



# BRT and BHLS around the world: Explosive growth, large positive impacts and many issues outstanding

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## ABSTRACT

A survey of Bus Rapid Transit BRT and Bus of High Level of Service BHLS around the world indicates that there are about 120 cities with bus corridors, with 99 of the cities entering into the list in the last 12 years. The existing bus corridors comprise about 280 corridors, 4300 km, 6700 stations and use 30,000 buses, serving about 28 million passengers per day. In 2010–2011, 19 cities completed new systems – 16 in the developing world – and seven cities expanded their current systems. By late 2011, about 49 new cities were building systems, 16 cities were expanding their corridors, and 31 cities were in initial planning. This impressive growth may be attributed in part to the successes of Curitiba, Bogotá, México City, Istanbul, Ahmedabad and Guangzhou. These cities show low cost, rapid implementation and high performance BRTs, with significant positive externalities. Interesting trends are emerging, such as the implementation of citywide integrated bus systems, improved processes for private participation in operations, increased funding from national governments, and growth of bus manufacturers and technology providers. Despite the growth, there are some outstanding issues: BRT and BHLS do not have a single meaning and image and are often regarded as a “second best” as compared to rail alternatives. In addition several systems in the developing world suffer problems resulting from poor planning, implementation and operation, due to financial, institutional and regulatory constraints. The BRT and BHLS Industry are in their “infancy” and there is need for consolidation and concerted effort.

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## 1. BRT and BHLS status around the world

Bus Rapid Transit BRT, can be defined as a “flexible, rubber-tired form of rapid transit that combines stations, vehicles, services, running ways and information technologies into an integrated system with strong identity” (Levinson, Zimmerman, Clinger, Gast, et al., 2003). In Europe, researchers and practitioners prefer to use the term Buses of High Level of Service BHLS (Finn et al., 2011). BRT and BHLS are an evolution of bus priority measures, such as designated busways and bus lanes, which were proposed, and in some cases implemented, as early as 1937 throughout the world (Hidalgo, in press; Levinson, Zimmerman, Clinger, Rutherford, et al., 2003).

The expression BRT was initially used in 1966 in a study for the American Automobile Association by Wilbur Smith and Associates (Levinson, Zimmerman, Clinger, Rutherford, et al., 2003). The first full featured BRT was implemented in Curitiba, Brasil, in 1982 (Lindau, Hidalgo, & Facchini, 2010). This application, was adapted to transit corridors in places like Quito (1995), Bogotá (2000), Los

Angeles (2000), Mexico City (2003), Jakarta (2004), Beijing (2005), Istanbul (2008), and Guangzhou (2010) (Hidalgo, in press). The influence of Bogotá has been particularly relevant; the Trans-Milenio BRT System is the most powerful BRT reference for planners and practitioners worldwide (Gutiérrez, 2010).

The expression BHLS was introduced by European researchers in the 1990s, as they wanted to differentiate the European applications, which are based on improving passenger experience rather than supplying BRT components (Finn et al., 2011). As indicated by Finn et al. (2011) the European bus sector has a long tradition of innovation and development: bus lanes, bus only roads, and traffic management measures to assist buses were already implemented in the 1970s, as well as automatic dispatch and control systems. In the 1990s, tramways received special attention and were subject of several improvements, while the bus was being left behind. Nevertheless, the application of modern tramways, in the form of Light Rail Transit LRT, was not possible in several corridors as their demand did not justify the investments (Euro 15–30 million/km, including urban integration).

European BHLS fills the gap between regular bus and LRT in terms of performance, cost and capacity, for the particular conditions of European cities. Finn et al. (2011) reviewed 35 cities

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**Table 1**

Regional distribution of BRT and bus corridors as January 2011.

	Cities	Corridors	Km	Stations	Buses	Passengers/day
Africa	3	3	62	93	463	390,000
Asia	33	85	1306	1658	6590	6,289,531
Europe	25	32	291	609	781	629,369
Europe/Asia	1	2	43	33	300	700,000
Latin America and the Caribbean	33	91	1345	2717	19,239	17,691,945
Oceania	5	12	324	142	1411	345,800
USA and Canada	20	57	993	1485	1993	1,013,901
Total	120	282	4364	6737	30,777	27,060,546

Source: EMBARQ BRT/Bus Corridors Database (EMBARQ, 2011), also presented in Hidalgo (in press).

applying BHLS concepts and list Paris (TVM), Nantes (Line 4, Busway), Amsterdam (Zuidtangent), Almere (10 lines trunk network), Kent (Fastrack A and B) and Jonkping (Citybussarna) as the most complete or full BHLS.

