DOI10.5281/zenodo.8402510

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URBAN TRAFFIC CONGESTION: THE PROBLEM AND SOLUTIONS

To many people, traffic congestion is an irritant because it throws their personal schedules in to chaos. To others conscious of the value of time in their economic pursuit, it is a financial loss. Yet to some others, it is an easy excuse for being habitually late for appointments and for some others it is a convenient conversation starter. But most often, all these people tend to shrug their shoulders and appear to accept that this part and parcel of the travails of urban living. This article examines the proposition if traffic congestion is something we just have to learn to live with or if there are indeed initiatives that could be taken to reduce and manage it within tolerable levels. But ahead of answering that, we need to ask some basic questions: • Why is there congestion? • What are the effects of congestion? Put simply, traffic congestion means there are more vehicles trying to use a given road facility than it can handle- without exceeding acceptable levels of delay or inconvenience. In Colombo and other major cities, this occurs mostly during certain times of the day- we call peak periods or rush hours. There are two clear parameters within a single equation that causes congestion, which is the balance between the demand and the supply of road space. The demand for road space arises from the universally observed desire of individuals to own and use a motor vehicle. As incomes increase and technological advancements reduce the real cost of producing a motor vehicle, more and more persons find the financial means for owning and using a motor vehicle. However, motor vehicles do not come without their share of physical and environmental limitations. A motor vehicle in the first instance requires road space to operate freely, parking spaces at residences and work places. Increase of motor vehicles (the demand) often outstrips the provision of road space (the supply) in many countries. The result is traffic congestion.. According to the TransPlan Model (UoM, 1999) average traffic speeds within the Colombo Metropolitan Region (CMR) have dropped to around 20 kms/hr today. The typical corridor (major artery) speed is around 10-15 kms/hr within Colombo City.

Traffic congestion may be considered a problem, by many, they often fail to see the extent of its impact on the community and country. These impacts could be further discussed as: Economic Growth: A good transportation system is an important selling point to communities that desire to attract development that provides for employment and growth of a city. If transport costs due to congestion increase, goods and services produced within that city tend to increase in costs thus losing competitiveness in international markets. Efficient transportation access is therefore a very important consideration as it has a direct impact on sound and sustainable economic growth and productivity. The cost of congestion in the Western Province of Sri Lanka is over Rs 20,000 million per year (around 2 percent of Regional GDP). This includes the cost of productive time and wastage of fuel. Quality-of-Life: To some people, congested highways are a symptom of deteriorating quality-oflife-in a community. The amount of time that is spent on commuting to and from work is also in reality, time that is taken away from social interactions or pursuit of activities that have a personal value and satisfaction. 3 Environmental Quality: Congested road conditions can have a detrimental effect on the environment, in particular air quality and noise pollution. Congestion arises due to increase vehicles on the road. Ironically this is the time when there are the most number of people on the roads as well. This means that many more people become vulnerable to respiratory diseases such as asthma -widely prevalent today. Anti- Social Behavior: Increasing social problems referred to as Highway Rage (or Road Rage)

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experienced in many countries where drivers show hostility to each other most often due to the frustration of slow moving traffic is also becoming a serious social problem.

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KNOWLEDGE

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