



Exploring the Mini-Bus Taxi as a Means to Improving Public Transportation in South Africa

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Abstract

Since the mini-bus taxi industry contributes to approximately 65% of all public transport in South Africa, this study explored its effectiveness and importance to the Gauteng Province in South Africa. An exploratory study conducted among a sample of 73 mini-bus taxis commuters and taxi operators revealed that the mini-bus taxis are assumed to be convenient, not time bound, accessible and affordable to the poor majority, and that it addresses the transport needs in areas where regulated and formalised public transportation is out of reach. Nevertheless, challenges pertaining to regulation, infrastructure, safety, customer care, and the environment in which the mini-bus taxi industry operates do present themselves. The researchers recommend an inclusive and integrated infrastructure system/strategy, which would hopefully address the challenges.

Keywords: public road transport; min-bus taxi; economic development.

Introduction

The Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) report released in 2004, reveals that despite the introduction of improved human settlement policies since the demise of apartheid (1994), with regards to land, housing, education, health, sports and recreation, the settlement patterns that were shaped by segregationist historical forces remain largely unchanged. According to the aforementioned report, some 54% of South Africans live in urban areas. Although the 1970s and 1980s saw large scale urbanisation, this was replaced in the late 1990s with more subtle patterns of migration from some large cities towards rural areas, towns, secondary cities and coastal regions. In light of the aforementioned, the taxi industry identified a critical opportunity to meet the transportation needs of a growing urban African workforce in South African cities.

Unlike mini-bus taxis, trains were long in operation and regarded as relatively safe, and were and still are, a formal mode of public transportation which is provided by the state and operated on a strict schedule. The apartheid (former South African) government disapproved of the taxi industry and never made any effort to formulate policies for its regulation, since it was viewed as a threat and an economic liability. The then apartheid government did not see the need to invest in infrastructure that would accommodate the growth of the taxi industry, and the transport needs of the commuter's from previously disadvantaged communities. As a result, this industry grew exponentially without any regulation or formalisation plans in place. This industry has undergone transformation from being operated locally using smaller passenger vehicles, to operations nationally between provinces in mini-bus kombis.

Sekhonyane and Dugard (2004) report that the number of illegal mini-bus taxis began escalating as early as the 1970s. During this period, the government began to view its near-monopoly in public transportation, which had initially been utilised to protect and prop up the South African Transport Services (SATS), as an economic liability. The 1977 Van Breda Commission of Inquiry into the Road Transportation Bill found that South Africa had reached a stage of economic and industrial development which enabled it to move towards free competition in transportation. The Breda Commission's findings reflected a neo-liberal shift in economic policy that resulted in generalised deregulation, commercialisation and privatisation, beginning in the late 1970s. Within the commuter sector, the consumer and bus boycotts of the 1980s were viewed as further evidence of the imperative to deregulate transport. Such boycotts also had the unanticipated effect of increasing demand for alternative forms of transport. This was because during this period, buses and trains were frequently attacked by the youth, forcing commuters to use taxis. (Sekhonyane et al., 2004).

The increase in the number of taxis during the 1980s emanated from the needs of the formal economy during the 1970s for a readily available supply of labour from the homelands, which were the often isolated and unfriendly territories into which the apartheid state's segregationist policies forced black South Africans. The State controlled transport sector, favoured the larger buses, and the then South African Railways (SAR). Commuters travelling from homelands would commute longer hours, on over-crowded buses on fixed routes, a journey comparatively expensive and generally inappropriate for the needs of the low-wage earning workers. In contrast, the mini-bus taxi was faster, more reliable, stopped conveniently close to commuters' destinations and, more importantly, it was relatively inexpensive compared to the other transport modes.