A survey of BRT and BHLS around the world (EMBARQ, 2011) indicates that there are about 120 cities with bus corridors. As July 2011 these cities have about 280 corridors, 4300 km of busways or bus lanes, 6700 stations and use 30,000 buses, serving about 28 million passengers per day (EMBARQ, 2011). As of July 2011, about 49 new cities were building BRT systems, 16 cities were expanding their corridors, and 31 cities were planning BRT corridors (EMBARQ, 2011). BRT and BHLS are no longer rare; they are usually considered in alternatives analysis and are part of multimodal transport systems or plans in multiple cities worldwide (Hidalgo, in press).

BRT and BHLS are present in all continents (Table 1). Latin America features about one quarter of the world cities, but concentrates two thirds of the total passengers (Hidalgo, in press). There are several cities and kilometers in Asia. Usage in Europe, USA and Canada is comparatively low in relation with the total kilometers. Only three cities in Africa have introduced BRT: Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa, and Lagos, Nigeria. Istanbul has the only intercontinental system, crossing the Bosphorus Strait from Europe to Anatolia.

Most cities with BRT and BHLS (99), introduced them since 2000 (Fig. 1). New cities are concentrated in China, followed by Indonesia, and the Latin American region (Hidalgo, in press). Just in 2010–2011, 19 cities introduced BRT (Table 2). In addition 7 cities expanded existing systems, adding 125 km, a 3% increase in the length of existing systems worldwide (Table 3).

**Table 2**

BRT systems and corridors introduced in 2010 and 2011.

Name	Corridors	Km	Stations	Buses	Passengers/weekday
Guangzhou BRT, China	1	22.5	26	800	800,000
Hefei BRT, China	2	12.7	14	65	65,250
Yancheng BRT, China	1	8.0	21	20	20,000
Zaozhuang BRT, China	1	33.0	24	20	20,000
Jaipur Bus, India	1	7.1	10	20	6200
Trans Hulongthanlangi, Indonesia	3	90.0	84	15	1920
Tans Musim, Indonesia	2	60.0	69	15	1920
Batik Solo Trans, Indonesia	1	30.0	35	15	1920
Bangkok BRT, Thailand	1	15.9	12	20	10,000
East London Transit, UK	1	20.0	40	18	9000
Cambridge, UK	1	25.0	24	40	20,000
Corredor de Ônibus de João Pessoa, Brasil	1	2.5	5	111	100,000
Transmetro, Barranquilla, Colombia	1	13.4	15	92	32,000
Metrolinea, Bucaramanga, Colombia	1	8.9	24	131	75,000
Mexibus, Estado Mexico, Mexico	1	16.0	32	63	63,000
Metropolitano, Lima, Perú	2	27.0	35	627	160,000
Züm, Bradford, Canada	1	28.5	17	15	7500
Buenos Aires, Argentina	1	12.5	21	150	90,000
Cape Town, South Africa	1	16.0	13	22	11,000

Source: EMBARQ BRT/Bus Corridors Database (EMBARQ, 2011).

The following sections indicate some reasons behind the explosive growth of BRT, outstanding issues, and some interesting trends.

## 2. Reasons behind the explosive growth of BRT

BRT is expanding rapidly as a transit option due to its low cost, rapid implementation and high performance and impact (Hensher, 1999; Hidalgo, in press; Wright, & Hook, 2007). Systems costs are a fraction of those of comparable rail systems. Fig. 2 shows capital costs for selected BRT corridors, ranging from USD 1.4 million (Jakarta) to USD 12.5 million (Bogota) per kilometer. Rail systems with similar capacities cost three to ten times (Hensher, 1999; Wright & Hook, 2007).

The system in Bogota includes dual lanes, large stations and terminals and some non-grade intersections, as well as a large fleet of articulated and bi-articulated buses, to provide for very high capacity and high commercial speeds (Table 4). This results in a much higher cost than other systems in developing cities (1.4–5.7 USD million per kilometer).

