

COPING WITH DEMAND FOR URBAN PASSENGER TRANSPORT IN ZIMBABWE: CHALLENGES AND OPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper starts by providing a general conceptual framework on urbanization and how it affects public transport provision. It then focuses on the urban transport problems in Zimbabwe by giving an overview of developments in the sector since independence. It continues to examine the challenges and options to cope with public transport demand in urban areas. The challenges and options include inter alia, the need to create an enabling environment, reduction in costs and influencing modal choice in favour of cheaper modes. On the demand side, the public have come up with coping strategies which include walking inter alia. The issues discussed are principally based on unstructured interviews with relevant stakeholders in Government, public transport operators, public transport users and civic society.

1. INTRODUCTION

The demand for urban public transport in many cities of the developing world continues to increase with urbanization. For instance, a third of the world population lived in urban areas in 1975 and by 2000, the population living in urban areas had increased to approximately fifty percent and it is estimated that by 2025, two thirds of the world population will be living in urban areas (World Development Report 2000). Most of the rapid urbanization changes are taking place in cities of the developing world particularly Africa where urban population is growing at an unprecedented rate. For instance, in the eighties, urbanization growth rates for Kenya, Tanzania and Zimbabwe were 7.7%, 6.6% and 5.9% respectively (Ibid).

It is clear from the above backdrop that the demand for public transport will continue to increase as population increases. Zimbabwe is no exception. The problem in Zimbabwe has been compounded by some macro-economic fundamentals, which have characterized the Zimbabwean economy over the last few years. The current inflation and interest rates are both hovering around 400%. The Zimbabwean dollar has fallen dramatically and by the beginning of October 2005, the US dollar was officially pegged at Z\$26 000 but at the parallel market (euphemism for black market) the US dollar was fetching Z\$100 000. Consequently, foreign currency reserves have depleted, making the importation of vehicles and the much needed fuel difficult.

While a good transport system is required to support the livelihood activities of the growing urban population, the macro-economic fundamentals cited above have had an adverse effect on the provision of public transport. Excessively long waiting times as well as long walking distances characterize the current urban public transport situation. This is more acute in Harare, the capital city. The crucial question to ask is; what are the challenges, options and opportunities to address public transport demand?

This paper seeks to provide a historical background on urban public transport provision in the country and the efforts that have been put in place to improve the situation. It also assesses the sustainability of benefits emanating from deregulation and finally proposes practical solutions to the current problem. It must be realized that the transport problems are not generic and clearly would not require simplistic solutions. Partly the problems have emanated from imprudent policy measures and it is hoped that an analysis of the situation in Zimbabwe would assist other countries in their future planning for public transport provision.

2. URBAN PUBLIC TRANSPORT PROVISION

2.1 Historical Perspective

Prior to the attainment of independence in 1980, the United Transport Group operated stage carriage services in the urban areas of Zimbabwe. Services were operated under a franchise agreement (between the local authority and the bus company, which gave the operating company an exclusive right to operate services within a specified franchise area. The franchise area then was defined as a 26 kilometre radius from the central post office. The agreement guaranteed the operator a certain level of profitability. In the case of Harare, a 20% return on capital employed was guaranteed and in the event that the company failed to achieve this level of profitability, the difference was paid by the local authority as a subsidy. During this period, long waiting and commuting times characterized the public transport system.

After the attainment of independence, the Government of Zimbabwe pursued a policy targeted at redressing the socio-economic imbalances that had characterized the Zimbabwean economy prior to independence. Urban transport was regarded as one such key economic sector as evidenced by a number of important decisions taken by Government. These decisions included:

- The determination of fares which became the direct responsibility of Government and no longer that of the local authority
- The legalisation of the informal sector private transporters popularly known as “emergency taxis” in order to supplement the conventional transport services. Emergency taxis provided a shared service on set routes and had a legal capacity of 7 passengers although 9 was the norm.
- The acquisition by government of a majority shareholding (51%) in the Zimbabwe United Passenger Company (ZUPCO). a holding company that had been formed to facilitate government participation.