The min-bus taxi industry competed with the public transport service that was heavily subsidised by the apartheid government. The state at first sought to ban the use of mini-buses as a mode of passenger transport, however, when this proved unsuccessful, it employed various repressive and statutory means to control this industry. Official efforts to come to terms with the volatility in the taxi industry during the pre-democracy era were initiated, by the various Commissions of Enquiry, which were never considered impartial by the main role-players within the industry. Their findings were thus viewed with suspicion and without legitimacy, and the ineffectiveness of the state's efforts led to the criminalization of the industry. The official policy adopted by the apartheid government in the 1980s for all practical purposes meant that

the state had 'ceded' its responsibility to control routes and ranks to large informal associations and later "mother" bodies. These organizations were essentially monopolies founded on violence, criminality and militancy. It is against this background, that the research was conducted, to explore the mini-bus taxi industry in South Africa, more specifically, its importance in addressing public transport needs in the Gauteng Province, which is the economic hub of South Africa.

Literature Review

A survey on 'the overview of public transport characteristics' was undertaken amongst 50 000 households throughout South Africa in 2003. The purpose of the survey was, amongst others, to understand the transport needs of households and travellers; to ascertain the cost of transport and assess whether households can afford to pay for the mobility which is essential to their survival; to assess attitudes toward transport services and facilities; to measure the availability and use of motor cars, and to understand the travel choices of different market segments. The results suggested that the affordability of public transport is one of the major issues facing developing economies (Walters, 2007).

The abovementioned study also revealed that bus and taxi services are relatively more accessible than rail services in terms of walking time to the transport modes. This was expected due to the route and network flexibility characteristics of bus and taxi service. According to Walters (2007) one third of households reported that safety from accidents and bad driver behaviour were the most serious transport problems; 20% of the respondents mentioned that the cost of transport was a serious problem; 71% were dissatisfied with overcrowding in trains; 64% were dissatisfied with security en-route to the stations, 63% were dissatisfied with the security on trains. With regards to public buses, 74% of the commuters were dissatisfied with facilities at bus stops, 54% with overcrowding on buses, and 51% with low off-peak frequencies. The vast majority (67%) of mini-bus taxi commuters were the most dissatisfied with the safety, 64% with the lack of facilities at ranks, and 60% raised concerns about vehicle roadworthiness.

Walters (2007) also highlights the following with regard to the mini-bus taxis: 14million plus people use taxi services each day; 120 000 officially registered taxis on South African roads; on average there are 2 taxis per owner; on average 8.8 hours is the time spent by taxi drivers daily on the road; on average taxi drivers work 6.33 days per week; the average monthly kilometres driven by a taxi is 8000km; average number of passengers transported monthly per vehicle is 3161; average time spent daily in a taxi by a passenger is 65 minutes; and the average number of trips per passenger per day is estimated at 2.3 trips (Walters, 2007).

The South African public transport system services 6.7 million people every week, 87 million public transport trips are made every week, of which 83% are made by taxis. The report also suggests that there are more than 200,000 taxis on South African roads, transporting more than 4.5 million people per day in Gauteng. The taxi industry has created sustainable jobs for more than 400,000 people, and has an estimated turnover of more than R16.5 billion per year (<http://www.sataxi.co.za>).

The taxi industry has always been perceived as a volatile, conflict ridden informal business. It is an informal business because the majority, if not all operators run this business as individuals and with no tax obligations. Most of these operators do not comply with labour legislation as their employees are not registered. Oosthuizen (2013) argues that the instability prevalent in the industry has undermined its progress and success, preventing it from reaching the point of full formalisation and empowerment and becoming a reliable business partner. The aforementioned researcher further asserts that the instability in the industry is not the only factor that is delaying progress with its transformation. Other studies also suggest that the deregulation of the taxi industry has contributed in the poor management and non-effectiveness of this industry, and created a legacy of a sector that proved very difficult to transform (Sekhonyane et al, 2004).

The taxi industry also commands a turnover of R16.5 billion annually (SANTACO, 2012). The road transport sector contributes 3.4% towards the GDP, of which the taxi industry is the major contributor, and employs an estimated 200 000 employees and mainly in a lower and semi-skilled categories. The taxi industry also provides business opportunities for hawkers and other informal retail business that depend on it for their trade. Table 1 reveals the annual purchasing power of the taxi industry.