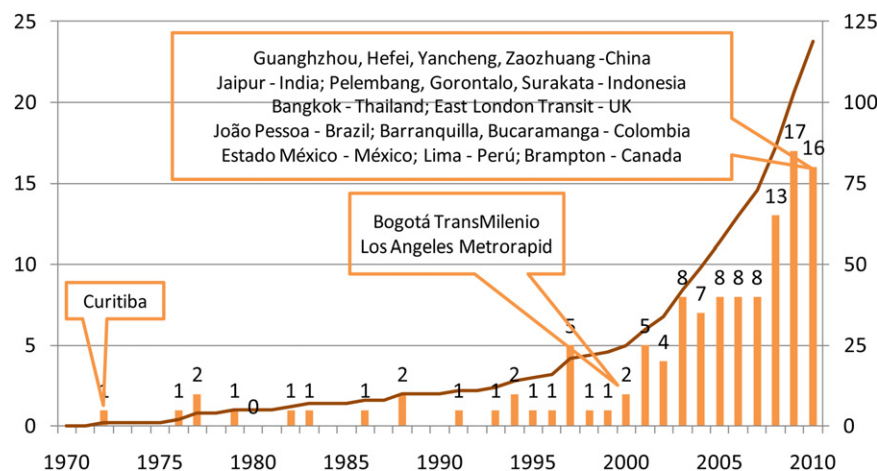


Fig. 1. Cities with BRT/bus corridors 1970–2011. Source: EMBARQ BRT/Bus Corridors Database, (EMBARQ, 2011).

**Table 3**  
BRT expansions in 2010.

Name	City	Expansion (growth)
Transjakarta	Jakarta, Indonesia	+48 km (34%)
BRT Teheran	Teheran, Iran	+21 km (31%)
Janmarg	Ahmedabad, India	+20 km (105%)
Select Bus	New York City	+14 km (121%)
Xiamen BRT	Xiamen, China	+11 km (28%)
Hangzhou BRT	Hangzhou, China	+6 km (46%)
Optibús	León, México	+5 km (19%)

Source: EMBARQ BRT/Bus Corridors Database (EMBARQ, 2011).

BRT can be implemented rapidly as well, which make the systems attractive to political leaders willing to complete systems before the next election cycle (Hidalgo & Carrigan, 2010). For instance, the city of Guadalajara, Mexico, completed a high quality corridor 16 km long for 125,000 passengers per day, in only two years from idea to implementation. The successes of Curitiba, Bogota, Mexico, Ahmedabad, Guangzhou, and other cities, are also helping decision makers in developing cities to adopt BRT concepts. Implementation in developed countries has been slower due to preferences of planners and decision makers for rail systems, and compliance with planning and funding regulations, including extensive public participation processes. One difficulty is lack of sufficient examples and information in developed countries; documentation efforts like those by Finn et al. (2011) for BHLS in Europe and Diaz and Hinebaugh (2009) for BRT in USA and Canada, may help in closing the knowledge gap.

Performance and impact of BRT is also high. Table 4 shows the maximum values observed for indicators like commercial speed, capacity and productivity. Some of the figures are beyond those indicated in transit manuals and textbooks, which creates

skepticism among planners. The figures are supported by special design features, like level of segregation, intersection priorities, platform length, vehicle length and number of doors, boarding level, prepayment and opportunity of overtaking, and information technologies.

Regarding impacts, most systems have showed better performance than the bus operations they replaced, regarding passenger demand, user satisfaction, travel time, reliability, and externalities such as reductions in air pollutant and carbon emissions and crashes and improved urban environments (Diaz & Hinebaugh, 2009; Gutierrez, 2010; Hidalgo, in press; Wright & Hook, 2007).

Concerning comfort, most systems in developing countries use very high occupancy standards (Hidalgo & Carrigan, 2010). These standards are not comfortable. High occupancy levels are the result of financial restrictions, as systems often lack subsidies that would allow the provision of a level of service exceeding what customers fares can strictly finance for operation and vehicles. Critics of BRT often cite comfort issues when comparing bus systems with rail.

### 3. Outstanding issues

BRT and BHLS do not have a single meaning and image — a broad spectrum of applications, from improved bus service on mixed traffic to totally segregated systems, are considered BRT (Hidalgo, in press) and BHLS (Finn et al., 2011). There is a need to refine the definition and create categories based on objective performance measures to improve the understanding among planners and decision makers. There are ongoing efforts by researchers to create such categories (see for example Table 5).

