

## TUT-POL CASE STUDY

# Mexico City's Bus Rapid Transit: Incrementally Laying the Groundwork for Large-scale Transformation

## Summary

In less than a decade one of the world's largest cities, Mexico City, has created the world's sixth busiest Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system. Called Metrobús, this still-expanding system now carries more than 300 million passengers a year on six lines that have 125 kilometers of exclusive bus lanes. Compared to the jitney and independent bus services that BRT replaced, travel times in corridors served by the new system have fallen by 40 percent and there are 30 percent fewer accidents. In addition, 15 percent of drivers in corridors served by BRT reportedly have switched to public transit. The improvements have also produced modest reductions in emissions of greenhouse gases and of the pollutants that cause smog. Whereas previous mayoral administrations had relied on heavy-handed state authority to discipline bus and jitney drivers, often with little effect, recent BRT expansions were achieved through negotiation and compromise. Additionally, the creation of Metrobús greatly enhanced the public sector's direct involvement in the planning and territorial management of key transportation services, administrative faculties which had withered over the previous two decades, an outcome that is arguably just as—if not more—important than BRT's impacts on mobility, safety, and pollution. The shift in strategy and the increased capacity to plan and manage transportation has been matched by

major changes in Mexico City's surface transit industry, which has transitioned from a system dominated by an unruly and unmanageable set of independent, small-scale operators fighting among themselves to capture revenues to the detriment of service outcomes, to a sector that is more professional, modernized, faster, safer, less polluting, more convenient, and more engaged with the public sector in co-producing better mobility conditions, particularly for those populations who rely on mass or collective transit services.

**This is a story of mayorally-led efforts to slowly but steadily discipline private sector transport providers through carrots, sticks, and ongoing negotiations, thus creating room for new transit services while also expanding the public sector's role in transportation planning through BRT implementation and expansion.**

## Strategic Actions

**Linking the timing of changes in bus and jitney servicing to Mexico's democratic transition in ways that generated a wide range of measures that helped solidify public support for a new electoral administration.**

Under the initiative of Mayor Lopez Obrador, only the second democratically elected mayor in the nation's capital, support for BRT implementation came slowly and cautiously, in tandem with a continuation of transportation policies from the previous (Cardenas) administration and with parallel support for highway expansion. Such moves helped gain the support of affluent, car-owning voters outside the governing party's traditional constituency and demonstrated a commitment to a balanced transport agenda, which helped subsequent BRT introduction.

**Matching these political objectives with a larger urban policy vision in which transit priorities were framed in terms—improving air quality, advancing environmental sustainability, and enhancing urban redevelopment of distressed areas of the city—so as to generate broader appeal.**

**Creating a new public agency (Metrobus) charged with planning and regulating privately operated bus services on BRT corridors allowed authorities to avoid being hamstrung by prior political commitments from local officials and agencies to longstanding transport operators.**

**Structuring public consultations to insert issues of transparency and democratic legitimacy into the discussion of new transport policies.**

The Ebrard administration set up 1,600 booths across the city at which residents answered a series of yes/no questions focused on environmental issues and partly touching on urban transport, with positive results interpreted as a mandate for change.

## Tactical Actions

**Borrowing tried and true policy templates from other cities and leveraging external resources to help catapult new ideas for transport onto the public agenda.**

Environment Minister Claudia Sheinbaum developed the BRT proposal with programmatic and funding support

from a global network of sustainable transport researchers, funders, development agencies, and philanthropies.

**Generating quick-to-implement, modest, yet highly visible programmatic wins on key corridors in the city.**

Despite lower projected ridership and existing public transport options, BRT implementation began with Avenida de los Insurgentes on the basis that it was located in a very prominent area and that political negotiations with the independent buses and jitneys would likely be simpler and less costly. Resultant corridor improvements enhanced support for BRT expansion to additional routes.

**Appeasing opponents with fiscal benefits without risking program viability.**

Once the highly generous compensation granted by the López Obrador administration to private operators for BRT service on Avenida de los Insurgentes proved financially onerous for the city, Mayor Ebrard and his deputies offered lower vehicle scrappage fees and income guarantees to bus and jitney operators in constructing more BRT lines.

**Combining persuasion and credible threats in negotiating with key stakeholders.**

When financial inducements reached their limits in inducing collaboration from bus and jitney industry leaders, city officials exploited divisions and rivalries to outflank uncooperative leaders in favor of dissident groups and threatened existent service operators that they would move forward with new partners in the absence of agreement on new BRT lines.

**Promoting administrative transparency and efficiency by shifting control over fare collection and revenue redistribution from jitney owners to third party contractors and the transport ministry.**

**Expanding the financial benefits of public-private partnership arrangements beyond original bus and jitney owners, so as to generate more widespread industry support for the changes.**

By including the public bus operator as a participant on the first BRT line, city officials gained the support of public sector workers, accessed useful information on actual costs of BRT operation, and reduced the number of new buses requiring financing by the new private sector BRT operator. When the set-up proved financially unviable for the city, local officials brought in Autobuses de Oriente (ADO), a private inter-urban transport company, as a co-financier and owner for the new BRT company on the next BRT line.