Government’s participation in ZUPCO was meant to influence policy in particular the acquisition of new buses to replace the old-aged vehicles as well as for expansion purposes. A few buses were bought but the bus acquisition programme came too late as it failed to keep abreast with demand. ZUPCO’s problems at the time were mainly a result of several years of financial stagnation as the company could not regularly adjust fares to keep abreast with increases in operational costs.

In 1990, the country embarked on an Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP). The thrust of ESAP was geared towards the liberalization of the economy by removing certain controls and regulations inhibiting competition. It is against the backdrop of the need to liberalise the economy that urban public transport in Zimbabwe was deregulated in August 1993.

2.2 Short Term Impacts of Deregulation

- Unprecedented increase in the number of privately operated public transport vehicles the majority being mini buses. This in turn has also increased capacity in a substantial way.
- An expansion of the urban public transport network as new services were introduced in some local authorities that were not served by public transport prior to deregulation.
- Improvement in the quality of service as evidenced by a considerable reduction in average passenger waiting times.

Notwithstanding the above positive impacts, there were also negative aspects, which were directly attributed to deregulation. The growth in the number of small public transport vehicles adversely affected the environment. The newly introduced “commuter omnibuses” took over a number of streets that they used as loading points. Noise, mainly caused by rank marshals touting for passengers is one of the problems associated with commuter omnibus loading points.

Secondly, the newly introduced commuter omnibuses with a completely different modus operandi threatened the survival of ZUPCO, an established stage carriage bus operator. Thus, over the years, the service provided by ZUPCO declined. For instance, prior to deregulation, ZUPCO had a fleet of approximately 1 200 buses for its urban operations. By 1997, the fleet had depleted by 45%. During the same period, there was a corresponding decrease in routes operated by ZUPCO in urban areas from 426 to 270.

On the whole, the positive effects of deregulation outweighed the negative aspects. Even public transport users acknowledged changes in service quality citing significant positive improvements resulting from deregulation.

3. END OF THE HEYDAYS

From about the end of 1999, public transport services in urban areas of Zimbabwe had been on a declining trend. Most of the public transport vehicles that were acquired at the time of deregulation had reached their economic life and needed to be replaced. However, the recapitalisation programme was affected by macro-economic challenges of high inflation and an unpalatable economic environment. Erratic fuel supplies also compounded the problem. Thus, peak periods are once again characterized by very long queues of passengers and excessively long waiting times. One commuter succinctly summarized the situation as follows:

“For the urban commuter, who travels daily to and from work, there is no public transport to talk about anymore” [Harare commuter thumbing for a lift]

There is a serious problem of capacity to cope with demand particularly during the peak periods. The situation has compelled people to walk for long distances and travel in all sorts of vehicles including lorries and pick ups, a practice which compromises the safety of travelers. The figure below illustrates the current problems of public transport in Harare.



**Passengers waiting for public transport in Harare.
Even lorries can be used to ferry passengers.**

Faced with the current public transport situation, what then are the challenges, and options for coping with the unprecedented and increased passenger demand?

4. CHALLENGES AND OPTIONS

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that urban commuters have to devise coping strategies to travel to and from work. On the supply side, the overriding challenge is to provide an efficient, reliable and demand responsive public transport service. This challenge requires a holistic approach with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in private and public sectors. A detailed discussion on challenges and possible options to address the present situation has been undertaken with all relevant stakeholders. The following section highlights the coping strategies that the people have devised and specific options to address the challenges in respect of urban passenger transport in Zimbabwe.

4.1 Coping Strategies

From the demand side, urban commuters have devised a number of strategies to cope with high transport costs as well as an inadequate and unreliable public transport system. The most significant coping strategy in urban areas of Zimbabwe particularly Harare is that people are walking for long distances from residential areas to places of work. One resident remarked that Harare was *“fast becoming a city of walkers”*.

Another coping strategy is that some people are cycling to work. However, as will be discussed in a subsequent section, bicycles are getting beyond the reach of many. Some employers, notably security companies have come up with credit schemes for the purchase of bicycles to assist their employees.

