Disentangling the nexus of global intermediaries: the case of bus rapid transit

Abstract
Building upon the debates around travelling policy and precipitous imitation of bus rapid transit worldwide, this paper commits to disentangling the nexus of global intermediaries – that is, the advocacy organizations, engineering consultancies and international banks furthering the economy of policy translation. These associations promote their particular policy package by providing training manuals, funding for study tours and a never-ending stream of architects, engineers and planners with topical expertise and skills. This paper unravels the multiple and overlapping roles intermediaries play first by introducing the policy to relevant policymakers, providing technical expertise and financing, and later serving as critic of the translation process, drafting formative reports and measuring the merits as compared to the model. The economy of policy translation is to maintain these entanglements, to complicate the transfer of knowledge and to ensure that localities remain dependent on the nexus of global intermediaries. As such, these global intermediaries create and sustain a process whereby learning is deliberate and methodical but never-ending and unhurried. Such analysis contributes to policy mobilities discussions by identifying a wider process of peripatetic policymaking and politics, and in so doing, explains how and why certain best practices are elevated and esteemed while others are discounted.

submitted: November 2018
reviewed: April 2019
accepted: May 2019

© 2019 Astrid Wood. This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).
Introduction

Though it is widely acknowledged that automobile manufacturers like Tata and Toyota spend billions of dollars per year developing and preserving their image, cultivating a set of loyal customers and selling their products, the economy of policy translation – the transport consultants that promote and publicize their policy products to city officials as best practice solutions, or the studies that support and sustain a particular transport agenda – is far less appreciated. And so for good reason (save for notable exceptions such as McCann 2013; Theodore & Peck 2011), knowledge exchange is oftentimes framed within a web of learning that obscures the economy of policy translation and the nexus of global intermediaries.

Such limited reflection on learning has been detrimental to the evaluation of bus rapid transit [BRT], a bus-based urban transport system hyped around the world as the cheap and cheerful solution to cities with deteriorating air quality, long commute times, increased greenhouse gas emissions, high rates of traffic fatalities and inferior road conditions. The Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) based in New York City, Embarq in Washington, DC and the World Bank, also in Washington DC are the principal promoters of BRT, affording a robust network of experts as well as the financial support, both of which are a perquisite to those cities eager to replicate BRT. And they target cities in rapidly urbanizing parts of the world such as Brazil, Colombia, China, India, Indonesia and South Africa, where governments have routinely turned a blind eye to public transport, instead spending vast sums on slick and shiny roadways that encourage the proliferation of private vehicle use, the denigration of public space and unequal access to transport systems. Indeed it is regrettable that some of these auspicious bus projects have failed to result in a higher-quality system of public transport (e.g. TranSantiago in Chile) and yet few of the discouraging lessons circulate (Gilbert 2002).

The arguments in this paper are grounded within the policy mobilities scholarship (McCann & Ward 2011; Peck & Theodore 2015), drawing as well on relevant debates on knowledge exchange from political science, communications and science and technology studies, all of which seek to further understand the role of global intermediaries within the economy of knowledge translation. The discussion applies these learning debates to existing analyses of the explosive growth of BRT (Hidalgo & Gutiérrez 2013; Marsden et al. 2011), concentrating on one aspect, the role of the international public transport advocacy groups and research centers, not yet sufficiently explored. Certainly this is not the first analysis of BRT; on the contrary, much has been written about the technical accomplishments of BRT cities in Latin America (Hidalgo & Gutiérrez 2013; Paget-Seekins & Munoz 2016) as well as China (Zhang, Zichang & Wang 2014), India (Mahadevia, Joshi & Datey 2013), South Africa (Wood, 2014, 2015b) and Tanzania (Rizzo 2017), to name just a few. This paper departs from previous accounts, which typically attributes the replication of BRT to its technical merits that enable policymakers to easily and quickly employ a cheap, comprehensive solution (Deng & Nelson 2011), instead aligning with those papers that highlight the political processes driving the replication of BRT around the world (Wood 2015b). In this manner, another overarching aim of this paper is to understand how and why BRT has proliferated so unrestrainedly in the 21st century.

Moving along now, the paper explains the methodological foundation of the study. I then turn to the academic literature outlining a theoretical pathway through the policy mobilities scholarship. In the fourth section, I will introduce and analyze the promoters of BRT, outlining the role of ITDP as the advocate sparking curiosity, Embarq as the engineer providing technical expertise and the World Bank as the financier backing the project. I will then re-entangle these intermediaries to advance the argument that the economy of policy translation is designed to make learning complex and indeterminate. In concluding, I will reflect on the main theoretical arguments to understand how and why the economy of policy translation is so effective.

