
In most places, aerial cable-cars are used to transport skiers and tourists. In South American cities, they are increasingly used for commuting and planned as a way to reduce poverty. Urban Mobility and Poverty documents the case of the Metrocables, a cable-car system in Medellín, Colombia’s second largest city. The book is available in print in English and in digital format in Spanish and English. The 23 chapters are all written by different authors, providing a wide range of perspectives about the subject.

The Metrocables project in Medellín is presented as a success story, where an imaginative and audacious idea led to the creation of an equitable and environmentally sustainable transport system. The lines connect poor, high-density hilly neighbourhoods with the Medellín overground metro system, providing local residents with a safe and affordable means of transport to the central parts of the city. But readers are alerted early in the book that it is not enough to look at the ways that transport enables access to opportunities and reduces social exclusion, a common approach in American cities where similar systems have been recently introduced or proposed in Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia and Brazil. While these chapters are quite interesting on their own, no links are made with the case of Medellín. One of the chapters dealing with the Soacha case already identifies some of the lessons learned from the Medellín's Metrocables project. However, the readers would more fully understand the importance of this project if those lessons were set in the context of those other four cities, as they provide a wider set of geographic, political and socio-economic terms of comparison.

The political and institutional obstacles to the project are discussed on a before-and-after comparison of variables such as employment, number of business and property transactions. This approach has limitations, recognised by the authors, because it is difficult to disentangle the effects of the project from those of trends affecting the whole city. Another chapter presents the results of a discrete choice model of people's travel decisions. This statistical analysis gives interesting insights into people’s preferences, but it does not fit very well with the rest of the book, which is largely descriptive.

The success of the Metrocables is clearer when compared with the failure of similar projects, such as the Cazucables in Soacha, a municipality adjacent to Bogotá. The local municipality has limited technological, financial and management capacity. The implementation of a large project such as a cable-car system is then dependent on decisions from the Bogotá and the national government. The political and institutional obstacles to the project are discussed in detail in several chapters, but once again, economic aspects are left relatively untouched, especially those related with the demand for the cable-car service.

The book closes with a series of chapters about other South American cities where similar systems have been recently introduced or proposed in Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia and Brazil. While these chapters are quite interesting on their own, no links are made with the case of Medellín. One of the chapters dealing with the Soacha case already identifies some of the lessons learned from the Medellín's Metrocables project. However, the readers would more fully understand the importance of this project if those lessons were set in the context of those other four cities, as they provide a wider set of geographic, political and socio-economic terms of comparison.

References

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