Thirdly, a significant number of low income employees are moving to residential areas, which are close to their work places to enable them to walk instead of using public transport. These people resorted to either stay with a relative or look for cheaper rented accommodation. Some have been building illegal temporary accommodation on municipal land in these residential areas which are close to work places. These people were victims of “*operation restore order*” which was implemented in May 2005.

There has been a significant increase in the number of passengers using the passenger train service (*known as the freedom train*) from high density areas served by the train. The freedom train is a cheap option that most low income families are using. It is slow, overcrowded and squalid. As an option people forgo speed, comfort and reliability as long as they get where they want to go.

The unreliable public transport system has increased car sharing. Those with their private transport (cars, pickups, lorries) are carrying passenger to and from work. Although this is illegal, the law enforcement agencies have turned a blind eye to the practice. Even company vehicles are being abused by drivers who carry unauthorised passengers for a fee. Even within families, there are concerted efforts to pull resources and gone are the days of mum’s car or dad’s car.

Some people have quit their jobs which require them to travel to work on a daily basis and resorted to the informal sector where they buy and sell a variety of goods within their communities. Others who quit their jobs decided to return to the rural areas as traveling costs had exceeded their wages.

4.2 Supply Side Challenges and Options

4.2.1 Creating an Enabling Environment

It is the responsibility of Government to determine the framework within which the principal decisions pertaining to transport are made. Therefore, Government has the challenge to create an enabling environment and to provide a clear policy framework for the provision and operation of public transport. Such a policy needs inter alia to articulate the objectives of urban transport in relation to investment in the sector, provision of an efficient, reliable and affordable transport system particularly for the urban poor, minimizing transport resource costs making more effective use of existing facilities and minimizing the impact of transport on the environment.

Hitherto, the country has had no national transport policy. Thus, there is no policy to guide investment in the sector as well as strategies required for the improvement of public transport. Efforts to come up with the National Transport Policy have been taken by the relevant Ministry and it is imperative that these efforts come to fruition soon. The initiative dates back to 1992 and the process has been very slow.

4.2.2 Reducing transport costs

It is the local authorities’ responsibility to provide infrastructure and services to residents in urban areas. In doing so, the challenge is to reduce transport costs for both the operator and the individual traveller. The location of physical infrastructure such as houses, industries, commercial centres have implications on transport costs. There is a clear need to integrate transport and land use. Local authorities have a vital role to play in order to reduce the distance travelled by commuters. Implementation of appropriate land use planning policies that integrate residential and employment places will significantly reduce transport costs and improve livelihood aspirations for the poor. Hitherto, local authorities have paid lip service to this important issue of transport-landuse integration as decisions

for new housing areas tend to be principally guided by availability of land and not integration with other land uses.

In Zimbabwe, the decline of the formal economy has meant that a greater proportion of people in urban areas have now resorted to informal self-employment. One significant informal trading activity is the selling of horticultural products (fresh farm produce) by people in urban areas. Due to the perishable nature of the product, frequent and costly trips have to be made to the market to source these products. In Harare, there is a centralized market (Mbare Musika) where all the traders converge to buy products for resale. Traders experience difficulties traveling to the central market as they wake up as early as 0400 hours in order to secure quality products. Public transport is not reliable and the traders spend a disproportionate amount of time to and from the market. While the economic significance of the central market in Mbare cannot be overemphasised, both the cost and need for long distance travel can be minimised by decentralising market functions at Mbare to other residential areas. Other traders who currently are not trading due to transport costs may be enticed into this business if products are brought nearer. Changing the status quo may not be an easy option as Mbare is well known and provides the critical mass for both traders and suppliers. This is a simple and inexpensive measure that will improve the livelihoods of the poor in urban areas, which the local authorities can implement. The transport problems experienced in our urban areas emanate from the traditional planning paradigm that tends to equate transport with mobility, that is, the movement of people as a means in itself. By bringing markets in close proximity, accessibility is enhanced and traders do not have to travel long distances.