Table 1: Mini-bus Taxi Purchasing Power

Fuel consumption	R5.6 billion
Insurance	R2 billion
Tyre costs	R600 million
Vehicle maintenance	R2.7 billion
Lubricants	R110 million
Staff costs	4 Billion

Source: SANTACO, 2012

Although mini-bus taxi owners are not formally organised administratively, they however, do belong to organised taxi mother bodies or associations. These associations, among other things, handle issues ranging from route registration and membership, conflict resolution, fare determination in consultation with members of the public (SANTACO, 2012).

The biggest challenge for the Department of Transport is the restructuring and integration of the public transportation system. Another challenge facing this department and law enforcement agencies is curbing taxi related violence, even though this industry is one of the shining examples of Black Entrepreneurship and economic empowerment (Sekhonyane et al, 2004). The on-going violence, however, pose a threat to this industry where integration and restructuring are concerned. This is where the focus of the transport policy makers and the various stakeholders, including the taxi associations should be. Several researchers, inter-alia, (Sekhonyane et al, 2004), (Barrett, 2003) and (Fourie, 2003), concur that the taxi industry is an important pillar of the South Africa's public transport and it is the most available and affordable mode of transport. A downside to the above practice is that there are those "illegal taxi

operators” whose reputation from inter-alia, operating unregistered/un-roadworthy vehicles, is questionable. These ‘questionable’ operators seize the opportunities to ferry commuters to their destinations during the night when very few law enforcement officers are visible on the roads.

Like many African cities, Johannesburg, also has an informal public transport system in the form of mini-bus taxis. These are not taxis in the typical Western sense of the term as they would not normally take you to your doorstep, rather they are small-scale bus services, often unmarked, operating with neither timetables nor formal stops. Mini-bus taxis are the cheapest form of transport in Johannesburg, and they provide daily transport lifeline to the majority of the working population. The use of the mini-bus taxi system for anything other than a short drive requires expert knowledge of ‘sign’ language indicating where each taxi is travelling, and an understanding of the various routes and how they intersect. This trend (hand signal) is uniquely South African and can be complicated to those who are not exposed to this kind of ‘sign’ language. The mini-bus taxis serve most destinations out of Johannesburg and, the industry continues to grow within an unregulated space at an alarming rate due to on-going rapid growth of the population particularly in urban areas.

Two major centres, namely Vereeniging and Johannesburg were identified as case studies for this study, since Johannesburg is completely urbanised while Vereeniging is a mixture of both semi-urban and rural environments. The mini-bus industry in this region has always been a ‘soft’ target for the traffic authorities, who imposed greater restrictions and clamp downs on un-roadworthy vehicles. There are 56 public taxi ranks, 12 of which are formal. Only 25% of the mini-bus taxi ranks are in good condition and most are either informal and/or temporally operating from the streets. The Sedibeng (Vereeniging) District Municipality Report reveals that the subsidized contract buses service mainly low income residential areas. Only 6% of commuter trips in the Sedibeng region are by rail, 15% by bus and the rest by taxi. The subsidized services are in direct competition with taxi operators for the majority of the routes (Sedibeng District Municipality website, 2013). The Bree Street taxi rank is one of the busiest and a major gateway to all business activities in the inner city of Johannesburg. It is home to 50 shop owners, 500 informal traders and 5000 taxi operators. Some 500,000 commuters arrive or leave each day. Strategically the centre is located in a place where people do not have to make an extra trip to access services.

In light of the brief literature review on a major industry in South Africa, a study was conducted in one of the most economically active provinces to explore certain stakeholders’ perceptions on the mini-bus taxi industry.