Methods for tracing pathways of policy learning

This study of BRT adoption reveals that policy mobilities is not only a planned and programmed sequence of exchange and interaction but a process of learning that involves power and personalities. Tracing pathways of policy learning can however be difficult to study since the exchanges rarely lead directly to implementation. Previous studies have traced the movement of knowledge through various ‘coordination tools’ (McFarlane 2011b: 364), which include conferences, journals, multimedia, reports, and study tours; and others have followed the transnational advocacy groups and learning forums that support global circulation (Theodore & Peck 2011). Scholars therefore reason that learning materializes through various agents and agencies translating and transferring information across uneven and distorted arrangements (for more details on methods in policy mobilities see: Peck & Theodore 2012; Wood 2016). This methodology for tracing pathways builds from these considerations by attending to the plethora of ordinary practices that forms the assemblage of learning. My approach assimilates the researcher into the learning field
by replicating the multilateral process of learning – relying on conversations with policy actors, hearing their anecdotes, reading their reports and attending their events – thereby exposing policy learning as more than just the occasional networking at a conference or a special workshop promoting a particular best practice but part of a continuous process of dialogue and debate.

This paper is part of a multi-year, multi-sited study of the geography of BRT. Between 2012 and 2017, I conducted 160 interviews with policymakers and BRT specialists in 11 countries, and specifically for this paper actors working for and working with ITDP, Embarq and the World Bank (Tab. 1.). In adhering to the above methodology, I also reviewed dozens of guidance and procedural documents from BRT agencies (for example: ITDP 2014; and Wright 2007 for ITDP; and Owen, Carrigan & Hidalgo 2012 for Embarq) and drew on proceedings from BRT-related learning events. The contentions presented subsequently proffer a set of arguments based on a long-standing engagement with BRT replication.

### Table 1

Summary of the interviews cited in this paper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of the interview as referred to in this paper</th>
<th>Professional affiliation</th>
<th>Place and date of the interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>city government</td>
<td>Johannesburg, 01/2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>city government</td>
<td>Cape Town, 02/2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 3</td>
<td>transport consultant</td>
<td>Vancouver, 02/2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 4</td>
<td>transport consultant</td>
<td>Manila, 02/2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 5</td>
<td>transport consultant</td>
<td>New York City, 03/2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 6</td>
<td>city government</td>
<td>Johannesburg, 03/2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 7</td>
<td>non-governmental agency</td>
<td>Istanbul, 04/2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 8</td>
<td>non-governmental agency</td>
<td>New York City, 04/2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 9</td>
<td>non-governmental agency</td>
<td>New York City, 04/2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 10</td>
<td>non-governmental agency</td>
<td>Washington DC, 12/2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 11</td>
<td>non-governmental agency</td>
<td>Washington DC, 12/2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 12</td>
<td>non-governmental agency</td>
<td>Washington DC, 12/2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Reflecting on global policymaking and policy actors

While conceptual understandings of intermediaries vary across the disciplines, for the most part, the process of translation is thought to take place through actors and agencies within particular policy arenas. Policy intermediation is generally understood to be more complex than power elites networking at a conference or workshops promoting international policy models; rather, these ‘idea brokers’ (Smith 1991: i), ‘policy entrepreneurs’ (Dolowitz & Marsh 1996: 345), ‘transfer agents’ (Stone 2004: 545), ‘gurus’ (Peck 2011: 773) and ‘policy mobilizers’ (Wood 2014: 1239) assiduously evaluate, enable and engage politicized forms of policy knowledge. This review of the literature will introduce concepts from political science, communications and science and technology studies, in addition to geography to explain how global intermediaries employ a selection of reports and study tours to facilitate policy translation.

Within political science, the notion of actors and agencies serving as intermediaries can be traced back to the policy transfer literature and its attention to the policymaker as a ‘learning agent’ operating within a normative, rational world of regulations and procedures. Of central importance to this approach is the research by D. Dolowitz & D. Marsh (1996) and D. Stone (2004) who studied the individuals engaging in transfer, their reasons for doing so and the challenges they faced in the transfer process. While there is much value in the transfer literature, within geography, transfer theorists are criticized though for being overly focused on the involvement of outside actors, creating typologies of their various roles rather than analyzing the power relations between importing and exporting actors (for lengthier critique of policy transfer see McCann 2011; Peck 2011).

In diffusion studies, the concept of intermediaries emerges within the nomenclature of ‘change agents’ (Hagerstrand 1952: 3) as the arbiters of whether or not to adopt an innovation. Intermediaries are said to aid decision-making processes, serve as standard-setters and later as evaluators of the success of the innovation. Diffusion studies identify a much broader, more varied role for intermediaries than generally acknowledged: intermediaries identify and assemble potential partners, develop, package, and even manufacture the innovation for transfer, provide financing and evaluate the product’s merits in the market (Rogers 1962). J. Howells (2006) provides a comprehensive review of the literature in the field of innovation intermediation and develops a typology of
the different roles and functions of intermediaries within the innovation process. He argues that intermediaries are more numerous than usually implied, and that they operate across increasingly complex relationships forming both vertical and horizontal relationships across dispersed networks. Thus, J. Howells (2006) concludes that intermediaries are increasingly the drivers, rather than the followers, of innovation.

