

What is “good” transport policy?

van Wee, Bert

DOI

[10.1080/01441647.2025.2516890](https://doi.org/10.1080/01441647.2025.2516890)

Publication date

2025

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Transport Reviews

Citation (APA)

van Wee, B. (2025). What is “good” transport policy? *Transport Reviews*, 45(4), 455-458.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01441647.2025.2516890>

Important note

To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
Please check the document version above.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download, forward or distribute the text or part of it, without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license such as Creative Commons.

Takedown policy

Please contact us and provide details if you believe this document breaches copyrights.
We will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

**Green Open Access added to [TU Delft Institutional Repository](#)
as part of the Taverne amendment.**

More information about this copyright law amendment
can be found at <https://www.openaccess.nl>.

Otherwise as indicated in the copyright section:
the publisher is the copyright holder of this work and the
author uses the Dutch legislation to make this work public.



What is “good” transport policy?

What makes an already implemented or potential future transport policy a “good” policy? This is one of the most fundamental questions to be asked in the context of policymaking and policy evaluation. In the policy analysis literature, there is a certain level of agreement that “good” policies meet three criteria: they should be (1) effective, (2) efficient and (3) fair (Young & Tilley, 2006). In this editorial, I will discuss these criteria in the context of transport policy-making and propose additional criteria: (4) a positive balance of benefits and costs, (5) ease of implementation, (6) flexibility and (7) long-term robustness. It is an undated version of a section in a paper written for a keynote at the European Transport Conference in 2009 (Van Wee, 2009).

Effectiveness

Effectiveness relates to the question: does the policy do what it is supposed to do? For example, if free public transport is implemented because of environmental reasons, the question is: will it lead to less environmental pressure? A road safety policy that aims to reduce the number of fatalities should reduce this number. If not, it is not effective. Note that not only the question if the policy is effective at all is of importance but also the level of effects: how much does a policy option, in the case of these examples, reduce environmental pressure or the number of fatalities?

Efficiency

Efficiency has often been expressed in terms of cost-effectiveness. Cost-effectiveness is generally a relatively easy indicator in the case of “simple” policy options, having one dominant effect, and only monetary costs. It can, for example, be applied to choices between technical vehicle-based options to improve safety or to technological options to reduce CO₂ emissions. The efficiency criteria can then be evaluated based on the division of benefits by costs. In the case of these examples, it relates to saved fatalities or tons of CO₂ emission per euro (or other currency).

Fairness

Fairness or equity dominantly relates to the distribution of the pros and cons over (groups of) winners and losers. For about 15 years, this topic has received way more attention in the transport (policy) literature than before. Fairness is not as unidirectional as effectiveness and efficiency: there are multiple ethical principles to come to a conclusion on fairness. Dominant principles are utilitarianism saying that an option is fair if the overall utility of all people increases. Sufficiency focuses on those who are worse off, for example, people with

the lowest levels of accessibility. Egalitarianism focuses on the distribution of effects of all (groups of) people. In the case of accessibility, these three principles have a prominent position in the academic literature (see, for example, Lucas et al., 2016), but there are more principles (see Van Wee & Roeser, 2013). For an overview of equity types: see Thomopoulos et al., (2009). Fairness is not limited to distributions of pros and cons only. For example, if a governmental body makes a promise to an area (region, municipality and neighbourhood), it is generally seen as unfair if the body does not keep its promise.

Positive balance of benefits and costs

The three criteria above can relatively easily be used if a policy has one (dominant) effect and only or mainly monetary costs. It is less simple to use these criteria if a policy option has (1) multiple effects or (2) monetary as well as non-monetary costs. An example of multiple effects: improvements in public transport may contribute to accessibility, safety and the environment. An example of multiple effects including non-monetary costs: reductions of speeds on motorways could result in lower emissions, and reduced fuel use and costs, which can be expressed in monetary terms. But they also increase travel times and might reduce the fun of driving for some, both being non-monetary costs. In cases of multiple effects, the effectiveness relates to these (obtained) effects. And if multiple cost categories apply (monetary plus non-monetary, or multiple non-monetary costs) there is not one denominator that applies to cost-effectiveness. In some cases, all costs, also non-monetary costs, can be expressed in monetary terms, and if so, effects per euro can still be calculated. Also, the evaluation of fairness is not straightforward if multiple effects occur, and the question of which (groups of) people should be distinguished can vary between these effects.

For such less simple policy options, a more complex evaluation framework can do the job. If effects are largely well-known and can be quantified and expressed in monetary terms, in many cases, a Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) can be an attractive framework as far as effectiveness and efficiency are concerned. But fairness is generally not included in a CBA unless one thinks that utilitarianism is the only "right" ethical principle. If one has other opinions, then an additional evaluation of fairness is needed. Because policy evaluations made by researchers should serve people (policymakers, politicians and others) with different ethical preferences, a researcher should not limit her or himself to one ethical principle only. So, if fairness is important, a CBA should be enriched by a fairness evaluation. Alternatively, a multi-criteria Analysis (MCA) can be used, and this is a more inclusive framework that at least theoretically includes all relevant effects, such as fairness evaluations based on multiple ethical principles. An MCA can be made actor-specific (Macharis & Bernardini, 2015). For further overview and discussions on methods to evaluate transport policies, see Mouter (2020, 2021).