Despite the growing evidence, idiosyncratic considerations are still dominant in the public debate regarding transit options. BRT and BHLS are still often regarded as a “second best” as compared to

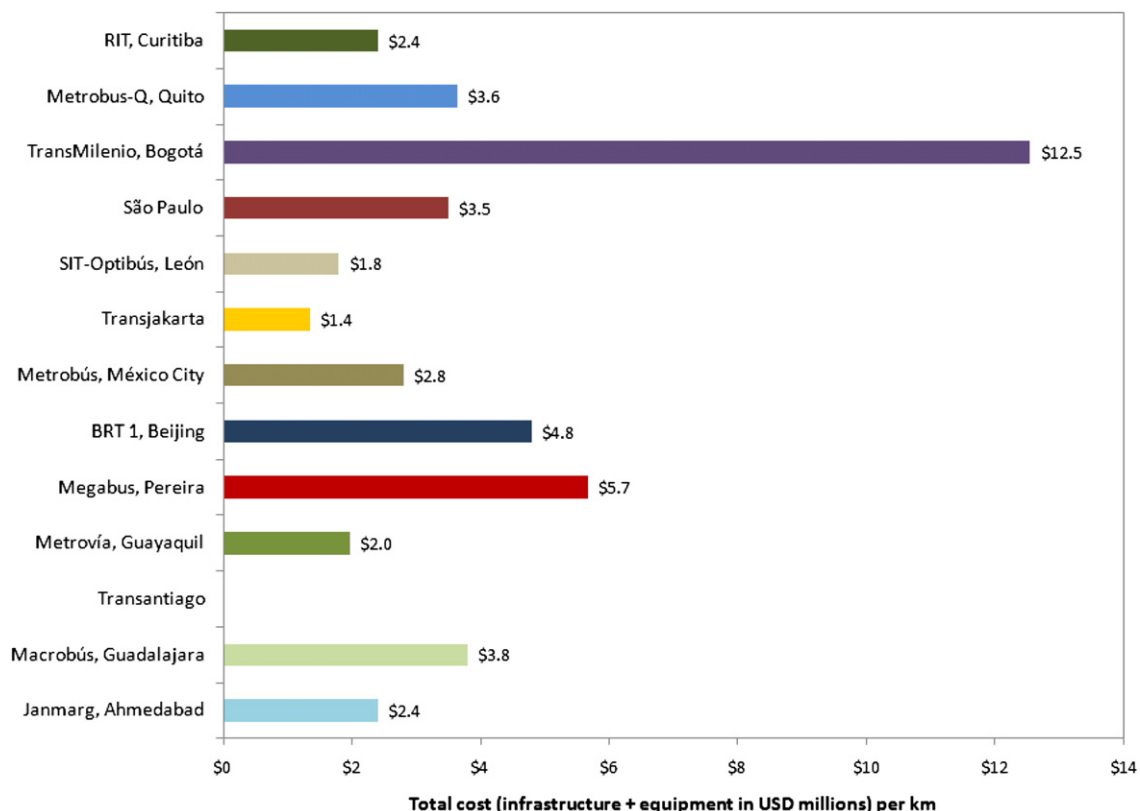


Fig. 2. Capital costs per kilometer for selected BRT systems (2009). Source: Hidalgo & Carrigan, 2010.

**Table 4**

Maximum values for some performance indicators in selected BRT systems.

Performance indicator	Definition	Value (year)	System, city	System features
Commercial speed	Distance/time as perceived by the user on board (km/h)	42 km/h (2011)	Metrobüs, Istanbul, Turkey	Fully segregated busway on expressway, stations every 1.1 km
Peak section load	Passengers/hour/direction (pphpd)	45,000 pphpd (2011)	TransMilenio, Bogotá, Colombia	Median busway, level access stations with 5 platforms, overtaking lanes and combined services – local, express, 7 standees per square meter, dense urban area
Infrastructure productivity	Passenger boardings/ km of busway	35,800 (2011)	Guangzhou BRT, China	Median busway, with long station, overtaking lanes, open operation 40 routes, very dense urban area
Capital productivity	Passenger boardings/bus/day	3100 (2010)	Macrobus, Guadalajara, México	Median busway, overtaking lanes relatively dense, mixed use urban area
Operational productivity	Passenger boardings/bus-km	13.2 (2010)	Metrovía, Guayaquil, Ecuador	Median busway, dense urban area, very low fare (USD 0.25 per trip)

Source: Hidalgo (in press).

rail alternatives without a fair evaluation or alternatives analysis (Finn et al., 2011; Gutierrez, 2010; Hensher, 1999; Hidalgo, in press). The political economy is often favorable to those candidates offering rail alternatives as part of their proposals in electoral debates.