In addition to these accounts, concepts of ‘translation’, a term from science and technology studies are helpful here in developing a discussion around the process whereby learning takes place. B. Latour (1987) introduces this terminology to examine how an object, such as an idea is transmitted from actor to actor by ‘translation agents’. Actors may react in a variety of ways: by ignoring, altering, traducing, supplementing or appropriating the idea. Each passage is unique with individuals reacting to the idea distinctively but the episode binds together in succession to form the process of ‘translation’. The translation of knowledge is thus the practice through which it emerges, shifts, realigns, sustains, and perhaps at times even disappears. Relatedly, M. Callon (1986) employs the translation process to understand how new ideas and concepts are rendered first in science laboratories and later popularized (or not) in the wider world. To him, the process of translation is a three-step: first, the main actors appoint a ‘translation-spokesman’, second, they pinpoint the obligatory points of problematization and, third, they convert ideas into inscriptions (e.g., reports, memos, studies) that render the notion – in his case electric vehicles, in our case, BRT – durable. Not every instance of exchange leads to transfer, but rather as will see in the next section, these ‘misreadings’, as E. W. Said (1983: 25) explained in his development of ‘travelling theory’ allow for adaptation and alteration. I will also argue that these amendments create a process of translation that is confusing and endless, always with reach but never fully reached.

This paper will incorporate these debates alongside the geographic focus on ‘policy mobilities’, a concept employed to understand mobile policymakers and their peripatetic planning practices. Scholarships trace the movement of policy knowledge and models (Peck & Theodore 2010; Freeman 2012) via policy actors (Larner & Laurie 2010; McCann 2011; Roy 2012) and their policy networks (Saunier 2001; Theodore & Peck 2011). This analysis utilizes the framing of existing research of the replication of transport (Wood 2015b), sustainability (Rapoport 2015) and urban governance (Ward 2006; Cook 2010; Didier, Peyroux & Morange 2012; Baker et al. 2016), as well as two pivotal volumes by E. McCann and K. Ward (2011) and J. Peck and N. Theodore (2015) to understand the global intermediaries of BRT.

Accordingly, this geographic approach to policy mobilities provides the groundwork for this paper on intermediaries: J. Faulconbridge’s (2010) global architects and their communities of practice; W. Larner and N. Laurie’s (2010) investigation of travelling consultants in New Zealand; E. McCann’s (2011) study of Bing Thom, a Vancouver architect-consultant hired by Fort Worth, Texas to ‘Vancouverize’ the city; and A. Wood’s (2014) analysis of the variety of actors that create, impart, mobilize, and approve global policy models. In E. McCann’s (2011) study of consultants, he emphasizes the role of ‘incoming policy consultants’ who bring knowledge from one city to another and ‘outgoing policy consultants’ whose practice involves disseminating the successes of one city to workers elsewhere. Importantly, J. Faulconbridge (2010) includes a critical focus on the ‘circulating nonhumans’ including models, texts and photos that travel alongside his global architects. Related specifically to BRT, A. Wood (2014) reasons that successful policy adoption hinges on the intersections between international and local policy actors. Throughout these cases, we see a prominent role for outsiders but additional theorization is needed to understand the way in which their distentiatied authority structures and facilitates learning.

There have also been critical diagnostics of the ‘global consultocracy’ (McCann 2011: 114) who often portray only the exemplary features of a policy product: M. Goldman (2005) for instance, shadows the World Bank as a single actor involved in environmental, governance and social ventures to show its role in increasing global inequality, while A. Roy (2010) takes up the charge slightly differently, studying the poor and the powerless through World Bank agents that manage poverty and their associated circuits of profit and investment. Similarly, N. Theodore and J. Peck’s (2011) study the OECD and its role as a selector and disseminator of neoliberalism and E. Rapoport (2015) presents exploration of the global intelligence corps, an elite group of international architects, engineers and planners based in Europe and North America shuttling notions of sustainable urbanism around the globe. Taking our understanding of consultancy further, E. Rapoport and A. Hult (2017) dub these masterplanners as ‘norm-setters’. Across the scholarship, these associations and consultancies are composed of a robust network of global intermediaries whose expertise is necessary for both policy mobilization and implementation, and central to my understanding of policy translation, these intermediaries are not isolated entities but empowered through their connections with other people, places and products.

