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Access to mobility: a basic social service

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Abstract

Even though access to mobility and to free choice is guaranteed in Switzerland, it is becoming necessary to redefine the satisfaction of social needs through the construction of road network in a context of sustainable development. Decision-making methods must contain a specific facet for the problem of mobility as a basic social service. The approaches carried out recently in Switzerland bring innovative elements to decision-making processes without, however, giving an obvious priority to that social aspect.

The notion of basic social service is not unanimously accepted and can only be totally integrated in a project if the protagonists concerned participate in the decision-making process.

Introduction

For a country like Switzerland, it is possible to say that, at the present, access to mobility is globally guaranteed. The social function of displacement possibilities is not questioned and access to regions and amenities is possible for everyone. In this sense, the worries of our country cannot be a very realistic example for developing countries whose primary concern is to improve the ease of mobility.

On the other hand, individual mobility is sometimes questioned, notably with respect to the free choice of displacement mode. This is problematical, especially when it may be noted that more than 54% of all displacements have the sole aim of leisure or shopping. Practising a sport generates 17% of all displacements. Considerations of the limitation of impacts and the need for harmonious territorial planning are given more and more weight in decision-making for creation, extension, adaptation or modification of the road network.

Even if the motorway network is more than 90% completed and the global achievement of these works has no opposition and is even included in legislation, there are still a large number of objects whose real need remains to be proven. Even more, at present, reflections are directed toward upkeep work and maintenance of the road heritage, which must also be evaluated and justified.

The concern of having a global vision to decide upon the need for an object must sometimes supplant local elements whose importance, unquestionable but often emotional, must not impede development. This is the case, for example, when a landscape of tourist value, a highly populated zone or an interesting biotope are concerned.

The social need in project evaluation

The principle of sustainability includes an essential component, which is solidarity and social development. It is understandable that society must make its own decisions concerning its future and take part in its social choices. This also implies, without explanation, that the protagonists, either close to or far from a project, must be associated with it. This is essentially true when a choice between options must be made when the need is not directly apparent. An approach by methods comparing costs and benefits or advantages and disadvantages is, of course, indispensable for supporting all decision-making, but at present they are not longer sufficient.

The objectives of sustainable mobility were defined by the Swiss authorities in the year 2000 [1]. The social aspect is underlined in the affirmation that all population groups and all regions must have access to transportation infrastructures. At present, this is true in our country under certain conditions of inconvenience linked to long distances, long travel time and limited access in winter. Thus, the notion of social justice may be described as follows:

- to guarantee basic provisions over the entire territory
- to take into consideration those persons which do not have access easily to transportation infrastructures
- to ensure the well-being of persons and to reduce health risks and accidents to a minimum

Concerned to take the three aspects of sustainable development into consideration in project evaluation, the Swiss federal roads authority has undertaken a process aiming to update methods of choice. A mandate [2] was given in 2001 to the firm Ecoplan with the idea « *of creating and installing an instrument which permits the evaluation of infrastructure projects, taking into consideration the objectives of sustainable development* ». Thus, the road authorities developed elements of comparison and evaluation at the national level to complete opportunities studies such as are described in two recent standards [3][4]. As described in these standard documents, the first aim of the planning study is to examine the opportunity of the project and at the same time to furnish the proof of the need. The terms remain very general and do not go into the level of detail needed to actually describe social need.

The general process is described by A. Cuche [5] in a diagram which underlines the evaluation logic:

