16 Unmet needs

Exploring mobility poverty in Buzău, Romania

Razvan Andrei Gheorghiu and Valentin Iordache

Abstract

This chapter presents the results of the fieldwork carried out in the city of Buzău, Romania, through interviews with stakeholders and focus groups with end users. The emphasis was on different vulnerable individuals, focusing on children (high school pupils), the elderly, people with visual impairments and those on low income (Roma people), all living in urban or peri-urban areas of the city. Within the city, a deprived area with poorer people and less comprehensive public transport was selected (the area of Simileasca). The main result was that, while policy makers have a weak understanding of mobility poverty, focus group participants expressed interest in innovative mobility solutions, well beyond traditional public transport systems.

Contextualisation

Buzău city is the capital of Buzău county, located in the south-eastern part of Romania near the central area of the county on the right bank of the Buzău River, covering around 82 square kilometres. On 1 January 2017, the municipality had a population of 134,552 inhabitants (National Institute of Statistics 2020). A downward trend can be observed: in 2011, Buzău had 140,875 inhabitants, but 148,839 in 2002 (National Institute of Statistics 2020). According to the Romanian National Institute of Statistics, there has been an increase in the number of elderly persons between 2011 and 2017, while the number of children and younger adults is steadily decreasing (National Institute of Statistics 2020).

The distance to Bucharest is about 100 km and the city is located at the junction of three main roads (Figure 16.1). Buzău is also an important railway node for both freight and passenger transport and has links with all areas of the country. Due to these features, it attracts transit passengers and commuters. The city has three bus stations that operate inter-urban transport. From these bus stations, private transport companies operate regular inter-urban services to other cities and municipalities in the area. With a radius of approximately 3.5 kilometres, local public transport services are currently offered on 20 main bus routes and on 10 secondary routes, all

- 61% of the population in the area only graduated high school;
- 80% of the population in the area belongs to the Roma minority; and
- 35% are children aged between 0 and 17.

There is also a growing number of elderly people and overcrowded houses (with less than 14 m²/person) are an additional problem.

Policy makers

The municipality of Buzău is the decision-making body and it also defines the transport strategy and planning. TRANS-BUS SA Buzău is the public transport operator, which is an autonomous entity, although most of its important decisions need the municipality's authorisation. According to the municipality of Buzău, there are no significant studies and surveys covering the urban problems related to mobility poverty. Policy makers lack information about vulnerable groups and their problems and thus, naturally, they cannot formulate any action or solution. Additionally, in order to tackle mobility poverty, the municipality of Buzău would need qualified staff, a favourable regulatory framework and additional funding.

Both the representatives of the city hall and of the public transport operator mentioned that they are trying to maintain a good relationship with citizens. Communication with them is accomplished through different channels such as their websites, press conferences, press, via phone and Facebook. Polls are also conducted to monitor the satisfaction of travellers, which can also take place via the Trans-Bus website. Municipality representatives said that there were cases when suggestions have been formulated by users, triggering changes to the transport systems, such as including the specific needs of vulnerable groups.

The disparities in the treatment of the different social groups, which also includes public transport, often prompt resentment. For example, retired people, usually on low incomes, reported that they do not appreciate that socially assisted people receive benefits to an extent higher than their pension. Also, visually impaired people stated that they usually have weak support from the authorities to improve their material and financial situation, many of them being retired with small pensions or not working at all. On top of that, although public transport is subsidised for them, and disregarding their mobility difficulties, they must regularly go to the city hall to renew their monthly pass.

Hence, it is correct to say that the City of Buzău has indeed developed actions to improve the mobility of different categories of citizens, but these are not grouped in a unitary plan to tackle mobility barriers. It should be noted that the municipality and the local transport provider (due to a national enforcement) renewed the public transport fleet in order to provide exclusively vehicles with a low floor and special ramp for wheelchairs. Conversely, it looks like only physically impaired persons are considered by the authorities, who lack greater understanding of transport and mobility poverty as

such. For visually impaired people, a lack of proper information systems (no tools to identify bus numbers, stops not being announced during the ride) and missing acoustic and tactile markings are important issues.

In recapping what was said during the interviews with policy makers and users, as well as in utilising the information available, we may conclude that local policy makers and transport providers have weak knowledge about the concept of mobility poverty, let alone solutions. We found the need for a better understanding of users' needs in order to address mobility poverty and transport issues in general. Due to the lack of a proper study on the topic, following our previous and current investigations, as anecdotal evidence we can state that in Romania the concept of mobility poverty is not well known as such and it is not thus considered in developing transport policy and implementing mobility systems. Moreover, a lack of funding to implement dedicated solutions for different vulnerable categories, poor legislation and regulations and even staff shortages at city hall level are significant barriers.

