



**Address by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the conference
InformNorden
Return on Investment
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Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Public transport plays a diverse role in our community. It makes people mobile, enables them to go to and from work, visit family and friends, attend meetings and gatherings. It is fundamental to urban planning, linking up different areas of towns and facilitating communications with neighbouring communities; and increasingly it represents a path towards economic efficiency and also a move to counter global warming, the climate changes that during this century could turn our lifestyles upside down and swamp cities the world over.

But public transport also gives us the opportunity to see society in a new light, enjoy the diversity that it embodies, see a snapshot of how people of all ages come together as they go about their daily lives.

When I was a student in Britain several decades ago, there were few things that I enjoyed more than observing the people who travelled on the buses, and I still clearly recall the effect that my first journey on the London underground had on me. The bustling world that appeared there was a stunning introduction to what the metropolis had to offer.

For many years while I was a member of the Icelandic parliament, I always took the bus down to attend debates and go back home afterwards, which was a very constructive experience. Many people would come up and talk to me on the bus or while we were waiting at the stop, and this gave me an immediate impression of how things stood, how people's views were divided on main issues.

I can also tell you a story about one member of parliament for Reykjavík some years ago, who always took the bus and never learned to drive, how he invariably turned up at party meetings or Parliament House,

and with great animation informed the assembled ministers and other members that a given matter would have to be handled in a specific way, public opinion was clear. This was some time before opinion polls came into fashion, and when he was asked: And how do you know that? – the answer was always: Well, I met a man on the bus!

We could even ponder here today what government in our day and age would be like if people in positions of influence still kept their finger on the pulse in this way.

Yes, public transport can be productive and play all sorts of roles in people's lives. My aunt, who reached the ripe old age of almost 100, took long bus journeys every day for many years – not because she had any business to attend to in town, but simply to see others and be seen. She would sit on the bus all the time, watch new areas of the city being developed, chat to her fellow-passengers. She was always brimming with news from her journeys when she came home, often better informed than anyone else in the family, including some of us who were supposed to be political leaders. Thanks to the bus service, that old lady was often a better barometer of what was going on.

Of course I am well aware that it is not your role as managers of public transport systems in your respective countries to provide seniors with pastimes or entertainment, or to put misguided politicians back on track with one good bus trip – but I mention these experiences here because I sometimes feel that amongst all the strategic assessments in this field, the debates on public transport in connection with roadbuilding, residential planning, budgets, municipal finances – I sometimes feel it is forgotten that public transport is also a social and cultural forum, a place where lifestyles meet and opinions are exchanged, perhaps of the same kind as the forum in ancient Rome or Greece, the forum where people gathered and democracy had its roots, the forum which in a sense formed the core of the Western democratic tradition. In our day and age public transport is a kind of social artery, its character has a considerable impact on our lifestyles, culture and democracy, and even on our form of government.

It is particularly important to bear all this in mind when considering Return on Investment, to quote the theme of this conference, and not forget that many fundamental aspects of the social contribution of public transport can hardly be evaluated in purely monetary terms, any more than we can put a price on the activities of political parties, primary schools, universities, culture, natural beauty or the space in which we go for walks, to cite just a few examples of what we consider an integral part of the good life, the life we want to lead.

This dimension to the contribution made by public transport is interesting when we bear in mind the changes that information technology is bringing about in everyday life, how the mobile phone has now opened up new directions, is increasingly becoming an information provider, a device that – regardless of where we are – can inform us about everything under the sun, links us all up in a new way.

Mobile technology today can provide all citizens with real-time information about the location of buses at any given time. Citizens can therefore act according to the time at their disposal, organise their daily chores and business on the basis of how long it will be until the bus calls at any particular stop.

The information technology that is now available and the advances that are being made every year create fascinating opportunities for connecting people with public transport in new ways, to foster interactivity that only a few years ago would have seemed like science fiction. Now, however, it is merely a question of imagination on the part of those who are responsible and how bold we wish to be in our innovation.

I urge all of you to approach these tasks with open minds and base your work on a broad vision, underlining the many-faceted social function that public transport has performed and will perform even more in the future, but at the same time to be prepared to embark on the diverse experiments that information technology has now made possible.

Certainly capital and investments are important, impose limits on our potential, but first and foremost this revolves as always around people, around citizens, revolves around the community and culture, democracy as it appears to us in our everyday lives, revolves around the answer to this question: What exactly is the good life and how can we enable people to enjoy it every day?