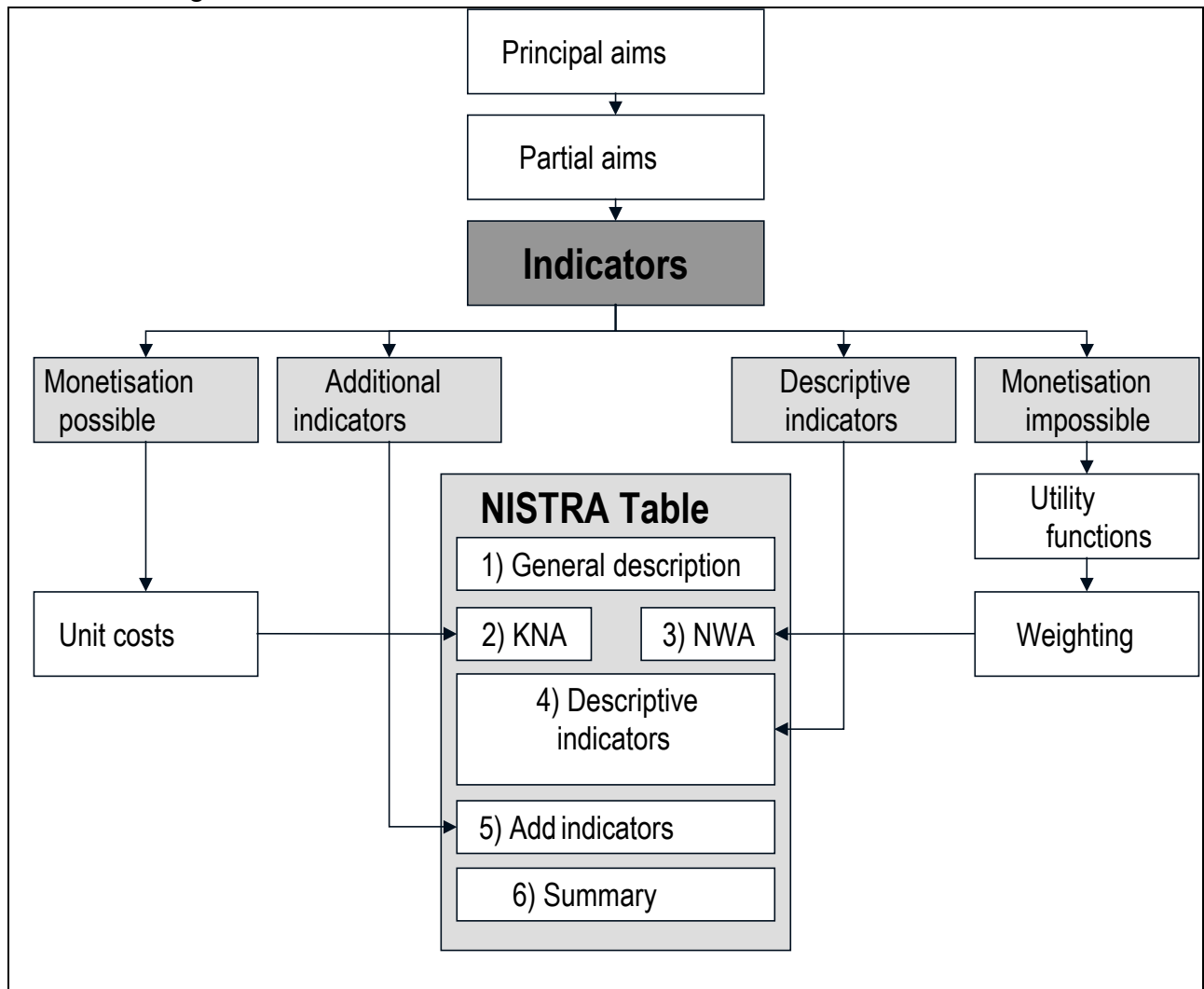


Fig 1 : General diagram of the evaluation method for projects after A. Cuche [5]

For the « social » part of the sustainable development, the principal aims retained by this method are:

- to guarantee basic transportation service
- to encourage social solidarity
- to guarantee acceptance, participation and co-ordination

These may be decomposed into partial aims which are to be considered as aspects to be taken into consideration:

- Basic transportation service over the entire territory
- Accessibility to transportation
- Distribution of costs/advantages
- Possibility of participation
- Health and well-being of the individuals
- Independence / individuality
- Social compatibility
- Comfortable zones for habitation

The indicators are therefore calculated, evaluated or estimated according to whether they are quantifiable or not and, in many cases, able to be monetarized.

It should be noted that the first aim remains basic transportation service and the accessibility of production and product distribution centres, but the direct advantages of each road user are not explicitly mentioned. It is clear that the needs of society have priority over those of the individual but it is not illusory to seek the satisfaction of each person. Thus, the proposed method does not treat the savings realised on travel time as determinant. Comfort during displacement and total cost, as well as an improvement in service efficiency, are not directly taken into consideration.

Delays created by numerous oppositions in the project or the construction of transportation infrastructures have underlined the interest in including the protagonists directly or indirectly concerned by it. The social need of the project is thus better appreciated and integrated into the project conception.

Consultation by the public

Another social aspect which is becoming increasingly more important in Switzerland is acceptance of and participation in the decision-making process in the case of transportation infrastructures and, especially, in road projects. The history of the construction of the existing networks is full of unilateral decisions made by constructors and decision-makers fully convinced of their point of view and sure of working for the betterment of the lives of the citizens.

Direct process such as it is practised in Switzerland (the right to initiative and referendum at the local and national levels) is an interesting conceptual element. Along the same lines, Swiss property laws guarantee strong protection of the individual with respect to public interest. These two procedures are however insufficient and sometimes dissatisfying to guarantee true dialogue.

Today, a more advanced dialoguing process is necessary which aims not only at simply informing but also at including the numerous protagonists during the entire conception and improvement of the project. This associative process is not without pitfalls and requires a clear definition and delimitation of the functions of each group of protagonists.

The social need may only be correctly and completely expressed through these protagonists. In a recent study, M. Tille [6] prepared an inventory of six groups of protagonists who are called upon to share their visions and opinions through a procedure of preliminary weighting for the preparation of variants. These groups are:

1. *Decision-maker* : Road administration (road service)
2. *Administrative protagonist* : Public administration, territorial planning, environment and transportation services (excluding road service)
3. *Non-governmental organisations* : Structured and established groups
4. *Public* : Affected individuals, concerned or passive, spontaneous groups
5. *Infrastructure users* : Beneficiaries, users and economic protagonists
6. *Political protagonists* : Legislative or executive, municipal, state (canton) or national

To accomplish this, M. Tille proclaimed « *A true Copernican revolution must be carried out in order to be able to favour completely the emergence of the project evaluation phenomenon by the public* »

Conclusions

Switzerland is slowly beginning to resolve its environmental conflicts, which have been costly in energy and financial resources and is starting to accept the healthy reflections of the concept of sustainable development. The notion of basic social services is not unanimously accepted but it can be totally integrated in a project only if a methodological process is used and if the protagonists concerned participate in the decision-making processes.

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