In spite of such rich academic engagement across the disciplines and over time, uncertainty regarding the role
of exogenous versus endogenous factors remain. To enable a thorough review of the economy of policy translation, I suggest we examine the nexus between multiple actors, simultaneously present and proximate, across socio-political and temporal divisions. Using the concepts of F. de Boeck’s ‘knot’ (2011), S. Nuttall’s ‘entanglement’ (2009) or C. McFarlane’s ‘assemblage’ (2011a), this paper thinks through the messy intersections between supposed opposites – innovation and inertia, amalgamation and apartness, connection and disconnection and other tactics that facilitate the transport and transposition of knowledge – as a method to capture the rhythms of learning that shape the urban. The evidence that follows demonstrates that the economy of policy translation is vested within the imbroglio of state-led/consultant-led, public/private, policy translation, and global intermediaries exploit their power by creating a process of continuous and regularized learning while simultaneously controlling the discourse and dialogue between cities. This is the art of direction and misdirection.

The upcoming narrative unravels the economy of policy translation by deliberating on the procedures through which best practice from elsewhere is formed, fashioned and furthered by global intermediaries as well as their interactions and inter-referencing. It provides evidence that from time to time, unscrupulous ideas are pushed-in and valuable practices overlooked, and encourages an appreciation of the multi-directionality and plurality of policy learning, in particular interrogating the topological spatialities and power relationships that enable such policy engagements. And in so doing, the argument that follows is especially sensitive to the way in which practices of citation and comparison are socially constructed processes embedded in global-local power relations and animated by both supply-side innovativeness and demand-side neediness. Of particular interest are questions regarding who holds the power to assemble and activate knowledge and how do external policy actors exercise and diminish the role of the other within the economy of policy translation.

Unraveling the overlapping backers of BRT

Unquestionably the World Bank has been a strategic pusher of notions of sustainable transport like BRT – in Bogota, for example, the World Bank funded the initial infrastructure of TransMilenio (Matsumoto 2007) – but a number of additional international actors from public transport advocacy groups and transnational consultants to philanthropic organizations and bus manufacturers in effect play a larger role. ITDP based in New York City and Embarq in Washington DC are the foremost leaders of BRT-related knowledge, publishing training manuals, hosting workshops, funding study tours and disseminating a never-ending stream of architects, engineers and planners with topical expertise and skills. Additional agencies and organization include the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Gesellschaft fur Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), International Institute for Energy Conservation (IIEC) and Clinton Climate Initiative. The bus manufacturers, such as Brazilian-based Marcopolo and Germany-based Mercedes play a vital but surreptitious part in the story. In unraveling the overlapping backers of BRT, this section sketches the role of ITDP as the advocate sparking curiosity, Embarq as the engineer providing technical expertise and the World Bank as the financier backing the project. The vignettes first explain the role each global intermediary plays in introducing BRT to the city before delving deeper into their style of intervention, organizational framework and financial arrangements. Of particular importance is the manner by which the intermediaries intersect and overlap augmenting or diminishing the role of the other within the economy of policy translation.

The advocate sparking curiosity

ITDP, one of the principal sponsors, was founded in 1985 by a group of sustainable transport advocates, to replace the export of the American model of car dependency with bicycle schemes. Two decades later, with a headquarters in New York City and offices in Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia and Mexico, ITDP has morphed into a ‘BRT propagation machine’, providing comprehensive technical expertise in transport and planning to local authorities in cities around the world (interview 5, New York City, 03/2012). ITDP has promoted BRT by highlighting the achievements of existing systems, namely TransMilenio, and facilitating dialogue among city leaders, ‘prying open the doors’ through professional presentations and study tours and helping cities with all elements of BRT from operations to infrastructure (interview 3, Vancouver, 02/2012). ITDP’s devotion to TransMilenio in particular can be traced to the fruitful relationship between former-CEO, Walter Hook and (former, and now again) Mayor of Bogota, Enrique Penalosa. In 2003, just months after Phase 1 of TransMilenio opened, Penalosa joined the ITDP Board of Directors and together they launched the first international BRT tour (interview 5, New York City, 03/2012). This expedition, and those that followed, introduced policymakers to the concept, igniting a fascination with sustainable public transport that has yet to be dampened.
Just how essential is ITDP to the assembly, mobility and adoption of BRT around the world? An emblematic incursion into the establishment of Johannesburg’s Rea Vaya or Cape Town’s MyCiTi systems reveals that ‘it is the ITDPs of the world that are making this happen more than anything’ (interview 4, Manila, 02/2012). Supporters attribute the operational systems around the world to ITDP’s ability to ignite a curiosity about sustainable transport in the minds of modernist urban planners. Many city officials recall that ITDP was the first to introduce them to BRT and while most consultants come in-and-out, ITDP’s persistence made a difference in the outcome. A director at ITDP explained that they aim to spark interest with city officials who then ‘bring us in at points where they either needed a little nudging from the inside… or they needed a stronger nudge within the government to be more critical […]’. We focus on what the government has identified as the biggest need’, they continued. ‘We don’t control these projects. We only go in and help where we can’ (interview 8, New York City, 04/2015). In Kampala for example, ITDP plays a much larger role in infrastructure design, whereas in South Africa, local and international consultants were employed to complete the plans. ‘South Africa had a lot of capacity, we were mainly there to keep them on track’ and ‘it was helpful to have an outside voice to say tougher things than anyone inside was really able to do’, concludes an ITDP director (interview 9, New York City, 04/2015).