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was used as a first step, during which process, probing questions were posed to mini-bus taxi operators in order to establish the knowledge level of the sample. The primary research was conducted at two chosen sites in Gauteng, namely, Bree Street and Vereeniging taxi ranks. Commuter participants were selected using a convenience sampling method, since commuters who were available and willing to participate on a certain day of the week were selected. A small number of mini-bus taxi operators were also selected through a convenience method to represent the entire group. Unstructured interviews were also conducted with commuters, taxi operators, and officials from the Gauteng Department of Roads and Transport.

A pilot study was conducted before the main research. During the pilot phase, a focus group interview was conducted and the mini-bus taxi operators in Vereeniging were asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards the industry. The pilot study was conducted to test the research questions and methodology, after which some questions were slightly altered.

A maximum of 100 questionnaires were distributed to commuters at the Vereeniging and Bree street taxi ranks. In some cases the questionnaires were administered by the researcher since some commuters could not respond to questions which probed their responses. A total of seventy three (73) completed questionnaires were used to compile data. The questionnaire for the commuters was disaggregated in terms of travel time, e.g. morning commuters, day and afternoon commuters. The survey was conducted between the 27th and 29th March 2013.

Findings

It became evident that under normal circumstances, the taxi would on average, take about 30 minutes from its point of departure to the town/city. They however mentioned that during peak hour hours this timeframe may be affected and a taxi would take up to an hour to reach its final destination. An overwhelming majority (87.67%) of the respondent indicated that they generally walk to the nearest taxi stop/rank., whereas less than 10% of the participants indicated that they used other modes of transport to get to the taxi ranks/stops. Of the participants, 47.95% indicated that they made one taxi trip to reach their destination, whilst 45.21% indicated that they normally take two taxi rides to complete the journey, and 1.37% indicated that they made more than three trips to complete a journey..

The overwhelming majority (82.19%) of the participants indicated that they use a taxi to go to work, whilst 10.96% indicated that they used a taxi for social reasons, and the other 5.48% of the respondents indicated that they use the taxi to go to school. A further overwhelming majority (98.63%) of the participants indicated that they pay their taxi fares in cash, but alluded to the fact that coupons were introduced in certain routes, and that the industry eventually reverted back to the cash payment method. The majority (49.32%) of the commuters indicated that they still preferred cash as a method of payment, 17.81% indicated that they would prefer monthly tickets so that they are able to properly budget for transport on a monthly basis, 23.29% indicated that they would prefer using smartcard technology systems that could allow them to use their bank debit cards, which would minimize handling of cash, and only 9.59% indicated that they would prefer to pay using their cellular phones or RFID cards as used by Gautrain.

An overwhelming majority (97.26%) of participants also indicated that the road infrastructure should make provision for dedicated taxi lanes, particularly in major cities like Johannesburg where during peak hours, the traffic becomes congested. This suggestion was attributed to the fact that during peak hours taxi drivers become intolerant and

illegally opt to use the restricted Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) lanes. This disregard for the by-laws by taxi drivers puts passengers' lives in danger and leaves them frustrated.

The taxi operators indicated that it was necessary for the government to provide the necessary road infrastructure (without prejudice) including dedicated traffic lanes for their use. They were aware that they broke the law currently by using prohibited lanes (even emergency traffic lanes); however, they indicated that they had no choice as they are constantly pressurised in most cases by their passengers, to get them to their destinations speedily.

A total of 31.51% of the respondents indicated that both the trains and the BRT met the fixed route and convenience requirements. However, the participants indicated that they have to first use a taxi to be able to access the aforementioned modes of public transportation. However, the respondents also indicated that the aforementioned modes of transport were inaccessible to the majority of them and, hence they first needed to board a taxi, which was readily available. Furthermore 57.53% of the participants indicated that there was no public transportation provided on the fixed routes in areas in which they resided and, 10.96% were unaware of any public transport that serviced the fixed routes as they were comfortable with the taxis, and therefore never bothered to enquire.

