

We're back! We will have new articles for you starting next week.

In the meantime, we have reader responses to our previous pieces. We'd love to publish your reactions as well - please email letters@indevelopmentmag.com.

In response to Nithin Coca's [Jakarta's Remarkable Urban Transformation](#)

Dear Editors,

Nithin Coca's piece on Jakarta's transit transformation is welcome, optimistic coverage of a city that has faced heavy pessimism from foreigners (mostly undeservedly, sometimes deservedly). Coca is right that there has largely been a positive institutional shift towards public transportation, but I am writing to push back on three things: the framing of the MRT as the central reform in Jakarta's public transportation, the triad of lessons that don't hold up, and the idea that Jakarta has done "the hardest part" on public transportation reform.

First, the MRT. It is clean, fast, and pleasant to ride – but congestion relief from the MRT is limited. With only one 16-kilometer line (inaugurated in 2019 after decades of delays), there have been very limited improvements to traffic across the city – only [some alleviation](#) along corridors directly adjacent to the line. Meanwhile, as Coca writes, Jakarta continues to add roughly 400,000 residents per year, and the private vehicle fleet has grown alongside the rail network. In this sense, public transportation is likely serving a new wave of demand rather than shifting existing habits.

Second, the triad falls short in a few ways. First, international investment was necessary for the LRT and MRT, but the BRT—which is now the world's largest bus network—was created without international investment, and has even used [increasing municipal subsidies](#) to keep fares affordable. It's important to note that there are independent possibilities of funding some public transportation, so that we can hold public officials to a higher standard.

There is no disagreement from me on the importance of political will. However, I would argue that the deciding factor comes from shared continuity of political will. Like many other democracies, Indonesia faces many abandoned projects ([oops](#)) due to changing administrations, and a stubborn refusal to engage or acknowledge programs by political rivals. Take the BRT system in Bogotá, which was started by former mayor Enrique Peñalosa: despite widespread initial celebration of the launch of TransMilenio, continued deprioritization by Peñalosa's successors led to the bus system's [eventual decline](#). Jokowi played a huge and difficult role in kicking off the MRT development, but the willingness of his successors to follow through is what consolidates continued development of Jakarta's public transportation, including [fleet improvements](#) and [public transportation integration](#).

As for luck... I am not sure what this is supposed to suggest. Coca mentions this in his opening, then never again. It's hard not to assume that he means we cannot succeed without some form

of an amorphous, unearned advantage. We are a democracy, and we elect our leaders. In turn, they should be expected to perform. I turn back to the issue I had with the thesis that we need international investment for relieving congestion – it takes away agency and responsibility from leaders who fall short.

In terms of the “hardest part” of this process, it’s difficult to agree. Coca seems surprised that “government and external donors can coordinate to improve the urban landscape” in the article, and implies that this sets a formidable precedent. Indonesia can coordinate, albeit sometimes by sheer desperation (think of the [voting logistics](#) across thousands of islands and [organizing yearly mudik](#)), but the problem is consistency and intentionality in leadership.

Jakarta’s progress in public transportation is wonderful – but it might be too early to say it’s successful if it doesn’t keep growing consistently. The key to success isn’t one-time political will or international investment, and it is definitely not luck. It’s cohesion in governance, and it’s that we need leaders who care about the country, over and over and over again.

Faye Simanjuntak

Schwarzman Fellow at the Asia Society

In response to Charles Kenny’s [“Where’s My Ministry for Emigration”](#)

Dear Editors,

I found a lot to agree with in Charles Kenny’s article in Issue 1, “Where’s My Ministry for Emigration?” Having previously been quite concerned about the problem of brain drain, I’m now inclined to believe that in [many - maybe most](#) - contexts, ‘[brain gain](#)’ is more common: there are enough people inspired by the prospect of emigration to invest in skills that stay that overall the sending country is better off. And for countries like India [producing graduates faster](#) than the labour market can absorb them, emigration is an escape valve allowing some of those educated young people to find meaningful work without storing up the inevitable problems such frustration and disenchantment will cause.

But while I think the argument is directionally correct, I fear - as seems often to be the case with migration advocates - the case is overstated. Hoping for migration to “be the driving force behind global convergence” seems to me to expect too much. The direction of travel seems to be towards carefully controlled and managed migration - a trickle, not a flood. Bilateral [Global Skill Partnerships](#), which coordinate the needs and contributions of sending and receiving countries, are the sorts of initiatives I would expect to see more of. But I would expect them to cover thousands of people, not millions - enough to take a small bite out of global inequality, yet hardly a large chunk.

Migration can be mutually beneficial for all involved, but we should temper our expectations as to what it can achieve.

Aveek Bhattacharya

Strategy Fellow at Coefficient Giving

In response to Daniel Yu's ["Exporters Without Borders: Why You Should Start a Company Instead of Working in Aid"](#)

Daniel's article is thought-provoking and a good interrogation of the assumptions underlying global development work. I love the line: "A successful commercial firm does something no NGO can: it issues "cash transfers" to a large group of people every month, indefinitely, funded by the market rather than donor whims." However, the article does not contend with the challenge that export-oriented manufacturing businesses require significant investment in public goods – for example, electricity, telecom connectivity, trade agreements, national standards bureaus, among many others. You can overcome supply chain and labour market challenges through sheer grit, perhaps, but how should budding entrepreneurs think about how to get governments to provide these public goods?

Karan Nagpal

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