

**Astrid Wood**, *How Cities Learn: Tracing Bus Rapid Transit in South Africa*, Oxford: Wiley, 2022. ISBN: 978-1-119-79428-8 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-119-79427-1 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-119-79430-1 (ebook)

How do “best practices” or “policy innovations” travel between cities? How are these ideas interpreted and applied by local actors in a city? In this process of moving and the arrival of ideas at different destinations, how and what do cities learn? These are the questions that Astrid Wood’s latest book, *How Cities Learn: Tracing Bus Rapid Transit in South Africa*, seeks to address by taking us through the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) projects in South African cities. Those familiar with Wood’s earlier work (Wood 2014, 2015a, 2015b), would immediately identify and associate with the geographies she traverses in this book. Through seven chapters, Wood explores the finer details of the idea of BRT and how cities in South Africa approached and implemented it. The BRT idea as a solution for urban transportation problems has received much attention in policy and planning circles in cities of the Global South following the success of Bogotá’s TransMilenio BRT. Launched in 2000, Wood terms the TransMilenio a “game changer” and explains why it was a model that South African BRT projects looked up to.

The book makes significant contributions to three key thematic areas. First, to the urban policy mobilities literature in the context of learnings and transfers between cities of the Global South, in contrast to policies moving from the Global North to the Global South. Wood outlines the usefulness of policy mobilities as a methodology and employs “studying through” (Shore and Wright 1997) to identify the different actors and networks associated with BRT globally and locally. Through tracing actors and networks, Wood demonstrates how policies are assembled, mobilised, and mutated, and the frictions they encounter on their paths. Wood illustrates this using the example of TransMilenio BRT and shows how it was mobilised by actors such as Enrique Peñalosa, a former mayor of Bogota, Lloyd Wright, an international consultant, and networks such as the ITDP (Institute for Transportation and Development Policy) and WRI (World Resources Institute) Centres, among others, and presented to South African cities. Through interviews with policymakers from these networks, we see how the Bogotá BRT model was promoted and made attractive to South African decision makers such as planners of major

cities and provincial and national government officials, while other BRT systems in South America such as Curitiba's or Quito's received little attention.

The second thematic area is the role of local actors and their politics in translating BRT for the South African context. The book focuses on BRT projects in six cities/municipalities: Johannesburg, Cape Town, Tshwane, Nelson Mandela Bay, Rustenburg, and eThekweni. Wood takes the reader into each site's planning processes, the debates and discourses surrounding BRT, and negotiations with several stakeholders. An important negotiation was with taxi operators, whose services were crucial in filling the gaps left by public transport operators. The middle chapters of the book describe local politics and the negotiations that shaped BRT projects from ideation to operation in these cities. To a reader unfamiliar with how local politics shape planning and policy decisions, these chapters give a ringside view of the same and methodological insights to conduct similar research.

The third thematic area is the history of transport innovations in South African cities. Wood adopts a historical policy mobilities approach and argues how ideas of Personal Rapid Transit (PRT), rail (for example, Gautrain), and BRT were circulated in policy and planning circles in South Africa long before the success of the Bogotá BRT model. Exploring the temporalities of BRT, Wood critiques the "faddish nature" of transport innovations, and how policymakers follow these hoping to replicate success, only to abandon them later. Wood emphasises the role of history in these policy flows and the roles local actors play in adopting or discarding global ideas. These historical narratives establish the relevance and engagements of local policy actors with several global ideas (in the case of South Africa, the BRT was circulating in policy circles as early as 1970s) and are useful in shaping future directions for planning and policy.

The final chapter ties in these themes and extends the discussions around mobile knowledge and policy mobilities. Wood remarks that the key question she addresses in her book is not just about the circulation of ideas but how certain ideas achieve prominence and how they are interpreted and implemented locally. Wood examines closely why the Bogotá BRT model was attractive to South African policymakers, and why they did not look to learn from their counterparts in Lagos' "BRT-lite" project or Ahmedabad's Janmarg BRT. Wood argues that

policymakers found the socio-political-cultural contexts of Bogotá similar to South Africa's post-apartheid cities, while such similarities could not be drawn from Indian or other African cities. This poses a line of thought on what exactly are the South–South connections, and who chooses to study or emulate what from whom and why? Wood provides evidence for this alignment (in this context with Bogotá) and draws our attention to the politics of regional leadership amongst Southern cities and the urban aspirations that drive these cities to seek such alignments.

The BRT was also a prestige project for cities in South Africa and a symbol of progress for South Africans. The meanings and objectives of these projects differ vastly from their counterparts in South America, and they focused on themes of social justice, accessibility, and economic and urban development rather than just a technically and economically feasible public transport solution. The South African model of BRT was a unique combination of formal public transport and taxi operators, different from other BRT systems in the world. Wood approaches the success of South African BRTs cautiously. The integrated land-use and transport planning or Transit Oriented Development (TOD) that these BRT systems are supposed to achieve, has not yet been realised. The actual ridership is much lower than anticipated, and fares were supposed to cover 35% of the operational costs of these BRT systems (a detailed appendix gives a thorough breakdown in terms of cost, ridership, materiality, and system details of the six projects). Such evidence reinforces the argument that planning for megaprojects such as BRT often underestimates costs and overestimates demand (Flyvbjerg 2007, 2008). The consequences of such planning approaches in the case of South African BRT projects could be a potential follow-up to this book.

Overall, *How Cities Learn* offers several insights into urban planning, constituents of public transport systems, and the underlying local politics in cities of the Global South. The book is an important contribution to the emerging and expanding scholarship on planning and policy mobilities in the Global South. For researchers based in similar contexts, it offers critical information and pathways to integrate the theoretical frameworks and methodological application of policy mobilities. It is also essential reading for those interested in understanding

how global ideas such as BRT are conceived somewhere, move through certain mediums, transform, and then reach the shores of cities in the Global South.

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