

The Future of Urban Mobility in South Africa: Planning for and improving public transport services in an equitable manner

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(Written for use in the National Treasury City Support Programme, Executive Leadership Programme at the Gordon Institute of Business Science)

There is a wide array of public transport services on offer across Gauteng. To the majority of the province's residents for whom private car ownership and use are out of reach, these services provide the means to earn an income, access basic services, and to make social and recreational trips. As elsewhere in South Africa, Gauteng's three metropolitan municipalities – the Cities of Ekurhuleni, Johannesburg and Tshwane – are sprawling places where large proportions of poor households live near the urban edge or in places that are removed from key centres of economic and social opportunity. Walking excessive distances, is often not a viable option to access work, services or other needs. Because of these transport and spatial realities, for many people public transport is a lifeline service and its provision, an economic necessity. The Constitution mandates provinces and local municipalities to provide public transport.

Public transport in the province comprises a complex combination of organisations, infrastructure, services and financial arrangements. Metrorail train services are owned and run by the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa, an enterprise of the National Department of Transport. The faster Gautrain rail service, along with its feeder bus system, is a service covering all three Gauteng metropolitan municipalities. It is overseen by the Gautrain Management Agency, an agency of the provincial government, and both rail and bus services are operated by a mainly privately-owned operating company.

In terms of road based public transport, the three metropolitan municipalities in the province have conventional scheduled bus services operating in and across their boundaries. Johannesburg's Metrobus, Tshwane Bus Services, and Ekurhuleni's Brakpan and Germiston buses are municipal-run examples, while Putco is a privately-owned company in this category. Along with Metrorail, these conventional bus services are sometimes called 'legacy services': their route, timetable and operating subsidy structures were inherited from the apartheid regime, and many of their current services still focus on transporting communities that were in the past forcibly moved out of urban centres.

More recently, the three metros have focussed on installing a new form of bus service: bus rapid transit (BRT). BRT services are operational to different extents in all three metros, under the banners of Rea Vaya in Johannesburg, A Re Yeng in Tshwane, and Harambee in Ekurhuleni. These services are planned and coordinated by the respective municipalities, and operations are contracted to private enterprises. The BRT services originated under the national Public Transport Strategy (PTS) of 2007, which envisaged the full replacement of existing bus and minibus services with new-generation bus and rail systems. In the process existing operators were to be given the opportunity and support to form companies that would operate the new generation services. In practice the Gauteng Metro municipalities have focussed on road-based BRT, while the enterprises holding the BRT operating contracts consist primarily of former minibus-taxi (MBT) operators.

Completing Gauteng's current public transport offering is MBTs, all of which are owned and operated by private, predominantly small-scale businesses, with some degree of collective representation by way of route and regional associations and the SA National Taxi Council (Santaco). MBTs have extensive route networks spanning a spectrum all the way from the neighbourhood scale to inter-metropolitan services and beyond. These routes mirror many rail and bus routes. The MBT industry has in practice demonstrated its flexibility to the extent that collectively it transports the most passengers of any mode of public transport, whether at metro, provincial or national level.

Despite marked differences in their market shares and passenger demographic, in terms of funding, all public transport services receive some form of capital support from the state. A common form that such capital support takes is funding for constructing the roads and railways that the vehicles use or share with other traffic, as well as of their station, stop or terminal facilities. In some cases there is also direct state support for vehicle purchase or renewal. Potentially the costliest of these, once complete, will be Prasa's national programme to replace train sets across the country. Another example has been financing support for BRT bus purchases where cities have embarked on installing these services as per the 2007 PTS. The National Treasury's Public Transport Network Grant (PTNG), set up in advance of the release of the PTS, has provided some degree of support for these purchases, while also funding the infrastructure that these vehicles use.

Arguably the most widespread capital support in terms of geographic reach has been the National Department of Transport's Taxi Recapitalisation Programme (TRP). Upon scrapping a minibus of model year 2006 or older, the owner receives a once-off contribution to leave the sector or to use towards the purchase a new safety-compliant vehicle. The capital contribution currently stands at R87 600, making up less than 20% of the full purchase price of a new minibus. Finance houses such as the large commercial banks and SA Taxi Finance allow many operators to make up the shortfall by signing up for instalment sale agreements, though the perceived risk associated with the MBT sector often leads to interest rates being well above 20%p.a. As at the end of 2017, about one-third of the estimated national fleet of 200 000 minibuses has been scrapped.

In terms of state financial support for operations, i.e. operating subsidies, the picture across the modes is somewhat different from the capital side. Operating subsidies can enable public transport operators to charge passengers less than what it cost to provide the services. Broadly speaking, rail and conventional bus services receive such subsidies from the National Department of Transport, or the Gauteng Department of Roads and Transport in the case of Gautrain. These subsidies essentially make up for what is not covered by the fares that passengers pay. The BRT services follow a similar model, though the funding shortfall has to be covered out of the municipalities' own financial resources. MBTs receive no operating subsidy, though it can be argued that the cash nature of the business and informal employment practices allow operators a financial advantage over bus and train operators, in effect a "negative subsidy".

Nonetheless, the implication is that the largest carrier of public transport passengers must recover the full cost of operations from passengers, while competing with other modes of public transport that state-funded operating subsidies to carry passengers. In 2017 a case was made before the Competition Commission to formally investigate such apparent discrimination. While that is in motion, individual MBT owners' must continue to find ways to balance their business finances. A clear consequence is underinvestment in vehicle replacement and maintenance, which is not sufficiently covered aided by the relatively small contribution from the TRP. The negative effects of both the maintenance and labour outcomes are clearly visible on the road.

Public transport planning and improvement are clearly challenging tasks in view of how the public transport services vary from one another and how they operate in relative isolation. The public transport planning challenge is all the more pronounced in Gauteng where there are substantial flows of people across the three metros.

In addition, municipalities must draw up Integrated Public Transport Network (IPTN) Plans that show how they plan to enhance mobility and access and make public transport investments financially sustainable. The focus of IPTN Plans has to date been mainly on BRT installation, which have had only limited geographic impacts. MBT services remain largely unchanged and not addressed in IPTN plans, despite it collectively being the biggest player in the public transport landscape.

Question: How can this wicked problem be better understood and better addressed in the context of South African cities of the future ?