



A look at paratransit in South Africa

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Paratransit provides a valuable service offering as a flexible mode of transport between formal transit and a private car. This term collectively describes transport services such as dial-a-ride, shared taxis, community transit and subscription buses. When it evolves to compete with more formal transit modes, efforts are made to formalise it. Paratransit is a flexible mode of transport and provides mobility in a variety of settings.

Paratransit often emerges in the absence of formal transit, or in response to low-quality and intermittent services. Observing the minibus taxis – the major form of paratransit in South Africa – one may easily consider them a chaotic bunch of freelance drivers. If the mode indeed operates in a laissez-faire style, and provides all but safe transport, what is there to learn from its growth into the dominant urban mode of transport?

In Gauteng, the economic nucleus of the country that includes Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni, as much as 70% of all transit trips are made using paratransit, so it is by no means a small illegal operation anymore.

To appreciate the role of paratransit, South Africa's taxi industry is used as an example and shows why a better understanding of the mode opens up opportunities and establishes its potential niche. The terms "taxis" and "taxi industry" are used to describe the paratransit mode in South Africa that uses minibuses. The terms do not imply metered taxis as is often the case internationally.

The South African paratransit industry

Minibus taxi transport and the associated vernacular emerged as a consequence of the system of segregation in South Africa from 1948 to 1994. During the apartheid struggle, public transport services became sporadic and unpredictable.

In earlier years, the Motor Carrier Transportation Act of 1930 prohibited the transportation of passengers by road without a permit, essentially making transport a state monopoly

held by South African Transport Service (SATS). The Act was also an attempt to protect the state-owned railways from competition by road transport. Taxis were restricted to carrying no more than four passengers.

Train stations had become centres of frustration for would-be commuters. On arrival, there would be no knowing how long it would be before the next train left or if there would be place on the train to accommodate even half the passengers waiting to board. As a result, many taxis started operating illegally, especially in rural areas that were not serviced.

In the late 1970s, legislation did not define taxis per se, but implied a bus to be a vehicle carrying more than nine people (including the driver). This loophole in legislation resulted in the legal use of minibus vehicles to carry eight passengers without having to conform to strict public transport vehicle regulations. The first taxi permits were area-based, and authorised taxi drivers to operate in regions within a radius of 100 km around a central point. Competition for passengers was fierce and drivers argued over ownership of routes.

Hendrik Schoeman, who was the Minister of Transport from 1980 to 1984, recommended that taxis go back to using the four-passenger sedan vehicles. The taxi owners were concerned that this arrangement was going to kill their industry.

The South African Black Taxi Association (SABTA), the only recognised body by the end of 1989, warned that deregulation such as this would lead to too many operators entering the market too soon and would result in chaos and violence.

→ *Minibus taxis in Klein Street in the city centre of Johannesburg. (Photograph: Chris Kirchhoff, MediaClubSouthAfrica.com.)*





→ *The minibus taxi industry developed from a need for more efficient public transport to the city centres.
(Photograph: Chris Kirchhoff, MediaClubSouthAfrica.com.)*

Local taxi liaison committees (later referred to as local taxi councils) had to be set up in all major centres and local authorities would then be responsible for regulating the industry.

Dynamics in the paratransit structure

The taxi industry is often referred to as a single entity, but in itself, the industry remains dynamic. This complicated matters, because the industry did not have one unified entity to represent it, and government recognised SABTA as the main taxi organisation.

There was animosity between SABTA and the South African Long Distance Taxi Association (SALDTA). Government's solution was to split the taxi ranks: half for SALDTA and half for SABTA. By that time, many associations apart from SABTA had been formed. SABTA then mobilised to form the South African Taxi Council (SANTACO). A second group also assembled and called itself the National Taxi Alliance (NTA).

As a result of the deregulation, the taxi industry remained largely overtraded. Ambiguous permits, associations claiming taxi ranks and subsequent conflicts between local

and long-distance taxi associations at the ranks often resulted in violent clashes.

Grassroots taxi operations

Despite the industry's growth, taxi operators are faced with daily frustrations. They receive no formal training and enjoy no employment protection, despite the existence of progressive labour laws.

