

BLOG POST July 29th 2016

Collaborative mobility: public authorities have a role to play!

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 Reading time: 4 min



Carpooling and car sharing among individuals are often presented as key components of sustainable mobility, especially in sparsely populated areas. While these practices have real environmental and social potential, their development for short distances faces many challenges. How can we overcome these obstacles, and what role should the public authorities have in supporting collaborative mobility actors?

Collaborative mobility: from promises to development challenges for short distances

OuiHop', Karos, WayzUp, Koolicar, Ecov... Numerous start-ups are seeking to develop carpooling and car sharing between individuals for daily travel. The increasing use of smartphones and digital technology indeed enables new solutions to facilitate the sharing of cars: for example, Koolicar equips vehicles with an internet connected box that enables keyless unlocking of the car, while the Karos application uses artificial intelligence to anticipate journeys and spontaneously offers carpooling alternatives. The new actors of **collaborative mobility** thus embody the convergence between digital and ecological transitions, which was the theme of [a conference](#) held by IDDRI on 23rd June 2016.

Practices that improve the sustainability of daily trips

The sharing of cars improves the sustainability of daily trips, especially in sparsely populated areas where there are few alternatives to the car. Carpooling enables car journeys to be shared and therefore reduces congestion and the emission of pollutants; while carsharing makes it possible to optimize car use: a car is rented only when really needed and different transport modes are used on other occasions. These two practices reduce the costs associated with mobility, the annual savings ranging from a few hundred to over three thousand euros, depending on the scale of the change in behaviour.

Problems in terms of development

However, there remain numerous obstacles to the development of these practices, as highlighted in the debates at the conference on 23rd June.

- Firstly, the development of car sharing depends on access to alternative modes of transport (collective transport, carpooling, cycling) for the most frequent journeys, with the car only being used occasionally. For this reason, it is not possible for car sharing to develop in areas where there are few alternatives to the car. Regarding carpooling, although the innovations developed by the start-ups reduce the organizational costs associated with the recurrence of displacement, the financial gain remains moderate and spread out over time – only becoming significant if the user gives up his or her own car.
- In addition, for these solutions to be effective for individuals to use for daily commuting, there has to be a very close match between supply and demand, because people are less flexible – in time and space – for trips they have to make frequently. The number of users must therefore be very high, and hence the increased difficulty for the development of these practices in sparsely populated areas.
- Finally, start-ups are struggling to develop viable business models, oscillating between commission-based remuneration models (C2C) or service delivery for local authorities (B2G) or for businesses (B2B). Financial sustainability is therefore far from guaranteed.

Collaborative mobility: what role for public authorities?

Faced with these difficulties, the question arises regarding the role of public authorities. So far, their involvement vis-à-vis these new actors is relatively limited, in contrast to the prevailing situation with the original carpooling actors (La Roue Verte, Covivo, etc.) and professional car sharing actors (Communauto, Autolib, Citiz, etc.), with whom they have close ties. This situation is damaging for two reasons.

1. Firstly, these new solutions can reach new audiences and broaden the dissemination of such practices to new territories, even if development constraints remain strong in sparsely populated territories.

2. Secondly, the challenge of sustainable mobility consists in going beyond the choice between private car/public transport, to offer a range of transportation modes that enable the recreation of the convenience and freedom offered by the private car, or from well-networked public transport.

The effectiveness of a multimodal system depends on the adequacy and complementarity between different transport modes, which can only be organized by public authorities.

Contrasting positions

A recent IDDRI-led study on [collaborative mobility](#) shows that local authorities have contrasting positions regarding these new actors. Some are interested in their solutions, but struggle to envisage ways to link these solutions with their existing mobility provision. Others are more reluctant to deal with these collaborative mobility actors who may appear intimidating, as do Uber and Airbnb for example, the figureheads of the collaborative economy. The issue of competition with public transport was often raised during the interviews carried out as part of this study and in the conference debate on 23rd June. *Experimentation seems essential to test new solutions and organize their complementarity with other modes of transport, but it faces in reality the difficulties of collaboration between start-ups and local authorities and the financial "hesitancy" of the latter.*

Experimental avenues

There are many avenues that can be envisaged to support the development of collaborative mobility for short distance trips: communication support, tax clarification and incentives, development of the road system, etc. Some of these proposals sparked debate during the conference on 23rd June. Experimentation seems essential to test new solutions and organize their complementarity with other modes of transport, but in reality it faces difficulties regarding collaboration between start-ups and local authorities and the financial "hesitancy" of the latter. The issue of governance was also discussed: should we build partnerships between local authorities, new collaborative mobility actors and public transport operators? Should the latter ultimately absorb these start-ups or should they develop partnerships with them? The issue of the public funding of collaborative mobility was raised, especially for sparsely populated areas where financial support from public authorities appears necessary.

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