Main findings from the focus groups

Five focus group discussions took place in Buzău and, for each of them, we identified the following causes of mobility poverty:

- 1 For **low-income and unemployed**, the most pressing barrier to transport use is a lack of money along with remoteness from the city centre or from schools and facilities. Additionally, participants mentioned unsuitable bus service coverage (urban and interurban), big distances from bus stops, high fares and, finally, the lack of infrastructure for bicycle lanes and proper footpaths for pedestrians;
- 2 For the **elderly**, material deprivation is also important, associated with scattered social networks, physical impairment, infrequent and inadequate bus services, the low availability of interurban public transport and inadequate walking and cycling infrastructure;
- 3 **People with reduced mobility** (visually impaired) lack comfortable and accessible buses, appropriate information and warning systems. They are also affected by financial issues, unemployment and dependence on relatives' chauffeuring. They stated that incorrect car parking creates problems for their ability to walk around the city, requesting a stricter application of correct parking conduct. Tactile markings on the pavement for pedestrians are only present at public transport stops (but not in their vicinity). At junctions and intersections, and at traffic lights, such facilities for visually-impaired people have not yet been developed in all parts of Buzău city;
- 4 For **children**, the main causes of transport limitations are low bus frequency, the lack of an appropriate information system, limited accessibility to regular fares (sometimes fares are too high), limited subsidies,

infrastructure which is not suitable for cycling, including safe parking solutions. Teenagers do not hold a driving licence; and

- 5 **People living in remote areas** are affected by the lack of or inadequate public transport options and limited access to purchase public transport tickets. However, we also noticed complaints about the cost of fuel and car maintenance, a lack of basic infrastructures (roads, footpaths, cycle lanes) and a low degree of road safety.

Although the unemployment rate is low in Buzău, for many of the participants finding a steady, suitable or accessible job is an important issue. People who are visually impaired, of Roma ethnicity or those in the lower social strata are in many cases unemployed. Employers often avoid offering jobs to these social groups, but this situation is also the outcome of there being few employment opportunities in the city and a lower level of pay than the national average (National Institute of Statistics 2019).

While the material situation varies from one social group to another, very few of the participants have a stable job or a good pension. For students, the situation in their families is mainly good, not marked by either a shortage or abundance of wealth, but they are dependent on their parents. The Roma people are most affected by a lack of money as they are usually unemployed, some of them making their living doing different activities they find each day.

Informal unemployment is common – people have income, they work abroad and send money home, or they have a small business in the market (without paying taxes) and almost 70% of their income is not declared.

Minorities and low-income NGO representative

The elderly and visually impaired people spend their pensions or modest income wisely, taking care of priorities first and, sometimes, paying the rent can be a challenge. It is also common for elderly people to receive little support from their families, mainly due to the migration of relatives abroad. Some of them have to work to earn additional money to their pension (even as taxi drivers).

We're too poor to spend thoughtlessly.

Elderly NGO representative

All the participants are affected to varying degrees by difficulties in managing their daily travel using an organised transport system. Their needs change, sometimes daily, and, from this point of view, traditional public transport is weak in meeting these demands (and there are no alternatives to public transport). When material poverty and the absence of transport solutions come together, many participants face severe forms of mobility

poverty. When prompted to discuss support from other persons, participants interviewed declared they ask relatives or neighbours for some help. In many cases, people decide to reduce their mobility considering the lack of proper solutions or support. Sometimes, they give up travelling completely or switch to walking if they are physically able to do so.

Walking is best.

Elderly participant

Public transport and its issues

In Buzău, many noticeable improvements have been implemented in public transportation during the past few years. The buses are well used and the focus groups' participants declared that the travel conditions are good: buses are clean and spacious and some of them have air conditioning. The public authorities also offer different types of subsidies for all disadvantaged social groups mentioned in this study. For example, high school students and retired persons benefit from free passes, although this is applicable to one bus line only. This can cover the very basic need of going to school or to the market, but it may be that any other form of mobility (like participation in extra-curriculum courses or recreational activities) is a kind of luxury. Such a situation makes children feel socially disadvantaged, as they have many different needs according to their age and social status that would necessitate them travelling more often or in different ways. Again, behind such a decision, we can trace a narrow vision of mobility needs that is reduced to basic needs, with little attention to the users' perspective.