Millions of young individuals endeavour to become part of the taxi transport industry at entry level. Many others who belong to the larger taxi associations have other commitments to face.

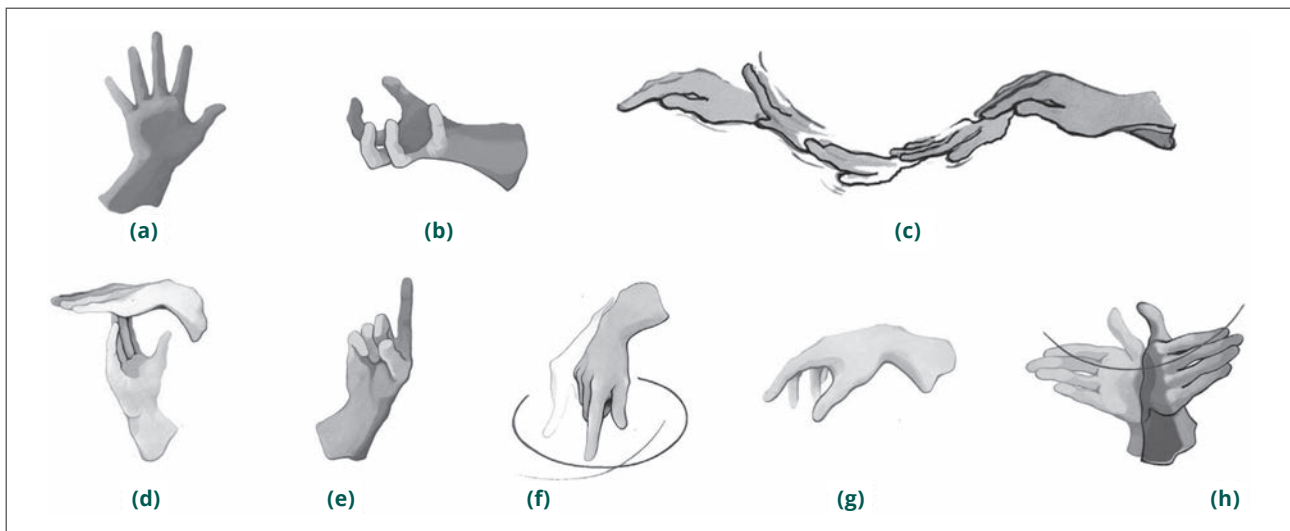
Salary structures and agreements differ among the owners, but two main models seem to emerge. In the first and most common, an owner specifies the daily check-in amount that is based on the distance of the vehicle's specific operating licence route. From the total weekly check-in earnings, the owner would then pay the driver a basic salary, typically 30% of the earnings. Tracking the exact earnings is daunting. Whatever earnings a driver makes in excess of the agreed check-in amount, after fuel expenses have been covered, are for his own pocket.

In the second model, an owner will price the check-in amount higher, closer to the total turnover, and establish a weekly contract price. The driver will then spend the first portion of the week trying to accumulate the week's contract price without having claim to any portion of the turnover. Once the contract price has been reached and paid over, the driver has the remainder of the week to drive for his own income. Financial survival, frequency of routes travelled, time, passenger capacity and number of passengers become more important than traffic etiquette, consideration, safety and rule of law.

The development and evolution of hand signals and other taxi lingo is important, since it influences the dynamic taxi commuter interaction. It is possibly a contributing factor to the widespread use of taxis and it allows taxi drivers to instantly identify commuters.

Communities often decide on hand gestures in conjunction with the taxi drivers in the area. The gestures are also used to communicate with potential passengers.

The taxi hand signal to the township settlement Orange Farm (Figure 1b) describes the name, as commuters



→ Figure 1: A selection of taxi hand signals.

use a cupped hand to indicate an absent orange. Many taxi hand signals are geographically descriptive of a place. The forward movement of a hand rising and falling (Figure 1c) describes the uneven ground in the area of Diepsloot. Commuters who want to catch a taxi to the nearest T-junction, simply make a T-junction with their hands (Figure 1d).

