



Why is acceptability important for the implementation of road user charging?

Several good reasons exist for considering acceptability. Firstly, we live in a democratic society, so societal, political and technological innovations must be introduced via the democratic process. Secondly, the acceptability concept stresses the user perspective. Even if most technological and political innovations might result in societal benefits, opinions and intentions of the people concerned are often not canvassed when new measures are being considered for implementation. Insufficient acceptability of a certain policy may have several consequences. For instance, strong public resistance may inhibit implementation, as political parties fear consequences for their next election. Secondly, with a sensitive topic such as mobility, the introduction of road user charging (RUC) may lead to active resistance. Thus, acceptability is assumed to have major influence on the effectiveness of the implementation and maintenance of a system. Lack of acceptance may even undermine post-implementation efficiency and produce high transaction costs because of a high violation rate.

What is currently known about the structure and determinants of road user charging acceptability?

Acceptability refers to the attitude of relevant stakeholders towards road user charging. It describes the prospec-

tive judgement of road user charging which might be introduced in the future. Relevant stakeholders in the implementation process have been identified as the citizens, the decision makers and technical experts in the cities, several interest groups and the media.

Levels of Public Acceptability

In general the acceptability of urban road user charging schemes is low. Compared to other travel demand management measures road user charging is often the least accepted form. However, considerable variations have been found in the levels of (public) acceptance, ranging from 8 % to 76 %. Several reasons for these differences are possible and difficult to determine: e.g. different objectives, different road user charging policies, different communication approaches etc. Hence, each specific result is unique and has to be analysed in detail.

Individual Characteristics and Public Acceptability

Concerning factors determining the degree of acceptability, in particular personal attitudes, expectations, perceptions and subjective evaluations about road user charging have been investigated. Among these, variables like negative outcome expectations, perceived unfairness, negative social norms and perceived infringement of freedom have been identified as important determinants. Socio-economic factors like income revealed a smaller and rather unsystematic impact on acceptability. The individual's personal outcome expectation explains most of the variance of acceptability. Those who

perceive more disadvantages also view urban road user charging as less fair, less effective and less socially desirable! Those who expect advantages evaluate road user charging in all dimensions more positively.

Scheme Characteristics and Public Acceptability

Important system characteristics include, among others, the level and structure of charges and the use of revenues. Studies show that with a hypothecation of revenues acceptability of road user charging increases considerably ("transport package"). Also the level of charges plays a role in determining acceptability. However, quantified relationships between acceptability and charge levels are rare and should be considered with care. Concerning the charge structure research shows that in general people have a clear preference for simple road user charging schemes. People want to know what their journey will cost before they start and may oppose complex uncertain road user charging schemes. In terms of acceptability a rule of thumb is to keep in mind local public transport fares when defining appropriate road user charge levels.

Implementation Process and Acceptability

Acceptability is not static but highly dynamic throughout the pre-, the decision- and the post-implementation phase. Findings show that after initial support acceptability decreases the more specific the proposal gets. Here negative aspects of the policy (risks) may become more and more important the closer the introduction of road user charging comes. In addition, the higher the initial ex-ante acceptability the stronger may be the decrease of positive attitudes in the course of the implementation process. After implementation perception of benefits, reduced uncertainties and cognitive dissonance reduction processes may increase acceptability.

What further research is needed?

There is agreement about the role of the key actors in the transport policy process. However, there is ambiguity about the relationships between these actors, the factors affecting their acceptability and how these relationships and acceptability may change over time. The dynamics of acceptability is certainly an issue that needs further attention. In the future it needs to be determined what the causes of these changes are and how they can be utilised in favour of the implementation process. Public participation can be one way of increasing public acceptability and the credibility of the implementation process. However, there is a lack of knowledge of the circumstances which could make a public referendum a promising way to introduce urban road user charging.

What can we conclude at present?

The consideration of acceptability issues should be at the core of every road user charging project from the very start. The following DO's and DON'Ts should help to increase the likelihood of a successful road user charging implementation.

DOs

Choose an adequate intelligent information strategy with clear and acceptable objectives.

Secure political support using every opportunity.

Revenues must be hypothecated. They have to be redistributed and good alternatives have to be provided.

Do publicise an integrated package of measures including road user charging, revenue use and transport improvements.

The system must work well from the very first day to ensure confidence and to avoid/overcome uncertainty of all key actors.

DON'Ts

Do not focus on road user charging but on traffic problems and on solutions which people perceive as helpful (transport package).

Do not leave it for the press to come up with assessments of the scheme themselves.

Avoid highly complex/differentiated road user charging schemes to assure comprehension.

Do not forget to consider equity and fairness carefully (some form of public consultation will be required).

