the president."

5.1.2. Seeking leverage in external funding

As evident from the above, inadequate funding towards integration of equity objectives in the road transport sector was by many highlighted as a key barrier. Interface bureaucrats indicated that they sought to alleviate this funding issue by continuously lobbying for more funding from different donors but also from the central government. They seek to direct available resources to provide for vulnerable road users but the resource gap means that the NMT infrastructure provided is not as inclusive as it should be. For example, Interviewee 1 explained:

"I see what is available for me in terms of space [road] and then I design to ensure that everybody fits in. But because there are those constraints, sometimes you do not provide adequate space for cyclists, do not provide adequate space for those who walk, then you miss out facilities for those who are blind because every addition is at a cost.... If we had sufficient money, definitely some of these things we would just do them without any hindrance."

Moreover, bureaucrats have pointed out how external donor funding, beyond the mere resources provided, can strategically help promote social equity in infrastructure provision. Road infrastructure development in Uganda is funded by both the Government of Uganda and development partners, such as the World Bank, African development Bank, the European Union, and via bilateral (Bogere et al., 2014). China has also increasingly invested more in Uganda, e.g., for the extension of the airport and the rail system. When these donors demand compliance with their environmental and social standards then such funding can play a critical role in ensuring integration of equity considerations in transport infrastructure development.

Interviewees here noted how these conditionalities provided important leverage points for interface bureaucrats to motivate and follow-up on the integration of social equity objectives, especially when the government fails to demand, or even work against, explicit requirements. We provide two examples:

"For the last 5 or 6 years, the World Bank has been funding the road infrastructure development and they have taken gender and equity as their main strands in all the designs and rollout that is done. So that has somehow helped us to influence the private sector to observe the gender and equity issues. Currently, the junctions that are being signalised and they are providing for people with disabilities." (Interviewee no. 3).

Actually, where a facility development is funded by the World Bank, they ensure that social equity is taken care of as much as possible [...]. We get challenges when the funding is local, but in many instances, we've been able to also convince the designers and implementers of the need to provide for the disabled, challenged colleagues [vulnerable users] of ours. So yes, efforts are made, but less where the funding is local, better with the funding from the development partners (Interviewee no. 8).

5.1.3. Alliance-building with civil society

A recurrent theme expressed by the interface bureaucrats was that the design of equitable transport infrastructure or services requires a solid understanding of the needs, preferences and trends of vulnerable road users. Thus, they found it vital to work for the involvement of these users, or organizations representing their views, in the design and implementation of infrastructure development plans. Two statements

speak to this point.

"So, yes, we need to go deep with civil society, identify the different civil society organizations that are doing this work, and we partner with them so that we get very good evidence-based feedback" (Interviewee no. 6).

"We conducted a paratransit study but I think the results of that study [were easily accepted] because all the stakeholders were engaged: Taxi groups, taxi driver associations or taxi owners' associations, taxi operators associations." (Interviewee no 1).

Interestingly, it became clear that this engagement with civil society was not simply out of a need to ensure citizen influence and hence policy effectiveness and legitimacy, following a traditional (i.e., top down) transport planning approach to stakeholder engagement (Booth and Richardson, 2001). Interface bureaucrats seemed to have realized that they can also strategically employ alliance-building with civil society groups to mobilize public opinion and, in turn, influence political leaders or decision makers within their bureaucracies:

As an officer, we keep dialoguing. [...] Working alone has always shown us that people will fight back. But first, we are engaged from the start and we are planning the improvements together. We have seen that we have more buy-in from people and we are able to move. We make more headway when we work with them and with all the stakeholders (Interviewee no. 2).

The civil society has also employed these new partnerships to influence decision-making:

Now we are trying to use the structures to penetrate through systems of government, to see how we can penetrate the policy frameworks of the government, to be able to put on board our issues that we come up with. So, with partnership that we have created, it is a bit evident and the work that we have so far done, we think that it can open doors for people to understand the need of such policies that are pro-poor in terms of transport. (Interview no. 11).

That said, the picture is not all rosy (see also Table 2). Dissenting views in the interviews were from civil society actors talking about "mild participation of communities and other actors, particularly in the construction of roads..." (Interviewee no. 9). Some bureaucrats agreed, observing that the efforts towards stakeholder engagement and public consultation, despite viewed as critical, remained hugely insufficient. For instance, interviewee 6 explained:

"When you look through the policy formulation process from idea conception to M&E, I would say, where we need improvement, one is consultation. We need to put more strength in terms of consulting the different stakeholders to have this equity issue handled at maximum...."