Critics of ITDP’s approach maintain that the organization leverages a multitude of roles serving as a salesperson, policy mobilizer and intermediary, and is thus more heavily embedded in the implementation of BRT than merely sparking curiosity. In particular, commentators mention how the agency enters a city by offering free advice but then utilizes its role as knowledge expert to be hired as paid consultants to work directly on BRT projects. ‘ITDP is part of the problem’, proposes one transport consultant, because ‘they offer an idea and then also get money from implementing of mobility projects, namely BRT.

While ITDP offers capacity to the international cities to build BRT systems, the extent to which ITDP oversteps its advocacy role by introducing consultants, hosting study tours and later adjudicating the merits of each system has led skeptics to question their motives. Our commentator above is criticizing ITDP for first creating the guidelines for BRT implementation and then commended those cities that followed their instructions. BRT enthusiasts embrace this far-reaching involvement calling ITDP ‘social activists’, rationalizing that ‘they operate with an NGO approach so they don’t charge very much and they are able to give good advice and they know about all different systems around the world’. They explain that the criticism comes from ITDP’s contacts who are international experts and charge consultant rates (interview 2, Cape Town, 02/2012). Could BRT have spread without ITDP and Penalosa? Perhaps, but not as quickly or as quietly.

The engineer providing technical expertise

If ITDP focuses on the political aspects of BRT circulation, then Embarq, a program of the World Resources Institute (WRI), is one of the primary technical engineers of BRT. Started in 2002 in Mexico City with seed funding from the Shell Foundation, Embarq employs more than 130 experts in field ranging from air quality to engineering with offices in Brazil, China, India, Mexico, Turkey and the United States. The program catalyzes environmentally, socially and financially sustainable transport solutions to improve the quality of life in cities by working with local and national authorities, businesses, academics and civil society. Today, the Embarq brand symbolizes the global transfer of best practices and implementation of mobility projects, namely BRT.

Dario Hidalgo, former-deputy manager during the implementation of Bogota’s TransMilenio phase 1 and 2 and now an international expert in urban mobility and development with extensive experience in BRT, directs the Embarq team. In reflecting on his support of Johannesburg’s Rea Vaya, one of the directors called Hidalgo a ‘walking encyclopedia of BRT’, ‘literally miles ahead of anybody else’. While ITDP provides great ‘theoretical support’, this Johannesburg-based transport planner contends, ‘they have never actually implemented a BRT. They are an NGO […] they are theoretical. They have been, visited and given advice but they haven’t actually built anything’. He went on to compliment Hidalgo for having ‘been through it like we went through it’, illuminating that Embarq has ‘cut their teeth on it and they know what they are talking about’ (interview 1, Johannesburg, 01/2012). Embarq thus serves the as the engineer providing technical expertise to cities across the globe.

‘Ten years ago the barrier had more to do with selling the ideas and battling the monoculture of the automobile approach to transportation development. Once they had broken through some of those barriers, new challenges were simply and how do you adapt and implement a Bogota-type system in a unique city like Cape Town, Jakarta or Dar es Salaam which are similar to Bogota in many ways but also very different. […] So it became a real project implementation association’ (interview 5, New York City, 03/2012).
Methodically, Embarq has been especially efficacious by employing either a ‘heavy touch’ in cities where they have offices, or a ‘light-touch’ in those with fewer partners. A heavy approach might involve ‘supporting unpopular projects’ or ‘introducing new ideas that even the city is not thinking about to help them look at things in a new way’. ‘We have cities where we are really heavily engaged but that is just a few cities’, explains a US-based Embarq director, ‘and that might be in water, transport, energy use.’ Then ‘we have our second level where we are maybe just working in just one sector’, and finally there is a ‘third level’ in which ‘we are just trying to get the message out there and influence decisions across the different areas’. In Brazil, in addition to their involvement with BRT, Embarq has been successful in hosting horizontal dialogues among city officials – ‘getting people together from the planning office or the transport department, departments that may never sit down in the same room and think about the future of the city’ (interview 10, Washington DC, 12/2015). In Istanbul, they see their role as ‘neutral’ because ‘we are an NGO and nothing has to happen as a result of our engagement’ as one staffer puts it (interview 7, Istanbul, 04/2015). In Accra, Addis Ababa and Johannesburg, by contrast, Embarq employs a ‘light-touch’, which entails hosting a workshop or two and studying the city’s experiences in various case study reports. They find this approach works especially well in cities in which the organization does not have offices. The Washington DC office tends to lead these projects, providing the financial support, while the international offices provide technical support (interview 10, Washington DC, 12/2015). Embarq differs from ITDP in that it tends to provide technical assistance rather than advocacy and political encouragement. In Brazil for example, Embarq found difficulty navigating the laws and systems and in India, the organization is strained to connect with appropriate institutions so there they tend to work alongside the private sector and bus operators. ‘You can work well with technical staff’, declares an Embarq manager, ‘but ultimately all decisions are made at the national ministries so you need to work with them to get anything adopted in cities’. She continues, ‘It takes a long time to build relationships so that you can do technical work’ (interview 10, Washington DC, 12/2015). To be successful, Embarq aims to provide 200 cities with specialized research and tools, afford deep, cross-sector support in four megacities and provide targeted economic, environmental and social assistance to 30 urban areas around the globe (Carrigan et al. 2014).

