Using Virtual Mobility to Alleviate Aspects of Social Exclusion

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INTRODUCTION

People's ability to participate in the activities that are necessary to ensure their economic, political and social participation in the society in which they live is dependent upon the accessibility of the activities. Accessibility has traditionally been perceived as a function of the space, or distance, between the origin of the individual (or community) and the destination of the activity—the opportunity, service, social network, goods—alongside the time that it takes to cross this space. Thus, accessibility is dependent upon the individual's ability to overcome space and time barriers, allowing them to reach the right place or person, at the right time—and, of course, upon the availability to them of adequate resources to do this (Couclelis, 2000)[1].

Transportation has traditionally been the principal technology, or resource, employed to fill this accessibility function, enabling people to travel faster and thus further to access a wider range of activities – for example, educational and employment opportunities, healthcare services, family and friends, healthy, or cheaper, foodstuffs and so forth. When individuals lack the transportation resources to overcome these spatial and temporal separations, however, these activities become inaccessible. The inability to overcome the separation between individuals or the communities in which they live and the opportunities, services, social networks and other goods that they seek to reach is a significant factor in both enforcing and reinforcing social exclusion.

Improvements in accessibility have, historically, been associated with advances in transportation technology, or in enhanced popular access to transport. Efforts to overcome accessibility barriers—and to challenge mobility-related social exclusion—have thus centred around improving access to physical mobility amongst socially excluded individuals and communities. In 2003, the UK government published *Making the Connections* (SEU, 2003), the result of a two-year study into the role of a lack of adequate transport in the experience of social exclusion. The principal recommendation given in the document to the communities and regions that were seeking to reduce social exclusion and induce development was to increase access to transportation, to increase mobility and, therefore, accessibility.

However, the advent of ICT presents a viable alternative to physical mobility in providing accessibility, allowing communication, information retrieval and goods exchange without the need for co-presence or physical movement by the person undertaking the activity. In overcoming many space/time accessibility constraints, ICT have the potential to reshape patterns of mobility and mobility-related exclusion. Indeed, evidence suggests not only that the use of ICT, specifically, the Internet is replacing existing travel and substituting for existing mobility, but also that it is providing an additional means of access to activities from which people were previously excluded, because of their accessibility deficit (Kenyon et al., 2003).

This article considers the role of inadequate physical accessibility in social exclusion, with a focus upon the role of mobility in both development and disadvantage at the individual and community levels. The article begins by providing a brief overview of the concept of social exclusion, before turning to highlight the place of mobility in exclusion. The article defines virtual mobility, then discusses the role of ICT, specifically, the Internet, in overcoming space/time barriers to participation, without recourse to physical mobility. The article suggests practical examples where Internet use can, not only replace the need to travel to access the opportunity, service, social network or other goods, but also provide a new means of access to activities from which individuals or communities were previously excluded. While recognising the limitations of this form of access, in terms of the possible negative social and transport effects of virtual mobility, the article is enthusiastic about the potential of the Internet to play a strong role in the delivery of social policy and the development of communities.

The article focuses upon community development in the United Kingdom (UK), in the context of initiatives to reduce social exclusion in deprived communities and regions. However, the author suggests that the debate presented is applicable across many countries, and that the lessons learned are applicable across developmental contexts.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Social exclusion is a central concept in social policy in the UK. The majority of the government's social policy initiatives in 2004 aim to eradicate the presence of this social ill, overseen by the Social Exclusion Unit, a body established in 1997 both to develop clearer understanding of and to ensure targeted responses to, social exclusion. It is a relatively recent concept, developed following the detailed analysis of the different types of inequality in modern society during the latter part of the 20th century. Social scientists had begun to recognise that inequality and disadvantage are not always material in origin, or in consequence. That is, that they are not always caused by income poverty, nor is income poverty their sole manifestation. Rather, there are many different causes, consequences and experiences of inequality and disadvantage. Therefore, policy initiatives to tackle the causes and consequences of poverty alone are unlikely to be successful in tackling inequality and disadvantage when understood in their multi-dimensional forms.

The term "social exclusion" was coined to overcome the limitations of the poverty discourse. The term embodies the sense that social exclusion is an active process—the process of being excluded from, or shut out of, full participation in society. It is the process of the interplay between a number of factors, unique to the individual or group, the consequence of which is a denial of access to the opportunity to participate in the cultural, economic, political and social life of the community. This process results not only in a diminished material and non-material quality of life, but also in tempered life chances, choices and a reduced level of citizenship (for a full overview of the poverty/social exclusion literature, see Kenyon et al., 2002).

Table 1, taken from Kenyon (2003), develops a framework of understanding for the concept, highlighting nine dimensions of exclusion. Within these dimensions, there are a number of factors which, when experienced either on their own or in combination with other factors, from any of the dimensions, can contribute toward the feeling of exclusion.

THE ROLE OF MOBILITY IN EXCLUSION

Table 1 highlights a *mobility* dimension to exclusion. The focus of this dimension is upon the accessibility deficit that arises when people or communities have inadequate access to public or private transportation.

As highlighted in the introduction to this article, access to opportunities, services, social networks and other goods is dependent upon the ability to traverse the spatial and temporal barriers between the origin of the individual and the destination at which the desirable or necessary activity is located. In the UK, in common with many nations across the globe, the spatial and temporal separations between activities have increased both be-

Table 1. Understanding social exclusion

Dimension	Discussion	Potential exclusionary factors (not exhaustive)
Economic	Factors affecting and arising from access to money	Income poverty; unemployment; lack of access to credit facilities
Living space	Factors in the local environment, which may disadvantage the individual or group	Crime; safety; ecological environment (pollution, availability of green space); availability of services and facilities; disunity of community
Mobility	Factors affecting and arising from access to (motorised) transport	Inadequate access to private transport; inadequate public transport services; poor access to opportunities, services, social networks and other goods
Personal	Individual characteristics influencing position in society and attitudes towards the self	Class; culture; disability; ethnicity; gender; skills
Personal political	The ability to make decisions over one's own life	Powerlessness; disempowerment; restricted choices; lack of access to information
Organised political	The ability to influence decision making at an organised level	Denial of rights/freedoms; disenfranchisement; low participation in interest groups; lack of representation; lack of access to information
Social networks	Factors arising from access to and relations with other people	Isolation; loneliness
Societal	Social factors at a societal level	Crime; education levels; family dynamics; health and social care; inequality
Temporal	Factors causing and arising from time pressures	Insufficient time to participate in social, political, economic activities

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