Policy decisions may also impact on transport costs. In May 2005, Government of Zimbabwe implemented the controversial “*operation murambatsvina*” (*operation restore order*) which resulted in the destruction of “illegal structures” in urban areas. Consequently, some people employed in urban areas were forced to relocate to peri-urban areas. Thus, the operation had implications on transport costs as in essence it increased the costs of traveling for the displaced people who secured accommodation outside the cities that offer employment. A study on transport hubs and their potential in improving rural transport efficiency and delivery of services (Mbara et al 2005), found out that some displaced people had relocated to places more than 50 kilometres from Harare. Clearly, the policy decision to clean the urban areas has exported the problem elsewhere and it is important that policy decisions have to be made after a holistic examination of their impacts. Apart from increased monetary costs, the people take a very long time to travel to and from work places because of the unreliable public transport system in the country.

4.2.3 Influencing Modal Split Patterns

Public transport and walking are the prevalent means of transport used in many cities of the sub-Saharan Africa countries. The same applies to Zimbabwean major cities as shown by Table 1, which illustrates the modal split patterns of selected cities in developed and developing countries.

Percentage modal split of selected cities (1999)

City	Public Transport	Private Transport	Walking	Cycling
Harare	40	15	42	3
Dar-es-Salaam	44	6	46	3
Eldoret	24	10	54	12
Morogoro	12	4	67	17
Nairobi	45	7	46	1
Amsterdam	20	30	25	25
Delft	13	34	16	37
Munster	10	37	22	32
Stockholm	35	30	20	10
Zurich	35	30	25	10

Source: - VeloMondial Conference, Amsterdam, June 2000
 University of Zimbabwe/Transport Research Laboratory
 Rebangira, T. Cycling in African cities, Status and Prospects in Low Cost Mobility in African cities, Proceedings of the Expert Group Meeting held in Delft, The Netherlands, 21-23 June 2000

In Harare, the percentage number of people walking is much more than the figures shown above (2000 survey) as many people are resorting to walking as a coping strategy. Of interest is the low share of cycling in Harare and other African cities with the exception of Eldoret (Kenya) and Morogoro (Tanzania), which are both small cities that benefited from the assistance of the World Bank and Sub-Saharan Africa Transport Programme. Interestingly, there are cities in the industrialised world where people have easy access to both public and private motorized transport, which exhibit higher shares of bicycle use. For instance, the bicycle modal shares of the cities of Amsterdam, Delft (The Netherlands), Munster (Germany) and Stockholm (Sweden) were 25%, 37%, 32% and 10% respectively.

The important role of non-motorised transport in meeting the travel and transport needs of the urban poor in increasingly becoming acceptable but has not been recognized in most African cities. Cycling as a non-motorised means of transport does not require massive urban infrastructure as required by motorized modes. It is generally regarded as a “benign” mode. Which is friendly to the environment and clearly it remains an option to be seriously considered in our urban areas in Zimbabwe. The challenge is therefore to create an enabling environment and encourage the use of bicycles. Notwithstanding the environmental benefits as well as the potential benefits to the poor, why then has cycling got an insignificant share of the travel modal market in our urban areas?

One problem that is constraining the use of bicycles in Zimbabwean urban areas is the environment that is unfriendly to the user. A friendly environment for the bicycle user is one, which provides facilities such as cycle lanes and properly secured parking for bicycles. The lack of these facilities has created a general perception among potential users that cycling is risky, and prone to accidents than motorized transport. Secondly, it is generally felt that the prices of bicycles are too high and outside the reach of the intended beneficiaries. This is an area where bicycle ownership costs can be reduced by the removal of duties. In short, the following are the specific challenges that need to be addressed:

- Creating awareness on the benefits of using non-motorised transport. This is a grey area as there is no local authority in the country that consciously addresses non motorized issues in the planning process.
- Consideration for the complete removal of duties on bicycles. The current cost of a bicycle in Zimbabwe is between Z\$6 million and Z\$8million. The cost can be significantly reduced if duties are scrapped. In view of the fact that the majority of lowly

paid people earn less than Z\$8 million per month, the cost is out of reach of the intended beneficiaries.