BRT and BHLS are also considered inadequate to foster urban development and planners often cite this as a fact. However, there is insufficient evidence, especially in developed countries, to prove that development is favored by rail over high quality bus systems.

BRT and BHLS use scarce right of way, usually dedicated to general traffic and is perceived negatively by car users. BRT and BHLS increase the throughput of people, not vehicles, but the perception is that road capacity is reduced.

In addition, several BRT systems in developing countries suffer problems such as (Hidalgo, in press; Hidalgo & Carrigan, 2010):

- Rushed implementation – several components incomplete at the time of commissioning, but gradual improvement over time has been observed
- Very tight financial planning as systems usually do not receive operational subsidies – this tight plans trigger that some of the costs are immediately transferred to the users in terms of larger vehicles and lower frequencies and a lower level of service which hurt the passenger's travel experience
- Very high occupancy levels – the adopted standard of 6–7 standees per square meter is not acceptable by the users.
- Early deterioration of infrastructure – lack of road surface reinforcement or problems in design and construction result in maintenance issues.
- Delayed Implementation of fare collection systems, which often require longer time tables than initially expected and very tight supervision.
- Insufficient user education for initial implementation and system changes.

These problems are associated with financial restrictions and institutional constraints, rather than intrinsic issues of the BRT or BHLS systems' concepts. Nevertheless, these difficulties affect their public perception.

#### 4. Interesting developments

Government agencies, especially in Latin America are moving from isolated corridors to integrated systems. Most Brazilian cities have adopted integrated fare collection systems. Santiago de Chile changed transit provision citywide and despite the initial difficulties, integrated operations are working at an acceptable level of quality after several amendments and the introduction of operational subsidies (Muñoz, Ortúzar, & Gschwender, 2009). The example has been followed by Bogota and Arequipa (under implementation) and considered in other cities in the region. BRT is a key component of the integrated systems, along with other modes like Metro and Light Rail.

Some institutional and academic initiatives are in place to generate collaborative efforts and knowledge. For instance in Latin America, 16 transit agencies created in 2010 a member-driven, non-profit association to advance urban public transportation and improve quality of life in the region's cities (SIBRT, 2011). The association works on benchmarking and innovation, quality certification and standardization, advocacy for policies and funding and improving the image of BRT.

In addition, academic and professional conferences and funding initiatives are considering BRT as a specific topic. Some research centers have been created, like the BRT-ALC Center of Excellence ([www.brt.cl](http://www.brt.cl)), the National BRT Institute in the USA ([www.nbrti.org](http://www.nbrti.org)), and the Buses with High Level of Service BHLS Europe initiative ([www.bhls.eu](http://www.bhls.eu)). Several conferences and meetings have sessions focused on BRT, like the TRB Committee on Developing Countries AB90, Subcommittee on BRT ([www.trb.org/](http://www.trb.org/)

**Table 5**

Types of Bus-based transit corridors according to transport demand needs and urban environment.

Type	Main features	Throughput/performance	Application
Basic bus corridor	Median or curbside lanes, on board payment, conventional buses	500–5000 pphpd 12–15 km/h	Low density corridors, suburbs
Bus of high level of service BHLS	Infrastructure, technology and advanced vehicles for enhanced service provision	500–2500 + pphpd 15–35 km/h	Small urban areas, historic downtown, suburbs
Medium BRT	Single median lanes, off board payment, information technologies	5000–15,000 pphpd 18–23 km/h	Medium density corridors, suburb/center connections
High capacity BRT	Dual median lanes physically separated, large stations with prepayment, large buses, information technologies, combined services	15,000–45,000 pphpd 20–40 km/h	High demand, dense, mixed use corridors, central city

Source: Muñoz &amp; Hidalgo, 2011.