The World Bank as financier
Although the World Bank’s involvement has varied from country to country and system to system, it has remained, without a doubt, the most notorious intermediary of BRT. ‘We are not a consulting firm’, explains a Bank director, ‘we actually finance BRT, so we have an additional stake’. They contrast their involvement with ITDP and Embarq seeing them as advocates. ‘I guess you could say we are also advocates, but we are not a one-size-fits-all type of organization’, he concludes (interview 12, Washington DC, 12/2015). In understanding the nexus of global intermediaries, we see a more complex role than merely a planner and financier of BRT projects around the world. Rather, these pushers and peddlers are trained in the art of direction and misdirection, crafting BRT to seem simple and straightforward.

In Dar es Salaam, for instance, the largest city in Tanzania and one of the fastest growing metropolitan regions on the African continent, the municipality has been trying to implement a BRT since 2002. According to the city’s Transport Policy and System Development Master Plan, Phase I includes 21 kilometers of dedicated lanes running in a closed system, 29 stations and five terminals at an estimated cost of $125 million. The project was initially introduced by ITDP on their Africa tour to alleviate the city’s worsening traffic congestion and improve the movement of passengers through the city. In Dar es Salaam however, implementation has been especially costly and cumbersome. Confronted by challenges of organizing the informal transit unions, expropriating land along the BRT route as well as the requisite hardware, costs for the project have mounted. The Bank has supported Dar es Salaam by providing financial and technical resources including furnishing a $290 million loan through the Bank’s International Development Association (World Bank 2013). The ups-and-down of the BRT project in Dar es Salaam have been analyzed in detail by M. Rizzo (2015) however we see that this to-and-froing in Dar es Salaam is yet another example of the entanglements of intermediaries.

The Bank has also been heavily involved in promoting the achievements of Lagos ‘BRT-lite’ – ‘a high-quality bus system that is affordable in the local context while retaining many of the most desirable BRT characteristics as possible’ (Mobereola 2009: vii) – that excludes exclusive rights-of-way, enclosed stations, level boarding and other features commonly associated with full-BRT. Perhaps because of its nominal hardware, the Lagos BRT went from conception to operation in just 15 months (unlike Dar es Salaam’s decade-long development) at a cost of $1.7 million per kilometer (as opposed to $6 million per kilometer of the World Bank).
kilometer in Bogota). Central to the completion and operationalization of the BRT in Lagos was a $100 million loan approved in 2002 by the Bank as part of the Lagos Urban Transport project, aimed at enhancing the efficiency of the public transport network through capacity building (World Bank 2011). Although generally disparaged by promoters of full-BRT at ITDP, the World Bank highlights the high ridership of the system (over 200,000 riders per day) as well as the establishment of the Lagos Metropolitan Area Transport Authority (LAMATA), ‘one of the most successful transport authorities in the world’ because it is both ‘technically solid’ and ‘politically savvy’ (interview 12, Washington DC, 12/2015). Such achievements are illustrative of an alternative approach to BRT not typically promoted by ITDP and Embarq but evidently advantageous to Lagos.

While the Bank has been actively involved in furthering and financing BRT in Dar es Salaam and Lagos, it has assumed a ‘lighter-touch’ in South Africa. The remit for assistance with BRT falls under a broader strategy to support aspects of urbanization and poverty alleviation through a reimbursable advisory service (RAS) agreement signed with National Treasury. It all started around 2009 when senior transport officials in South Africa approached the Bank and asked them to play a stronger role in urban transport. Staff at the Bank recall officials at National Treasury asking for a broad array of support with capacity building for BRT being a major component. Their first intervention came in June 2009 when the Bank hosted a workshop in Tshwane to support the city’s strategy to strengthen the relationship with SANRAL, the South African national highway authority, in order to get the BRT project back on track. Although initially (and understandably) skeptical of World Bank involvement in transport delivery, in 2015, National Treasury’s City Support Program, a unit of Treasury tasked with operationalization of the BRT in Lagos was a $100 million loan approved in 2002 by the Bank as part of the Lagos Urban Transport project, aimed at enhancing the efficiency of the public transport network through capacity building (World Bank 2011). Although generally disparaged by promoters of full-BRT at ITDP, the World Bank highlights the high ridership of the system (over 200,000 riders per day) as well as the establishment of the Lagos Metropolitan Area Transport Authority (LAMATA), ‘one of the most successful transport authorities in the world’ because it is both ‘technically solid’ and ‘politically savvy’ (interview 12, Washington DC, 12/2015). Such achievements are illustrative of an alternative approach to BRT not typically promoted by ITDP and Embarq but evidently advantageous to Lagos.