It is also worthwhile to recall that even if individual bureaucrats considered that they had succeeded in deepening collaboration with civil society on singular issues, this takes place in a political context wherein civil society is exposed to various forms of suppression. One recent example is the decision of the Government of Uganda in 2022 to require NGOs to register with the Personal Data Protection Office within a month timeframe.

5.1.4. Proactive use of city level by-laws

Interviewees highlighted that the multiple gaps in existing transport policy and regulations were a key barrier to implementation of social equity objectives (see also review in section 2). As an example, public transport vehicles are regulated through registration, licensing and inspection by the Directorate of Transport Regulation and Safety at the Ministry of Transport, as stipulated in the Traffic and Road Safety Act, 1998 (Amendment) Act, 2020. However, the act does not have any explicit provision for consideration of the diverse vulnerable user needs into the public transport service provision. One person explained:

There's no regulation which has ever been made for those vulnerable groups to ensure equity. That is a challenge... Sometimes we want to force people to provide facilities for the disabled, but [the requirement] is not in there [in the law], so you can't force them (Interviewee no. 7).

To try and fill part of the gap in national road transport regulation, some city-level bureaucrats explained how they have put in place and enforced new city bylaws. For instance, the KCCA has, since 2020, attempted to integrate the needs of vulnerable groups into the public

transport service provision by providing designated seats in buses. These efforts do not go unnoticed, though, with push-back from private operators:

We recently asked that we allow for at least two spaces (because they only have 14 seaters). And if the vulnerable (persons) are there, they should use the seats...But most of these improvements really are a tug of war because they [private transport operators] do not understand why they need to do this. They don't understand why they need to wait for a lame person if they can go with another one available at the time (Interviewee no. 2).

Again, though, civil society actors were not impressed or rather, did not show recognition of these efforts (see Table 2). The impression shared by several NGO representatives was like that of interviewee 11: "No one regulates the transport system".

6. Discussion and conclusions

The starting point for the study was an understanding of the abundance of implementation barriers when it comes to social equity in the transport sector in East Africa (e.g., INTALInC, 2019; Schalekamp and Saddier, 2019). Moreover, we considered the multiple societal causes of these barriers, linked to, inter alia, social stratification, patriarchal systems, ethnic tensions, and influence of colonial institutions (Arimah, 2017). The purpose was to shed light on how some of the key actors respond to and navigate this intractable situation, seeking to contribute new insights about the role of human agency to scholarly debates otherwise centred on either more technical aspects or structural factors.

Overall, the findings in this case study of Kampala showed how several interface bureaucrats express commitment and takes initiative to address social equity concerns. The analysis highlighted four distinct practices employed by government staff, emerging in response to practical implementation barriers and guided by people's subjectivities. These insights comprise a contribution to conceptualize the role of interface bureaucrats in transport studies (Funder and Marani, 2015; Holstead et al., 2021). Moreover, the study adds to a very limited set of empirical studies on the role of interface bureaucrats in the context of East Africa, specifically Uganda (though, as noted, see also Zedekia, 2017; and Sidha et al., 2021).

Although the study was not about a formal evaluation of the impact of the practices exerted, it seems clear that the efficacy of interface bureaucrats' agency often was insufficient to counter disabling factors rooted in the wider governance system. The limitations in the described practices were visible, e.g., in the detrimental impact of political interference on the achievement of social equity in the privately led public motorized transport sector and the privatization of public transport service delivery coupled with gaps in transport regulation. Although the bureaucrats have devised creative strategies to cope with implementation failures – and arguably should be credited with making some headway – they acknowledged, unsurprisingly, that substantive changes were needed in the existing policy, legal and institutional frameworks to enable them to ensure social equity in road transport. This is also an observation coming out in the remaining criticism from civil society actors, whom in several instances did not recognize the existence of practices highlighted by government staff or found them hugely insufficient.

The study also indicates how interface bureaucrats sometimes cope with disabling conditions, such as limited financial resources, by disregarding, consciously or unconsciously, the mobility needs of some vulnerable groups (e.g. incorporating universal design features such as tactile elements for blind persons, audible pedestrian traffic light for people with disabilities in the design of NMT infrastructure). This has also been mentioned by Zedekia (2017, p 1), who noted that 'bureaucrats cope with the gaps between the legislative mandate, citizen's demands and resource availability by rationings of the services. Clients are divided into big categories from which they decide who to prioritize for service provision'. Vedung (2015) has also argued that bureaucrats may opt to focus on a limited number of clients when they seek to offer

transport services and cope with otherwise unmanageable expectations.