- Provision of appropriate infrastructure to enable bicycle users to cycle in a safe environment.

Most of our cities in Zimbabwe are located on flat terrain, which is conducive to cycling.

4.2.4 Investment in Larger Capacity Modes

The availability of an insatiable demand for public transport in our urban areas provides a ready market and a business opportunity for both existing as well as potential operators. The challenge is to provide an adequate capacity to cope with this unprecedented demand. There is need to change the investment approach which has focused on small vehicles as larger vehicles will be needed. Apart from their carrying capacities, larger vehicles have an added advantage in that they are an efficient user of road space. Thus, such vehicles would also go a long way in minimizing congestion in the principal urban areas, particularly Harare.

Government has recognized the need to encourage operators to invest in bigger buses by a deliberate policy to phase out small public transport vehicles. For instance, importers of public transport vehicles with a capacity of more than 22 passengers will be exempted from paying duty.

Government owned company, the Zimbabwe United Passenger Company (ZUPCO) has also made concerted efforts to invest in conventional buses. In 2006, ZUPCO acquired 115 conventional buses and the company intends to buy more in order to bring its fleet to 1 500 buses. With Government support, ZUPCO is probably the only company that can inject a meaningful number of buses onto the market. The fleet of other private operators has significantly declined primarily due to the high cost of the bus. In January 2005, the cost of a conventional bus was approximately Z\$1 billion. By December 2005 the cost ranged between Z\$5.5 billion and Z\$13 billion. Private operators have for sometime not been placing orders for new buses and as one of these operators remarked:

"I last bought a new bus in 1996. My fleet has significantly declined. The high cost of the bus, and unviable fares have seriously affected the public transport industry. Yes we have an obligation to transport passengers but there is nothing that we can do"

In July 2002, in an attempt to alleviate the problem of public transport in urban areas, Government introduced commuter trains in the two largest cities of Harare and Bulawayo. The commuter trains are using existing coaches and permanent way and thus, they are only serving those high-density areas adjacent to rail lines. Harare has 3 services and they operate during the peak period only. The rail system, which is cheaper, has gone a long way in assisting commuters. It is affordable as passengers' pay a quarter of the fare charged by road based public transport.

The introduction of the commuter rail system is an appropriate intervention but the challenge is to provide the requisite infrastructure and facilities to enhance safety and comfort of users. There is need to provide platforms to ease boarding and lighting both inside the trains and at stations in order to improve security.

4.2.5 Knowledge of the Industry

In Zimbabwe, there is an enormous challenge to know what is happening in the urban public transport industry. This is an area, which requires accurate data as any strategies and decisions to address and cope with the situation has to be based on factual

information. For instance, basic information on the levels of public transport demand, size of fleet operating in each urban area, passengers carried on each day, percentage of disposable income spent on public transport is not known. There is therefore need to continuously conduct research whose results would assist policy makers and transport managers to make informed decisions. Government has to support research not only by paying lip service, but by providing the requisite funds which would ensure that research is undertaken.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Public transport in Zimbabwe is characterized by inefficiency and unreliability. Partly, this is a result of the macro economic fundamentals, which have increased operational costs. The unpalatable macro-economic environment is compounded by a negative image of the country, which need to improve in order to attract investment in the transport sector.

There is need to develop a sustainable urban public transport system in Zimbabwe. A policy framework is required and a transparent and symbiotic partnership between central, local governments, private sector and civic societies has to exist. These stakeholders have to share a common goal of developing a sustainable urban public transport system.

The current challenges include inter alia, the need to reduce costs, encouraging and development of cheaper modes, integration of land use, positively influencing modal choice in favour of cheaper and benign modes, investing in bigger modes as well as supporting research and development. The bottom line is that these options have to be funded. While the public transport user is looking for a cheaper service, replacement and expansion of public transport vehicles would require financial resources. There is need for the user to accept the "user pays principle" and at the same time the user need to get value for money. In the meantime, the user has devised coping strategies which include inter alia, walking and relocating to residential areas which would either eliminate or minimize transport costs.

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