

Covid-19 and the future of public transport in South Africa



Infrastructure-heavy public transport investments such as rail and Bus Rapid Transit are facing increased financial difficulties in the aftermath of Covid-19

OVERVIEW

South Africa's public transport has been (and continues to be) severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic – initially in terms of restrictions on operations, and lately, as we emerge from lockdown, in terms of reduced ridership that may be slow to recover. In this we mirror the experience in many other countries where transport operators are facing a severe struggle for survival. The last few months have taught us important lessons that, should we heed them, may help us to build back more robust and sustainable systems for the future.

CURRENT SCENARIO

Before the pandemic about 60% of the population used public transport, while currently, reported public transport use remains substantially below pre-Covid levels. For instance, at the end of August, Google's Mobility Report indicated public transport use to be 42% below the baseline.¹ However, this data is likely

skewed towards formal bus and rail, consistent with the definition of public transport facilities (formal stations and interchanges) used by Google when generating the data. Although the data is lacking, anecdotal evidence suggests that passenger numbers on informal minibus-taxis have recovered better, partly because most passengers are captive to public transport. By contrast, public transport systems aimed more at the choice passenger market, like the Gautrain high-end rail system, has experienced an almost tenfold drop in ridership as people turn to other options seen as less risky, notably driving. The drop in traffic congestion due to continued work-at-home practices exacerbates this trend. The implication is that, for these systems, subsidy needs are expected to grow substantially, to the point where their financial sustainability may be in danger, or at least where further investment in expansions might be significantly delayed. This situation also applies to South Africa's four Bus Rapid

Prof Christo Venter
Centre for Transport Development
University of Pretoria
christo.venter@up.ac.za



Gary Hayes
Centre for Transport Development
University of Pretoria
u16401868@tuks.co.za



Dr Nicolaas van Zyl
Centre for Transport Development
University of Pretoria
KvZ.BlueMind@outlook.com



Transit (BRT) systems, which carry a mix of choice and captive passengers. Our BRTs were already plagued by poor ridership and high subsidies before the onset of the pandemic – a situation that is likely to get worse in the short to medium term.

The fact that the minibus-taxi industry has continued to operate mostly unsubsidised, even in the face of reduced passenger numbers, has clearly demonstrated its importance to the functioning of society. While, under initial lockdown, government shut down buses and train services to prevent large congregations of people in stations and vehicles, minibus-taxis were allowed to keep on operating on the strength of their dispersed routes and lower levels of overcrowding. But, as economic pressure has mounted within the industry, so has the pressure to relax operating restrictions. Government has been unable to enforce the same behavioural standards in terms of distancing, mask-wearing and sanitising among minibus operators as among all other industries, and a threat of a nationwide taxi strike and disruption was enough to get government to agree to a 100% load factor for minibuses in cities. This was at the height of virus transmission in South

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Africa, and likely came at the expense of passengers' health. The lesson is that there is a significant power differential between the informal industry and government, and that any vision of achieving a formalised, high-quality public transport system is entirely beholden to these powerful vested interests in the taxi industry.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PUBLIC TRANSPORT PLANNING IN FUTURE?

Firstly, on the demand side we need to understand the impact of the pandemic on traveller behaviour and whether it will be sustained. Work travel has recovered almost to pre-Covid levels (8% below the baseline¹), suggesting that, different to more developed economies, work-at-home options remain feasible for only a fraction of workers. This will likely be a feature of many sub-Saharan economies with large proportions of workers in manual labour, manufacturing and informal sectors. Behavioural changes may also affect mode choice, and hence the rate of ridership recovery. As formal bus and train systems have been much better able to implement disinfection and distancing protocols, it might attract some passengers away from informal modes, but that remains to be seen.

Secondly, on the supply side we need to take the role of small vehicles more seriously, especially in the lower-density, dispersed and low-labour cost environments of much of South Africa's towns and cities. In a world of increasing uncertainty and unpredictability, the need for adaptability and demand-responsiveness (whether in formal or informally operated fleets) will become increasingly important. This does not mean there is no role for large-vehicle systems; we need to get better at balancing and integrating the different components of the system.

Thirdly, a rethink is needed of the pathway towards upgrading informal modes within this mix. While national transport policy already accepts that the future of public transport is founded on cooperation with and upgrading of minibus-taxi operators rather than efforts to eradicate them, this rests on the assumption that some combination of incentives and regulation can be found that would secure the consent of vested interests in the informal industry. Our experience over the last few months teaches that this may be more difficult than supposed, especially given the asymmetrical power relationship at play and the severe disjuncture between private

and public interests. We urgently need better ideas about how to move from narrow commercial interests towards system-wide welfare benefits.

Finally, we need to think more carefully about investment in infrastructure-heavy public transport options. This applies to rail systems, firstly, which see their value-for-money propositions severely eroded by ridership volatility as the economies of scale that they depend on for financial feasibility evaporate. A further weakness of rail which has been frustratingly displayed is its vulnerability to theft and vandalism of fixed assets, which has all but debilitated PRASA (Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa) services in most cities. In many sub-Saharan countries, and South Africa in particular, even classic BRT (with all the bells and whistles) looks less attractive than before, especially in cases where the realities of low demand-density and low willingness-to-pay among passengers curtail their financial affordability, both to governments and to passengers. The Covid-19 pandemic is likely to further fuel the move towards lighter, more flexible, low-cost approaches to public transport that are better integrated with existing services in South African cities, as the current set of bus-based solutions do not serve our future well enough. ▣

REFERENCE

- 1 COVID-19 Community Mobility Report, 30 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.google.com/covid19/mobility/>.



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