While the Bank has been actively involved in furthering and financing BRT in Dar es Salaam and Lagos, it has assumed a ‘lighter-touch’ in South Africa. The remit for assistance with BRT falls under a broader strategy to support aspects of urbanization and poverty alleviation through a reimbursable advisory service (RAS) agreement signed with National Treasury. It all started around 2009 when senior transport officials in South Africa approached the Bank and asked them to play a stronger role in urban transport. Staff at the Bank recall officials at National Treasury asking for a broad array of support with capacity building for BRT being a major component. Their first intervention came in June 2009 when the Bank hosted a workshop in Tshwane to support the city’s strategy to strengthen the relationship with SANRAL, the South African national highway authority, in order to get the BRT project back on track. Although initially (and understandably) skeptical of World Bank involvement in transport delivery, in 2015, National Treasury’s City Support Program, a unit of Treasury tasked with accelerating decentralization and devolution, signed a RAS to last for 5 years (interview 11, Washington DC, 12/2015). Bank officials understand their responsibility as distinct from ITDP or Embarq, agencies they describe as having a pivotal agenda to push BRT, instead calling their assistance a form of ‘unbiased support’. They claim that South Africa ‘knew that the World Bank had some technical expertise from our prior visits there and they knew that our expertise came without any biases’. The director continues, ‘We don’t want to make money. We are not consultants. We are not Siemens. We are not Volvo. We are not in this business to make money’ (interview 12, Washington DC, 12/2015).

This is certainly not an exhaustive list of all the agencies and associations furthering BRT – the Volvo Research and Education Foundation (VREF) and their Centers of Excellence for example, is yet another intermediary with extensive expertise – and so it is easy to get lost in the overlapping web of power plays outlined above. And this is precisely how the economy of policy translation operates: by becoming so deeply knotted and intertwined that it becomes nearly impossible to trace the origin of a particular policy to a disseminating agency. The projects and their related urban objectives are all connected in one way or another, interlacing with the agendas set forth by these transnational networks whose goals are not always in parallel with those of the cities in which they work. This is particularly important as we see that the role of any one individual is not as important as the involvement of the agency as a whole. And, if the donors become interested in another part of the world, of course their focus must shift as well. Thus, the role of intermediaries is far more multifaceted than usually understood.

Re-entangling the nexus of global intermediaries

Thus far, the paper has sought to untangle and scrutinize the nexus of global BRT intermediaries, but this section highlights the entanglements to advance the argument that the economy of policy translation is furthered by the complexity of learning. Much of the fact and folklore within the transmission of BRT can be traced to an ITDP presentation or a World Bank study tour but in actuality these global intermediaries work in tandem with one another and over time their roles become embroiled. For example, Lloyd Wright whose involvement in BRT is almost ubiquitously mentioned in interviews in South Africa, worked as an independent transport consultant, then as a director at ITDP, in 2007, he signed a two year contract with the City of Cape Town to develop the MyCiTi system, and most recently he has been involved with the TransJakarta BRT. City officials are often befuddled by the way in which global intermediaries constantly shift positions. However, this does not mean that entanglements are limited to global intermediaries. Within South Africa, the role of local BRT implementers has also twisted and turned over time: from city government employee to transport consultant to national government employee, for example, or simply from BRT adopter in city x to consultant aiding implementation in city y. These shifting roles are not necessarily a limitation but rather I have recorded many instances when these shifting roles bring a variety of perspectives to the story of BRT. Thus I argue that the nexus of global intermediaries empowers the economy of policy translation first by providing evidence of the effectiveness of BRT, and second by affording impunity should the BRT experiment pan out differently than initially promised.
It is also critical to some recall that global intermediaries like ITDP operate along a shoestring budget as the vast majority of funds go into project-related spending with less than 10% remaining for staff and overhead. Intermediaries thus take on multiple roles, positioning themselves between global donors and local city governments. In South Africa for example, in 2006, as there was not yet any national funding for BRT, ITDP procured additional funds from international donors to support Rea Vaya: USAID sponsored two leaders of the minibus taxi industry to travel to Bogota to see BRT first-hand, the Clinton Climate Initiative financed a scoping study, and UNDP bankrolled the signing of the initial contracts (interview 1, Johannesburg, 01/2012). All these projects though were branded as ITDP initiatives.

