Mobility, Well-Being and Active Ageing: The Role of Local Public Transport for Older Adults in Italy

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Extended Abstract

The progressive aging of the population is considered one of the most significant social transformations facing European cities in recent years. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), by 2030, one in six people worldwide will be over 60 years old, giving rise to substantial challenges in terms of accessibility, equity, and quality of urban life. To better address this phenomenon at a global level, the WHO has created a program of policies and measures together with member states, called "The Decade of Healthy Aging 2020-2030," aimed at supporting each country in addressing the economic and social implications of this trend (Rudnicka et al., 2020). In this context, the issue of publicness, understood as a guarantee of the universal right to mobility and access to urban spaces and services, is becoming increasingly central. This paper reflects on the implications of active aging for urban mobility policies and the need to rethink local public transport (LPT) planning strategies from an inclusive perspective, capable of responding to the specific needs of older people. In this scenario, active aging policies, defined as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security to enhance quality of life for older people" (WHO, 2002), ensure that older people maintain good health, psychological well-being, and high levels of happiness (Kim et al., 2021).

This work is part of the recently launched European project SMART-AGE (Sustainable Mobility and Accessibility for Resilient Transport in AGing urban Environments), which aims to study and support the transition to more sustainable, accessible, and resilient urban mobility for people over 65. The general research question driving the project is: how can we facilitate the transition of older people from a mobility model heavily based on private cars to alternative, shared, and sustainable modes of travel without compromising their right to autonomous and safe mobility? This question is being asked in a context where many European cities, and Italian cities in particular, are adopting ambitious policies to reduce private vehicle traffic. These policies include low-emission zones, parking restrictions, and disincentives to car use. However, such interventions, if not meticulously calibrated, can inadvertently penalize the most vulnerable segments of the population, such as older people, thereby exacerbating the risk of social isolation. In fact, it has been observed that due to the inability of local governments to provide adequate solutions, older people often avoid using public transport altogether, preferring to use their cars (Sun and Lau, 2021). At this stage, the SMART-AGE project initiated a multidimensional analysis process that integrates expertise in the fields of urban planning, law, social sciences, and economics, with a particular focus on the mobility needs of older people. In the initial phase of the research, a comparative analysis of the mobility policies currently in place in several European

cities has been conducted, with a particular focus on the urban contexts of Milan and Genoa. The analysis covered the main traffic regulation measures, strategies to promote sustainable mobility, and public and shared transport services, in order to assess their potential impact on accessibility for people over 65.

At the same time, a field survey phase has been launched through the administration of questionnaires and the establishment of focus groups targeting the elderly demographic. The aim of this phase is to ascertain the needs, preferences, perceived barriers, and motivations that influence the mobility choices of this segment of the population. From this perspective, the survey included the symbolic and practical value of private cars for older people, often associated with independence and freedom. In addition, the study explored what conditions could encourage a transition to alternative modes of transport without a perceived loss of autonomy. Another key methodological element of the project will be the organization of "mobility walks," i.e., exploratory walks in neighborhoods with the joint participation of seniors, local administrators, and transport operators, with the aim of identifying critical issues, obstacles, and opportunities related to urban accessibility and the use of mobility services. These activities are fundamental moments of co-design and dialogue, in line with the participatory and interdisciplinary approach that characterizes the SMART-AGE project.

This contribution aims to initiate a preliminary reflection on the need to reconsider urban mobility policies from the perspective of the right to mobility for all, with particular attention to the emerging needs related to demographic aging. The basic thesis is that ensuring publicness in the contemporary city also involves the development of public transport systems capable of adapting to an increasingly heterogeneous population in terms of age, ability, and socio-economic conditions. In this direction, the research aims to contribute to the construction of more inclusive and flexible policies, capable of combining the environmental objectives of reducing traffic and emissions with the social objectives of equity and participation, thus reducing the risk that ecological transition strategies will translate into new forms of exclusion.

This paper therefore aims to provide a theoretical and methodological reflection on the theme of 'Publicness as accessibility and the right to mobility in cities and territories', drawing on the ongoing experiences of the SMART-AGE project. The reflection will highlight how the integration of social innovation, participatory planning, and inclusive design can serve as a fundamental mechanism for ensuring the right to mobility for older people in future urban environments. Although the research is still in its early stages, the expected results are expected to provide operational tools and valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners, thus directing urban policies towards a greater emphasis on the social sustainability of mobility and the full recognition of the active role of older people in urban life.

Keywords

Elderly mobility; active ageing; accessibility; public transport.

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