Our free pass should not be limited to only one bus route. For example, I have to use one route in winter and another one in summer, which would not be accessible to me when there is snow or ice, or if it is dark outside, because I have to pass through a less travelled tunnel under the railway.

High school student

Elderly people also have the option of purchasing (at reduced cost) a subscription for the entire city or receiving an additional 20 free tickets each month. Unemployed and visually impaired people are also encouraged to use public transport by being given a free monthly subscription on one bus line only. That being said, for any category, buying extra tickets is often too expensive. Students said that they need to use different bus routes and they must pay extra fees; people with disabilities must go to the City Hall every month to obtain their transport pass; people on low income often have irregular mobility patterns, as they do not have continuous work, which implies changing routes and transport needs every day; the elderly must take

regular trips for bureaucratic reasons to their pensions scheme authority, which is located at the edge of the city. To answer these specific needs, a wider coverage of free access or increased subsidies would be a plus.

Besides that, accessibility to standard fare tickets is also problematic as the purchase may be made either in some specific kiosks, which are rare to find, especially in peri-urban areas, or on board where purchases carry an additional 50% cost, which may be an issue for many users. As reported in the focus groups, users then have the dilemma of seeking an official kiosk/shop (a very time-consuming activity), paying extra on board (which they cannot afford) or buying more tickets for future trips in advance (which can unbalance their weekly budget). For people living in remote areas (where selling points are very rare), this problem is more serious, pushing them to buy on board, pay extra and eventually leading to challenging situations. Often, they refuse to pay on board, sometimes trying to provoke and intimidate the bus personnel or the driver. Free public transport or easier access to normal price purchasing could easily resolve this situation.

Commuters pointed out that Buzău, due to its location, has good connections with all the major cities in the area, although it currently lacks proper connections to small surrounding villages (15 villages with about 84,000 inhabitants, with distances of between 3 and 15 kilometres from Buzău city centre) (National Institute of Statistics 2020). While users are generally pleased with the new buses, many of the participants said that the public transport service is not properly distributed in the city, questioning frequency and timetables; indeed, peri-urban areas are less well served, making it difficult for participants who live there to access it.

The children complained about the fact that the timetable is not always respected, especially at the end of the schedule, reporting that it ends too early in the evening, forcing them to use other transport facilities, which are usually more expensive.

This leads to considering the need for more frequent inter-urban transport in order to avoid crowded services as currently experienced, a situation which is affecting many social groups. Low-income persons stated that they want to benefit from the opportunity to find proper jobs in nearby cities and the children living in the cities near Buzău want to benefit from subsidies to be able to attend school, or other activities, and at the end of these activities to go back home at a convenient time.

It does not seem right for fellow students who do not live in the city to pay for the trip to their school.

High school student

Such a situation could be improved if the public transport operator integrated new lines into the existing network, or more simply, extended the current network².

Beyond public transport

In Buzău, the modal split reveals a low usage of private cars. Being a small city, in many cases walking is the apt choice (and indeed half of urban trips are made by walking) (Buzău City Hall 2016). Cars are indeed considered as very comfortable and fast, however, expensive. Those who own a car face the challenges of high tax and fuel expenses, so, naturally, for long distances, ride-sharing is seen as an option. When car-pooling, drivers are usually able to find a neighbour/friend to take them along for longer journeys, the fuel cost being divided among all the travellers. For short distances, apart from walking, non-motorised scooters are considered only in a few cases.

Question from the interviewer: “Which mode of transport do you see yourself using in two years?”

Answer from an elderly person: “A non-motorised scooter. An old woman riding a scooter.”

Cycling can offer a lot of potential: it is NOT perceived as a “poor” system, but it is currently not a real option, mainly due to poor quality infrastructure and a lack of dedicated (secured) lanes. The poor road quality encourages car drivers to go around holes in the asphalt, zigzagging and thus creating a more unsafe environment for cyclists. This, naturally, often pushes cyclists to use the footpaths, making walking unsafe too.

I do not agree that cyclists should use the footpaths. Both children and adults. We’re dealing with them. It’s not right because they run us over. They hit a lady last week. I’m afraid to walk on the footpath.