In relation to wider debates around social equity in development studies, our study reminds of both the resistance faced against reforms and the efforts that interface bureaucrats make, nonetheless, to push equity objectives forward. Recent years have seen widespread progress in so-called diffusion of equity norms, globally. In low-income countries, development agencies have played important roles in promoting the integration of equity objectives into national legal frameworks, as part of the international human rights agenda. What is often-times ignored, however, is that this is, essentially, a prescriptive normative agenda that is prone to encounter resistance from in-country actors, e.g. when conflicting with traditional culture and/or historical patterns of privilege (Engbjerg-Pedersen, 2020).

Interrelatedly, an interesting finding in the context of developing countries, such as Uganda, is about the role played by donor conditionalities. Large scale infrastructure and transport services depend mainly on donor support and loans for infrastructure development. Here, international funders were found to influence practices of bureaucrats through their funding standards and associated conditions. Obviously, these effects must be assumed to be an explicit motivation for such conditionalities, but it is arguably of interest that this steering by donors was so clearly welcomed by the interface bureaucrats charged to facilitate policy implementation and promote social equity.

The findings speak to the growing literature on the need for more inclusive transport planning and for involving the public and the voice of vulnerable users in decision making processes to achieve a more equitable transport system (Sagaris, 2018; INTALInC, 2019). Here, we saw that interface bureaucrats have learnt the value of involving targeted road users, from policy design to road construction, for any change to happen on the ground. More specifically, as noted above (section 4.2.3), interface bureaucrats sought to strategically employ alliance-building with civil society groups to mobilize public opinion as means of leveraging equity-oriented actions. While once again reminding about the dissenting views and remaining criticism from some civil society actors, we suggest that this adds an additional dimension to the debate over public participation in transport planning: interface bureaucrats may consider this important, not only out of an obligation to ensure citizen influence and hence policy effectiveness and legitimacy, but rather since it is in their own best interest, to draw support from public opinion and interest groups.

Theoretically, these findings have resonance in particular with one strand within the literature on interface bureaucrats, namely that which has explored the role of bureaucrats as 'citizen agents' rather than 'state agents'. As Maynard-Moody and Mosheeno (2000:352) stated, based on observations from US bureaucracies: 'street-level workers, themselves, tell a different story, a counternarrative of the worker acting as a citizen agent'. This is a counter-narrative in the sense that it articulates how interface bureaucrats may not primarily have allegiance to their state institutions, but to the citizens they seek to serve. Lavee and Strier (2019) have suggested that this citizen agent narrative might be particularly relevant when interface bureaucrats work with marginalized groups, as is arguably the case for social equity in the transport section, and especially so in East Africa. As Lavee, Cohen and Nouman (2018:334) explain: 'when street-level bureaucrats become alienated from the current policy worldview and believe that reconciling the problems with it through implementation is not enough, they will see themselves as citizen agents and act to influence policy outcomes... they might do so not only via implementation practices, but also by trying to influence policy design directly'.

This is an important point since transport studies have, globally, tended to focus on the selfish tactics and strategies of interface bureaucrats. As a case in point, Salomonson and Felleson's (2014) study of public transport employees look at their tactics in dealing with traveller misbehaviour. Moreover, as Frisch Aviram et al. (2021) have reviewed, much earlier work on public administration has tended to assume that interface bureaucrats either accept the alienating conditions of

dysfunctional bureaucracy or leave their positions. The study adds insights into how interface bureaucrats also seek to act proactively as policy entrepreneurs.

In conclusion, we suggest, this case study has added a new empirical building block, comprising one of the few empirical studies available on the role of interface bureaucrats in addressing social equity within the transport studies literature and in the context of East Africa. Moreover, it has offered a theoretical contribution to conceptualize what the agency of interface bureaucrats means for the operationalization of key policy objectives – such as for social equity – in the transport sector. This should help motivate more empirical studies to further probe the issues raised from our research and consolidate understanding of how government officials pitted in ambiguous roles in the transport sector can be better supported in enacting their mandates for the good of the wider public.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Cassilde Muhoza: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Rasmus Kløcker Larsen:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Rocio Diaz-Chavez:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

Acknowledgement

This study was conducted within the Stockholm Environment Institute's Gender, Social Equity and Poverty (GESEP) Program, funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. Kløcker Larsen also acknowledges funding from Formas - a Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development (grant number 2020-01407). We are grateful to government officials and representatives of vulnerable groups' organizations in public transport from Uganda who participated in the study and provided their insights. We are grateful to SEI colleagues in the GESEP Program for helpful advice, including Lisa Segnestam and Natalia Bidskupska. A particular note of thanks goes to former SEI colleague Elvine Kwamboka, who helped conducting the study.

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