These entanglements are particularly apparent in recent attempts to more clearly define what is truly a BRT system. In 2012, ITDP published ‘The BRT Standard’ to serve as both a scoring system and a planning tool, and provide a framework for system designers, decision-makers and the transport community to identify and implement top-quality services. The BRT Standard designates a BRT corridor as gold, silver, bronze or basic. Importantly, the designation committee is composed of representatives from all the various agencies outlined above as well as many of the transport advocates interviewed for this paper. Taking the argument one step further, I argue that more than merely adjudicating the definition of a BRT, benchmarking further fuels the economy of policy translation, first, by complicating the translation process and second by ensuring that localities remain dependent on intermediaries like ITDP. Rather than being a mutable notion that shifts and changes in each city as appropriate, BRT has now become a type of infrastructure that must be uniformly implemented uniformly, an engineering and political feat best fulfilled by internationally-approved consultants. Thus it becomes apparent that no single intermediary could possibly promote BRT so effectively, instead it is the interactions and intersections that have enabled the nearly ubiquitous espousal of BRT and the intensity of policy translation.

Concluding remarks

This paper reconsiders the precipitous imitation of BRT worldwide using the policy mobilities discourse to interrogate the packaging and parading of BRT as best practice. It proceeds to disentangle the nexus of global intermediaries and their techniques for promoting BRT by investigating three prominent promoters of BRT, delineating the role of ITDP as the advocate sparking curiosity, Embarq as the engineer providing technical expertise and the World Bank as the financier backing the project. This is not to suggest a universalizing process for policy translation or to insinuate that these intermediaries only conduct these particular roles, rather I argue that the economy of policy translation is to maintain these entanglements, to complicate the transfer of knowledge and to ensure that localities remain dependent on the nexus of global intermediaries. As such, policy translation is constantly taking place, be it through an invitation to see an international expert present their local experiences or via a financial inducement. Such analyses make a valuable contribution by identifying BRT as a policy model whose successful translation is not a feature of any measurable achievements but part of a wider process of peripatetic policymaking and politics, and in so doing, it rationalizes how and why certain best practices are elevated and esteemed while others are snubbed.

Moreover, while it might seem as if international intermediaries are the only actors involved in BRT learning, we find that adopting localities also play an instrumental role in the mobility and adoption of best practice as well as in translating their learning back into circulation and the re-grounding of policies-in-motion elsewhere (see also, Wood 2014). Across projects and contexts, government support for international involvement tends to buoy the translation process. While strong personalities were at times dominant in pushing BRT from the outside, at other times, this was balanced by the bureaucratic structures which endow local implementers with the power and responsibility for initiating a new planning project. And so, in most cities, the transformation from policy model to planning project was only achieved by local policy actors within the adopting locality. Such glimpses into the agency of movement and the wider political relationships that facilitate the reception of mobile ideas suggest that it is not feasible to delineate if a project is truly pushed from the outside or pulled-in, nor is it possible to conclusively declare the process was state-led versus consultant-led, public or private, translocal versus local, fast or recurrent because learning is indirect, indeterminate and impermanent.

A second matter emerging relates to the temporalities of policy learning and the narratives above confirm a case of persistent introduction and alteration before adoption finally ensued. Following on from A. Wood’s (2015a) rationale of multiple temporalities of policy circulation, we see that innovations like BRT spread across the globe not through a process of rapid policy translation but rather through unremarkable events and repeated suggestions that ultimately sanction it as a best practice to local policy implementers. Accordingly, I argue that failure is central to the economy by creating a process whereby learning is dawdling and delayed, assembling alongside
earlier encounters so as to prolong the employment of said international agency. This is particularly perceptible upon a deeper reflection into the delayed process of BRT espousal in Dar es Salaam, one of the first African cities committed to introducing BRT back in 2002, but it took another 15 years for the system to launch. Likewise in Cape Town, a failed attempt to implement a BRT system in 2002 morphed into the contemporary plan for MyCiTi. In light of the descriptions of the lengthy and protracted process of BRT circulation, perhaps there is much to be learned by thinking through the practices of ostensibly ineffective, fruitless or aborted mobility.

Such observations are particularly useful in highlighting the way in which the policy model, the actors, the particulars of the city and the moment-in-time interact and intertwine to bundle and launch best practice before it is released, embraced, implemented or discarded. Under this schema, policy circulation and adoption are never absolute but always in play, constantly moving and mustering, touching-down and lifting-up, entangling with the politics of place and disseminating the involvement of elsewhere around the globe. And this indeterminacy is fueled by the intersecting and indeterminate role of intermediaries providing them opportunities for profit without responsibility or oversight. Greater understanding of the economy of policy, I hope, will inspire policymakers to be more vigilant within learning processes.

Acknowledgements

This paper is the outcome of several years of research and it would be impossible to thank all those whose comments and criticisms have buoyed it. I am especially indebted to the delegates and discussants at the 2015 Global Conference on Economic Geography, the 2015 RC-21 Conference and the 2016. Annual Meeting of the Association of Annual Geographers whose remarks helped clarify my arguments. Any mistakes herein are all my own.

REFERENCES