Elderly participant

Also, children asked to have a secure and monitored parking space to be able to come to school by bicycle. The school has created a limited number of bicycle parking spaces, but definitely insufficient for the potential users. In the future, this should also change, as Buzău municipality is implementing projects that will redesign the main streets to accommodate bike lanes and, in addition, a bike-sharing system will be put in place to further stimulate the usage of alternative (non-motorised) means of transport in the city.

The use of ICT solutions could be useful in reducing mobility poverty, but assistance by apps or other ICT systems is mainly limited to planning travel routes when driving a private car. The use of smart devices is high among children, but they claim a lack of access to information about the public transport service. The elderly hardly use ICT solutions, very few of them accessing the Internet daily. Some of the visually impaired people use smartphones that have voice synthesis, applications related to public transport or software that may recognise objects, like tickets or different types of banknotes.

Based on the results from the focus groups, we may summarise that the root causes of mobility poverty in Buzău include:

- Low income and (too) high cost for transport (public transport, fuel, taxis);
- Remoteness from the city centre, jobs, schools and pensions scheme authority;
- Inadequate public transport coverage of the area;
- Lack of appropriate and accessible information on the (public) transport system;
- No driving licence, inability to drive, no access to a car;
- No support from family, mainly due to the migration of the workforce abroad; and
- Lack of proper infrastructure for safe walking and cycling.

Conclusions (and solutions)

In our analysis of mobility patterns in Buzău, we think there is no coherent and far-reaching understanding of mobility poverty. Beyond the lack of information, we find that an overarching framing of the problem is missing, too often reduced to offering bus access to wheelchair users. A wider understanding of disadvantaged people's needs has not yet been grasped by the local authorities or planners when designing the transport system. There is a necessity for more announcement systems (acoustic) at bus stops, more parking spaces for persons with disabilities and law enforcement for people who park private cars where they are not allowed to do so, preventing the normal movement of visually-impaired persons.

It is of course true that different groups have specific and divergent demands, but still we encountered several basic flaws, which are heavily hampering the mobility opportunity for many social groups. As mentioned above, the public transport service is not properly distributed within the city limits so it is difficult for people living in peri-urban areas to access it. Single tickets for the bus should be cheaper (with easy purchase) or free subscription should be extended to the whole network; there is a clear demand for more frequent and more reliable, on-time, interurban public transport services, with proper information provided to travellers. Currently, non-motorised means of transport are not encouraged either. The pedestrian routes in some parts of the city are of poor quality and cycling is currently not a viable option, although it is not seen as a "poor" system.

According to municipality representatives, there are, however, many projects envisaged to be implemented in the future:

- Modernising and improving road infrastructure, including two major boulevards in the city centre; implementing dedicated lanes for public transport (ensuring connections to the north, west and south);

- Implementing an adaptive traffic management system for the main axes of the city prioritising public transport;
- Development of an intermodal hub in the city in order to facilitate peri-urban–urban interchanges;
- Implementation of a new parking policy which aims to discourage private vehicle access in the city centre;
- Development of two park-and-ride systems;
- Expansion and modernisation of pedestrian areas; and
- Implementation of bicycle routes and a bike-sharing system.

All of the above should improve the mobility of these citizens, meeting many of the requirements formulated during the focus groups.

Notes

- 1 Please see the [introduction](#) to this volume regarding the contextualisation and methodology of this research.
- 2 The issues of network extension and ticketing should, however, be solved soon. The municipality has a project that will design new bus lines connecting all Buzău neighbourhoods, along with the implementation of an electronic ticketing system that will gather information about service usage, providing the metropolitan authority with suggestions about the future planning of the bus schedules.

References

- Buzău City Hall. 2016. “The sustainable urban mobility plan of Buzău municipality 2016–2030: Interim report.” <https://primariabuzau.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/PMUD-Buzau-web.pdf>. Accessed 6 January 2020.
- Buzău City Hall. 2017. “Strategia de dezvoltare locala a municipiului Buzău. Etapa a II-a a mecanismului DLRC” [“Buzău local development strategy – second stage of the DLRC mechanism”]. Buzău: City of Buzău.
- National Institute of Statistics. 2019. “Monthly statistical bulletin of Buzău County”. Issue 9. <https://www.buzau.insse.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/BSL0919.pdf>. Accessed 6 January 2020.
- National Institute of Statistics – ROMANIA. 2020. <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online>. Accessed 6 January 2020.
- Trans-Bus Company. <http://www.transbusbuzau.ro/>. Accessed 6 January 2020.