Ease of implementation

The fourth criterion is the ease of implementation. Easy-to-implement policies, all else being equal, are to be preferred over more difficult-to-implement policies. But this criterion is not added to suggest that only easy-to-implement policy options should be selected. Especially if a policy option can have major positive effects and is cost-effective, it should be considered as an important potential option. In the author's opinion, road pricing policies can be in this category. It is worth trying to understand the major barriers for implementation and to learn from successful implementations elsewhere. For example, the equity barrier (see above) can be reduced or even solved by carefully selecting options for revenue use (Schuitema & Steg, 2008). It could be an option to use revenues to reduce income tax for low-income people

or to reduce taxes on fuel-efficient cars, which are more than average owned by low-income people. Of importance for the chances of successful implementation, but highly underestimated and under-researched is the role of champions. Champions, often only one or a few persons, have a good vision and know how to implement it (Cervero, 1999). An example of a champion, to my opinion, is Ken Livingstone, the former mayor of London, an elected mayor who announced that he would introduce the congestion charge, did it successfully and was re-elected (but not the second time).

Flexibility

Flexibility or adaptivity relates to the ease to adapt the policy, because of easy or difficult to foresee uncertain developments. Once introduced, levies on fuels and cars, and emissions regulations can be changed relatively easy. For example, different levies on petrol versus diesel are in several countries legitimated because of differences in emissions levels (CO₂, NO_x, PM). Changes in these emission levels could be translated into changes in levies on these fuels. Difficult-to-foresee changes are inherently more difficult to deal with. Out-of-the-box thinking might be helpful to imagine such changes. An example to illustrate this: let us assume a region with planned urban development at several locations. Based on long-term urban planning, a tram line could be considered. But what if due to unexpected demographic changes, a housing crisis, or a lack of firms to be interested in new employment areas the original plan could not be realized? To deal with such possible events, a bus line could be an option, at least for the first 10 years. Depending on real-world developments, the track could later be converted into a tram line. Increasing flexibility brings us to the concept of Adaptive Policy Making, a systematic approach to develop flexible policy strategies under uncertainty (see Walker et al., 2001 for the general concept or Marchau et al., 2010 for the application in the area of transport).

Long-term robustness

Long-term robustness, the final criterion, relates to the question if a policy is “no regret” under uncertain long-term developments that could have a major impact on society. Long-term robustness relates to major changes. Examples are climate change and change in the preferences to reduce climate change, adaptation to climate change, the depletion of fossil fuels, very high or unstable fuel prices, major geo-political changes, major shifts in goods flows, strongly affecting the position of harbours and freight transport networks, or a breakthrough in battery or hydrogen technologies, or in solar or wind power generation, resulting in the availability of plenty of inexpensive and clean energy. It is recommended to evaluate how robust a policy with difficult-to-reverse effects is under such changes. Policies for which this applies are major land-use and transport infrastructure policies, and strategic policies influencing the energy needed for the transport system. Again, Adaptive Policy Making could be an attractive way to deal with such deep uncertainties.

ORCID

Bert van Wee  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0370-3575>

References

Cervero, R. (1999). *The transit metropolis. A global inquiry*. Island Press.

- Lucas, K., van Wee, B., & Maat, K. (2016). A method to evaluate equitable accessibility: Combining ethical theories and accessibility-based approaches. *Transportation*, 43(3), 473–490. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11116-015-9585-2>
- Marchais, C., & Bernardini, A. (2015). Reviewing the use of multi-criteria decision analysis for the evaluation of transport projects: Time for a multi-actor approach. *Transport Policy*, 37, 177–186. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tranpol.2014.11.002>
- Marchau, V. A. W. J., Walker, W. E., & van Wee, B. (2010). Dynamic adaptive transport policies for handling deep uncertainty. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 77(6), 940–950. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2010.04.006>
- Mouter, N. (2020). *Standard transport appraisal methods* (Elsevier Series Advances in Transport Policy and Planning, Vol. 6). Elsevier.
- Mouter, N. (2021). *New methods, reflections and application domains in transport appraisal* (Elsevier Series Advances in Transport Policy and Planning, Vol. 7). Elsevier.
- Schuitema, G., & Steg, L. (2008). The role of revenue use in the acceptability of transport pricing policies. *Transportation Research Part F: Traffic Psychology and Behaviour*, 11(3), 221–231. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trf.2007.11.003>
- Thomopoulos, N., Grant-Muller, S., & Tight, M. R. (2009). Incorporating equity considerations in transport infrastructure evaluation: Current practice and a proposed methodology. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 32(4), 351–359. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2009.06.013>
- Van Wee, B. (2009). *Transport policy: What it can and can't do?* Paper presented at the ETC Conference, Noordwijkerhout, The Netherlands.
- Van Wee, B., & Roeser, S. (2013). Ethical theories and the cost-benefit analysis-based *ex ante* evaluation of transport policies and plans. *Transport Reviews*, 33(6), 743–760. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01441647.2013.854281>
- Walker, W. E., Rahman, S. A., & Cave, J. (2001). Adaptive policies, policy analysis, and policymaking. *European Journal of Operational Research*, 128(2), 282–289. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0377-2217\(00\)00071-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0377-2217(00)00071-0)
- Young, W., & Tilley, F. (2006). Can businesses move beyond efficiency? The shift toward effectiveness and equity in the corporate sustainability debate. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 15(6), 402–415. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.510>

Bert van Wee

Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management, Delft University of Technology, Netherlands

 G.P.vanWee@tudelft.nl  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0370-3575>