Some taxi hand signals are so commonly used that they have become established for particular destinations. For instance, the taxi hand signal to town, in most main cities in South Africa, is one index finger pointing upwards (Figure 1e). Similarly, the sign to any nearby location is a downward point using the index finger to trace an imaginary circle (Figure 1f). A cupped, downward-facing hand indicates a shopping mall (Figure 1g). The waving hand signal used for a trip from Tembisa to Sebenza (Figure 1h) indicates the direction of Sebenza, although, like many hand signals, the exact meaning may yet be established.

Interventions aimed at formalisation

In South Africa, two seemingly parallel economic systems developed (Development Policy Research Unit, 2008). The first, popularised by former President Thabo Mbeki in 2003 as the first economy, is a modern economy similar to that found in developed countries.

The first economy is formal and is well documented with receipts, records, a credit system and legally enforceable rights and remedies. The second economy lacks all these elements. It is informal and mostly regulated by community norms or self-appointed regulators, and is based on small taxless cash transactions. As the taxi industry is probably the largest single contributor to the second economy, government has made a number of efforts to formalise the industry and migrate it to the first economy.

Taxi owners feel that, instead of appreciating their contribution to mobility, government is out to punish them through formalisation. It is not formalisation per se that the taxi industry is opposing, but rather government's general approach. In engaging the industry as a single homogeneous body (at national level) with large-scale nationwide initiatives, many aspects of the essential nature of the industry, such as its grassroots communal structure, are disregarded.

One of the attempts to formalise the taxi industry was the Taxi Recapitalisation Programme. This was a multibillion rand effort from government to provide a R50 000 incentive to taxi owners to exchange their old, unroadworthy minibus taxis with newer, safety-standardised vehicles. Another formalisation attempt was Bus Rapid Transit (BRT).

With the success of BRT in other developing countries (Deng and

Nelson, 2010), most notably Bogota in Columbia and Curitiba in Brazil, the South African government envisaged BRT to be a viable instrument to formalise the minibus taxi industry.

SANTACO was opposed to BRT, and the first phase of the rapid transport system was launched without agreements being reached with the taxi industry. Instead, an intermediate operating company was formed. Eventually, the City of Johannesburg secured the removal of taxi competition from the BRT routes. In return, the City agreed to pay the 313 shareholders – former owners of the 585 affected taxis – direct monthly payments, as opposed to yearly dividends, for the first four years of operation.

The current cash check-in amount required by owners has long been identified as a significant factor contributing to the generally unacceptable driving behaviour of minibus taxi drivers. Speeding and skipping traffic signals are unintended consequences of the way in which the drivers are remunerated.

The government has been using a top-down approach to influence the taxi industry for too long. It was critical to understand and appreciate the taxi industry as essentially a bottom-up entity: taxi drivers make a living by driving for taxi owners, who require decent returns on their investments. The owners make up the local associations and these associations



→ *Traders and minibus taxis in Bree Street in the city centre of Johannesburg. (Photograph: Chris Kirchhoff, MediaClubSouthAfrica.com.)*

make up regional, provincial and national bodies. A bottom-up approach enables decision-makers and change agents to successfully engage with the taxi industry.

The way forward

Changing the view of paratransit is both valuable and necessary. It should not be considered a problem that has to be solved by forced formalisation. It should be considered an essential part of the economy, both as a mobility service provider and as an employer, even if it remains completely informal or semi-informal.

The culture surrounding the taxi industry is already changing. Holland (2011) urges other road-users to consider the inherent value provided by taxis. In South Africa, decision-makers need to change their attitudes towards paratransit. Many low-income earners remain on the periphery of large metropolitan areas and require low-cost transport services. It is not economically viable for government to consider providing fixed and costly transport infrastructure.

Little fixed infrastructure is required for the taxi industry to operate, especially when compared to rail infrastructure or the expensive pavement structures for heavy BRT

vehicles. A proactive approach can see a subsidy structure that outlines and benefits the responsive and agile nature of the taxi industry.

Promoting the taxi industry holds a number of scientific, social and political opportunities. Scientific, state-of-the-art research already attempts to incorporate the behaviour of paratransit operators in agent-based transport planning models (Neumann and Nagel, 2011). Social and political awareness and appreciation needs to be created to increase the accessibility of the minibus taxi industry and lower the barrier to entry. 📍

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