

**MICHAEL BRIGUGLIO**

Buses, numbers, people

A recent parliamentary question revealed that, according to Transport Malta's inspection methodology, overcrowding is practically non-existent on Malta's public buses.

Reporting in *The Malta Independent* (15 July), Yasmin Mifsud observed that for regular users of the public transport network, the official figures bear no resemblance to everyday reality. To be fair, even Transport Minister Chris Bonnett said that the numbers do not add up.

The resultant debate on bus overcrowding in Malta raises important questions about how public transport is evaluated. Indeed, this is an

opportunity to broaden the conversation towards people's lived experiences.

As both a sociologist and a daily bus commuter, I have experienced first-hand many of the strengths and shortcomings of Malta's public transport system. Last year, my wife and I decided to stop relying on a private car and instead use buses, walking and, when necessary, taxis. The change has reduced our transport costs, lowered stress levels, and encouraged a more active lifestyle. Having started driving relatively late, in 2008, I can also confidently say that today's bus service is considerably better than it was back then.

Air-conditioned and more accessible buses, improved connectivity in several areas, and, in some instances, complementary services such as ferries have made sustainable mobility a much more realistic option. Living in Sliema, one of Malta's better-connected localities, I arrive at work on time. Let us also keep in mind that the service is free for all residents of Malta and Gozo registered with a personalised Tallinja Card, and is relatively cheap for paying-users.

Yet everyday commuting also reveals challenges that are not always reflected in operational data. For many people, and with respect to many routes, punctuality often remains problematic. Bus shelters

often provide inadequate shade during Malta's increasingly hot summers. The mobile application is useful but could become more user-friendly. Overcrowding nevertheless remains a persistent issue, at times made even worse when passengers are unable or unwilling to move further inside the bus. Loud conversations or mobile phones played without headphones can reduce comfort for fellow passengers despite notices encouraging considerate behaviour. During particularly crowded journeys, tensions may occasionally arise, including the odd discriminatory or xenophobic remark.

Buses are social spaces where people from different generations, occupations, and cultures encounter one another every day. This includes many EU and third-country nationals who depend on the bus service as their main form of transport. Parents travel with children, elderly people are connected to everyday needs and activities, workers commute to their jobs, students head to school, and tourists discover Malta. As a regular commuter, I also notice the remarkable professionalism of many frontline workers, many of whom are third-country nationals. Many of the drivers I encounter remain calm and patient despite navigating heavy traffic, overcrowded vehicles, demanding schedules and sometimes

difficult interactions with passengers. Their experiences and wellbeing deserve as much attention as those of commuters themselves.

These everyday realities suggest that Transport Malta would benefit from complementing its operational analyses with more grounded social-scientific approaches, including Social Impact Assessment, to analyse the social dimensions of transport policy. Passenger numbers, punctuality and occupancy rates remain essential indicators, but they tell only part of the story. A Social Impact Assessment would evaluate reliability from the perspective of users, accessibility to employment, healthcare and education, the experiences and working conditions of transport workers, accessibility for persons with disabilities, gendered and care-related journeys, geographical inequalities, overcrowding, dignity, comfort and personal safety. It should also examine whether transport reforms are actually encouraging the usage of public transport and other sustainable forms of mobility, and it should analyse the motivations and situations of those who depend on private cars.

Such an assessment should combine quantitative and qualitative methods. Statistical analysis should be complemented by ethnographic observation, interviews, focus groups, and stake-

holder mapping involving commuters, drivers, inspectors, transport planners and even people who choose not to use buses. Researchers should spend time travelling on buses, waiting at bus stops and observing how people experience the network in their everyday lives, allowing policy to be informed by both statistics and lived experience.

One sociologically interesting question concerns the relationship between experience and public opinion. Some of the strongest views about Malta's buses come from people who rarely use them, while regular commuters often develop a more nuanced appreciation of both the system's improvements and its shortcomings. Exploring these different perspectives would itself enrich our understanding of public transport.

As regards transport policy, the evidence also suggests that greater priority should be given to public transport itself. In this respect, I agree with ADPD – The Green Party that measures such as dedicated bus lanes are likely to be more effective than relying on what it has described as "magical solutions" being proposed by others.

Michael Briguglio is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta