

# RETHINKING THE FUTURE OF MINIBUS TAXIS

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## ABSTRACT

The world is currently grappling with congestion problems that have rendered cities unlivable. Improvement in public transport has been one of the most sought-after solutions with implementation of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Systems being one of the key strategies. Previous studies have demonstrated that Mini-Bus Taxis (MBTs) could be part of the solution to improved public transport as they won't be eliminated overnight. Transportation officials and authorities in South Africa have rethought the future of MBTs and come up with initiatives to improve the quality of MBT service. This essay presents the Blue Dot Program in Western Cape; Moja Cruise in eThekweni and the MBT contracting model in Rustenburg Local Municipality as some of the initiatives taken in South Africa. The approaches taken focus on improving safety, security, availability and reliability of MBTs as a mode of transport.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Transportation and planning officials are thinking of improved public transport strategies to overcome the mobility challenges (Levinson et al., 2003) that have rendered world's cities unlivable (Vuchic, 2017). Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) has been considered a cost effective approach to mass public transport prompting many cities to launch BRT systems (Deng and Nelson, 2011). In the last 15 years, South Africa has invested heavily in BRT systems (Venter et al., 2022) with cities of Cape Town, Johannesburg, Tshwane rolling out their own systems.

Mini Bus Taxis, also known as paratransit or informal public transport due to the fact that they are always flexible and unregulated (Cervero and Golub, 2007) have been the dominant form of public transport in South African cities (Venter et al., 2020). The current BRT roll out strategy has focused on replacement of paratransit. Plano et al. (2020) state that the large number of paratransit operators in South African cities has nullified efforts by cities' officials to eliminate them in favour of scheduled services.

South African Transportation Authorities have recently changed their approach to MBTs in the implementation of Integrated Public Transport Networks (IPTNs) focusing on improvement of MBT services rather than replacement. This involves rethinking the future of MBTs in provision of sustainable public transport with focus on addressing the current challenges in terms of availability of service, safety and security. This has been achieved with the launch of the Blue Dot Program in Western Cape (Western Cape Government, 2024); Moja Cruise in eThekweni (Ethekeeni Metro Taxi Council, 2024) and MBT contracting model in Rustenburg Local Municipality (RLM) (Chetty et al., 2024). This essay presents initiatives through which the MBT industry has been upskilled and reskilled to address the future and current public transport challenges in South Africa.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### 2.1 Approaches to Improvement of Mini Bus Taxis

Kgwedi and Krygsman (2017) suggest ways in which the MBT industry can be improved to provide sustainable public transport to commuters. These approaches aim at addressing the challenges facing passengers, drivers and owners are presented here.

#### *2.1.1 Regulation*

MBT regulation is fundamental to addressing consumer interests, public safety, congestion, city image and maintaining balance between taxi supply and demand. Passengers are concerned with service attributes such as the roadworthiness MBTs, safety, driver behaviour and taxi fares.

Regulations can be in the terms of quantity regulations to address the number of vehicles; quality regulations to address the operator's qualifications to operate, vehicle standards and insurance and economic regulations relate to fares (Aarhaug, 2016).

#### *2.1.2 Labour Formalization*

Labour formalization assists the industry to escape exploitative labour relations between owners and drivers which maximises owners' profit at all costs, to one that is law-abiding (Mahlangu, 2002; Ndibatya & Booysen, 2020).

The formalisation process should consider the labour process within the taxi industry, as well as the linkages between the formal-informal sectors. Formalisation process faces challenges when it is a top-down process, and does not consider the nature of work in the industry (Fobosi, 2013). Therefore, all stake holders including National Departments of Labour and Transport, the local authorities and the industry must be able to work closely together on labour related matters, subsidies, and facilitation of workshops to provide an engagement platform (Boudreaux, 2006)

#### *2.1.3 Law Enforcement*

Kgwedi and Krygsman (2017) suggests the need of a dedicated structure or team to interact closely with the taxi operators. A dedicated team consisting of Inspectors and Law Enforcement Officers should be set up to deal with public transport law enforcement for a successful implementation. This ensures improvement in the quality and safety of public transport services.

## **3. METHODOLOGY AND CASE STUDIES**

This essay is based on literature reviewed about South African cities and municipalities in which initiatives have been taken to improve MBT services. These initiatives involve participation by Taxi owners (associations), drivers and Government officials. The initiatives discussed in this essay include: Blue Dot Program in Western Cape; Moja Cruise in eThekwin and MBT contracting model in RLM.

### 3.1 Blue Dot Program in Western Cape

The Western Cape Government in partnership with the provincial minibus industry rolled out the Blue Dot Program in 2021. According to Western Cape Government (2024), the program aimed at improving the quality and safety of the service provided to the

passenger, achieve empowerment and transformation of the MBT industry and address the industry's most challenging issues of illegal operations and violent conflict.

Participants in the Blue Dot Program earn monthly financial incentive based on their performance against the performance standards set by the provincial government covering driving behaviour and service quality. The higher the performance, the higher the financial incentive. Performance is monitored using the onboard trackers and on-the-ground monitoring, as well as user feedback from passengers and other members of the public (Western Cape Government, 2024).

Participants are required to attain and maintain a green status. This involves meeting conditions including: installation of onboard vehicle trackers, adherence to licensed routes, taxi operators to provide a minimum level of service each day, vehicles being licensed, roadworthy and passing a safety inspection, and drivers having a Professional Driving Permit, operators and drivers to have completed Blue Dot training, taxi operators subjecting vehicles to periodic inspections, monitoring of habitual poor driving behaviour and display Blue Dot branding and the required passenger information.

### 3.2 Moja Cruise in eThekweni

Moja Cruise; a partnership between Municipality of eThekweni and eThekweni Management Taxi Council was launched by eThekweni Transport Agency in 2018 to ensure safe, secure and efficient customer oriented service (Ethekewini Metro Taxi Council, 2024).

The Moja Cruise involves about one thousand participating taxis which are branded and fitted with tracking systems paid for by the Municipality. Moja Cruise taxis adhere to set criteria to offer a clean, safe, efficient, customer-oriented service to the public. The vehicles are monitored to ensure that these criteria are met to qualify for the financial incentive. (Ethekewini Metro Taxi Council, 2024). The participating taxis are required to be compliant with drivers having Professional Driving Permit and undergoing training and capacitation.

### 3.3 MBT Contracting in Rustenburg

RLM achieved transformation of the MBT industry through compensation of MBT operators and establishment of a joint-operating company, referred to as the Integrated Public Transport Operating Company (IPTOC) (Chetty et al., 2024). The taxi associations affected by the IPTN received a package in the form of monthly instalments (paid over 12 years) and were required to surrender their vehicles and operating licenses. Almost 250 operators were compensated and given the opportunity to invest and become shareholders in the IPTOC (Rustenburg Local Municipality, 2016).

The surrendered MBTs were re-branded and fitted with GPS tracking devices to be used for contracted services, optimizing vehicle costs. The MBTs are used as a complementary mode to the 12-metre (72-seater) standard buses to provide scheduled services. In addition, 65 MBTs were contracted to operate as unscheduled services (referred to as mop-ups) along Yarona routes to increase capacity and cater for demand (Chetty et al., 2024). These operators were charged a daily fee and retained all user fares (Wattel, 2022). This contracting model acknowledges the value of informal MBTs operations and enables vehicle monitoring and stringent controls.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The case studies discussed show that different municipalities and cities have taken various initiatives to improve the MBT industry and consequently improve public transport. The approaches in eThekweni and Western Cape approaches have focused on improving safety, security and efficiency of MBTs as a mode of transport. The model used in RLM demonstrates the potential of MBTs to serve in scheduled services to increase reliability. These initiatives show that MBTs can be formalised to meet transport needs of the future. Therefore, as we consider reskilling of the transport industry, a shift in thinking about improvement of public transport especially with MBTs should be considered as the case studies discussed have shown feasibility of the initiatives.

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