**Table 6**  
Institutional models for BRT systems in Latin America.

Main components	Publicly own and operated	Moderate participation of the private sector	Medium participation of the private sector	Large participation of the private sector
Examples	Quito – Trolebús	México – Metrobús	Bogotá – TransMilenio	Guayaquil – Metrovía
System planning	Public	Public	Public	Public
Roadway				
Terminal				
Stations				
Operational planning				
System dispatch and control				
Trunk buses		Mixed – net cost (fixed payment per kilometer)	Private separate contracts (hybrid – revenue distributed based on kilometers)	Private separate contracts – gross cost (gross cost per passenger)
Feeder buses	Private	Non integrated feeders	Private separate contracts (gross cost per passenger)	
Operational control	Public	Public	Public	Private integrated (gross cost per passenger)
Fare collection		Publicly owned, privately operated	Private separate contracts (percent share)	
User information		Public	Public	Public

[Transportationgeneral/TRBCommittees.aspx](http://Transportationgeneral/TRBCommittees.aspx)), the International Conference Series on Competition and Ownership in Land Transport THREDBO ([www.thredbo-conference-series.org](http://www.thredbo-conference-series.org)), the World Conference on Transportation Research WCTR (<http://wctrs.ish-lyon.cnrs.fr/>), Transforming Transportation (<http://www.embarq.org/en/transforming-transportation-2011>), the Sustainable Transport Congress, Mexico (<http://www.congresotransportesustentable.org/>), the Pan-American Conference of Traffic and Transportation Engineering and Logistics PANAM ([http://www.panam2010.info/EN\\_006.htm](http://www.panam2010.info/EN_006.htm)) and the Latin American Public and Urban Transport Congress (<http://clatpu.org/>). Organizations promoting public transport also feature BRT among the topics of discussion, such as UITP ([www.uitp.org](http://www.uitp.org)), APTA ([www.apta.com](http://www.apta.com)), and CUTA/ACTU (<http://www.cutaactu.ca/>) among others.

Another interesting development is the growing interest in evolving institutional arrangements for BRT and BHLS implementation and operation with the participation of private agents. There are very different models as indicated in Table 6, which shows some examples used in Latin America, which are being replicated in New systems in India and South Africa.

BRT implementation has facilitated the evolution of several developing cities from unregulated private operations to more organized forms of public transport provision with well defined contracts with adequate assignment responsibilities, revenues and risks. One of the most interesting conceptual discussions is the revenue allocation: net cost (fixed payment per vehicle-kilometer) versus gross costs (payment per passenger). Experience in Latin America shows that net costs is easier to implement as the risk is carried by the public authorities, but has difficulties in the medium and long term as there is an incentive of not having enough vehicles for the peak hours and running vehicles empty outside the peak period. On the other hand gross cost contracts have resulted in prevalence of commercial interest over level of service. Hybrid models have resulted in a more balanced approach, with risk distributed among public agencies and private operators. The extended experience in Australia, UK and other places in Europe in contracts and institutions is very welcomed to the evolving systems in developing cities.

Another very promising evolution is the increased support from the national level for bus based transit solutions, formerly only applicable to rail. National mass transit programs in Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, India, Indonesia, France, and the USA are an indication of such trend.

The growing demand for BRT and BHLS has also sparked interest in vehicle and technology manufacturers. There is increased production of buses, including those with alternative fuels and

hybrid drive trains in India, Indonesia and China – complementing the high bus production of Brasil.

Finally the advanced fare collection, control, user information systems technologies have consolidated as standard features of the newer systems. No BRT or BHLS systems today is implemented without some ITS elements. There is still room for improvements, for example with much robust operational control techniques that reduce bunching and improve reliability.

## 5. Conclusion

BRT and BHLS have come a long way since the development of the concept in the late 1960s and initial implementations of high level applications in Brazil in the 1980s. It is now a feature in about 120 cities worldwide, with explosive development concentrated in developing countries. The rapid growth has been sparked by its intrinsic low cost and rapid implementation. Several applications show high performance and impact fostering its replication in other cities. Nevertheless there are outstanding issues that need to be solved as well as institutional and financial constraints, not necessarily associated with BRT and BHLS. The BRT and BHLS industry heard the wake-up call in the early 2000s (Hensher, 1999), but is still in its infancy and needs coordinated work toward its consolidation. There are good academic and professional initiatives, but there is still a long way to go.

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