The vast majority (76.71%) of the respondents indicated that they preferred the mini-bus taxi as a mode of public transportation. They said that the taxis were much more flexible as they are available on many different routes and more importantly, the fare is reasonable. Some (17%) of the commuters indicated that they would use other modes of public transportation if they were easily accessible, and within walking distance from their place of residence. They said that the reason why they sometimes despised the mini-bus taxis was because the taxi operators were not friendly and the environment in which they operated was volatile and prone to violence emanating from inter-alia, rivalry among operators.

Although the majority of participants indicated that the mini-bus taxi is effective as they are always available and easily accessible anytime of the day, 26.03% of commuters indicated that taxi operators do not provide transport services where there is poor road infrastructure (e.g. potholes and gravel road). As a result, commuters who reside in such areas usually struggle with all forms of public transportation. Safety was highlighted as a serious challenge, as over 71.23% of participants indicated some concerns, inter-alia, they ran the risk of being mugged by petty criminals who preyed on citizens who used the service roads leading to the ranks.

An overwhelming number (72.60%) of participants also indicated that they were not sure whether regulations that govern the mini-bus taxi industry existed, whereas 16.44% indicated that they believed that there were enough regulations, however they indicated that the element of corruption hampers effective law enforcement. The taxi operators indicated that they were also not sure what the rules and regulations were, and that they were only conversant with the rules of the road and not on the regulations governing the mini-bus taxi industry. They argued that even if regulations were in force, there was never any form of public participation to discuss these. The mini-bus taxi operators suggested that it would be proper if each operator could have a booklet that provided guidelines on rules/regulations that govern the taxi industry.

All 73 commuter participants indicated that there is a need to engage in consultative processes between stakeholders (taxi operators, commuters and government) to determine the routes which should be based on a commuter needs analysis and the viability of the routes and the mini-bus taxi business. Only 15.07% of the commuter participants indicated that the government must determine the routes for the mini-bus taxi industry, and 6.85% of the respondents believed that the taxi industry should drive its own process of route determination without interference from the state.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The exploratory case study has revealed that the mini-bus taxi industry in Johannesburg provides an important service and this should be recognized by the authorities and regulation bodies. The challenges facing the mini-bus taxi industry should be addressed, if not the service can become diluted, and this may impact on the economy and society. A decisive policy direction from the government and all stakeholders is urgent, and long overdue. Apart from the Taxi Recapitalization Programme (TRP), a comprehensive regulatory framework, should among other things, encompass safety and security. Oosthuizen (2012:350) argues that "the new TR3 2020 policy document developed by SANTACO gives a bird's-eye view of where the industry wants to go. For the first time, the mini-bus taxi industry realised that the customer was indeed the king, and for this reason the Hlokomela project was started, where the industry embarked upon a campaign to improve road safety by starting at the taxi rank, by making sure that the vehicle would not leave the rank unless it was safe, and that the needs of the passenger would be catered for".

A general lack of business skills, violence and ignorance of labour laws among taxi operators were cited as some of the "core problems" facing the South African mini-bus taxi industry. These challenges are further compounded by the poor regulation and controls that prevail in this industry. A survey by Barrett (2003) highlighted that the industry had grown over the years without being monitored, and by 1990 the industry was already showing signs of over-saturation in some areas of the country and that resulted in intense (and often violent) battles between the different taxi associations, who were fighting for the monopolisation of lucrative routes and resisted law enforcement. The violence compelled government's intervention to decisively deal with the challenges that existed in the industry, such as the need for formalisation, and reduction of the size of the industry to a manageable fleet.

However, despite the fact that taxis are the most available means of transport to commuters compared to other modes of transport, there is another demand that is not being met. These include late night services, where there aren't any other transport choices, a demand which results from people who work late night shifts. This gap in transport service is mainly serviced by private "illegal" taxi owners and individuals who own private cars, and charge higher than the normal taxi fares, since their services are based on a 'door to door' principle. Regardless of the high fares charged, commuters are prepared to pay for these services as their safety is relatively guaranteed. These findings are further testament of the need for a national campaign driven from the Department of Roads and Transport to empower both taxi operators and commuters about their rights and responsibilities, and the regulations that affect this industry.

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