

How dependable and sustainable are the low cost⁹ public transport options in meeting mobility needs in Nigériian urban centres?

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ABSTRACT: Many Nigériian urban centres, like their counterparts in other developing countries, are expanding at phenomenal rates, that range from 4 to 9 per cent per annum. The attendant rapid population growth, the burgeoning spatial extent of the urban centres, and high dependence on inadequate and inefficient low cost public transport modes are deepening the concern on how to substantially meet the mobility and accessibility needs of poor urban residents in particular. The principal question, therefore, is that, given the prevailing poor operating conditions and high fares of public transport among other things, how can public transport services be made more affordable and sustainable, such that the vast majority of the urban poor that consume these services can benefit more.

1 INTRODUCTION

The rapid rate of urbanisation in Nigeria has continued to widen the demand for greater mobility and accessibility, including those of the vast majority of the urban poor. While average annual population growth for Nigériian urban centers is put at about 3 per cent, many urban centers are growing at rate of between 4 to 9 per cent per annum. The attendant effect includes rapidly rising demand for public transport, which far outstrips the rate of supply of public transport services. In fact, by the late 1980s, what seemed like the imminent collapse of the entire Nigériian urban public transport System, due largely to the terribly weakened Nigériian economy and the impact of structural adjustment (World Bank 1991), was prevented through some palliative initiatives from both the public and private sector transport operators. The Fédéral Government, for instance, initiated the Fédéral Urban Mass Transit Programme (FUMTP) in 1988, which covered four major components, including road-based projects, rail-based projects, water-based projects, as well as intermodal projects (Ikya 1996 and Bolade 1998).

In addition, during the period of sévère urban mobility crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the depleting stock of available public transport vehicles - due largely to the high costs of spare parts, vehicle repairs and maintenance, the sliding rate of registration of commercial and public

transport vehicles in spite of the high demand for them, and the exorbitant cost of procuring new public transport vehicles clearly meant that cheaper and 'low-cost public transport options had to be provided. Consequently, there was a spontaneous émergence and unprecedented growth in commercial motorcycle opérations in many Nigériian urban centres (Adesanya 1998, Fasakin 2000), the strengthening of existing mass transit companies and the establishment of new ones, as well as the massive importation of 'fairly used" motor vehicles (commonly referred to as *tokunbo*) from European countries mostly.

The situation in more recent years is that the variety of public transport services in Nigériian urban centres has increased considerably, with commercial motorcycle services growing at an uncontrollable and very frightening speed. Despite this, public transport fares remain high, while the quality of public transport services is still very poor, to say the least. There is, therefore, a growing need for affordable, reliable, low cost and sustainable transport services that can meet the mobility and accessibility requirements of most Nigériians, who are basically low income earners and captive riders of public transport. Since the lives of people revolve around transport, it is imperative for transport policies and programmes to be geared towards alleviating the precarious condition of the poor, so that their access to basic facilities and services (employment areas, schools, health facilities, markets, and so on) can be facilitated.

2 URBAN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Like in the cities of most developing countries, transport fares in Nigériian urban centres take **away a** sizeable proportion of individuals⁵ disposable income, with the urban poor being the most affected. A study in 1992 indicated that majority of low income workers in Nigériian urban centers spent higher than 30 per cent of their disposable incomes on meeting the public transport demands of their households (Adeniji 1993). This is in addition to the long queues for inadequate public transport vehicles and, sometimes, the bitter struggle and rush that most commuters have to go through, in order to get into and disembark from the vehicles during peak travel periods.

In most Nigériian urban centres today, there is usually a mix of different paratransit modes and services, including taxis, minibuses (*danfo* adapted large capacity buses (such as *Molue* in Lagos), commercial motorcycles (popularly called *Okada*) and tricycles in very few cities like Lagos, Kaduna and Kano. Urban centres that are endowed with inland waterways or navigable water bodies such as Lagos, Port Harcourt, Lokoja, Warri and Onitsha among others, also provide some form of water transport services, using dug-out canoes with or without outboard engines, boats and ferries. The paratransit modes that provide intraurban services normally operate side by side and are subjected to little or no regulation, in terms of the quality of vehicle, age of driver, driving skills, the possession of valid driving licences and the fares charged. Most road-based public transport vehicles in Nigeria come in as fully built imported vehicles, pass through the production line of local vehicle assembly plants, or are built on vehicle chassis - in the case of adapted vehicles such as mammy *wagons/b oie kaj a* and *molue* among others. The type of modes existing in the Nigériian public transport market are limited and vary considerably from those of many Asian countries, where traditional animal and human drawn vehicles, adapted vehicles using bicycle and motorcycle technologies, shared taxis, minibuses and so on are in abundance.

It should be stressed that private sector operators dominate the Nigériian road-based public transport market, by taking about 98 per cent share. Apart from rail transport services, which are entirely under the control of a wholly publicly owned agency (the Nigériian Railway Corporation), the public sector has often complemented the dominant and overwhelming efforts of the private sector in the provision of road-based public transport services.

Beyond this, the availability of different public transport modes in Nigériian urban centres would perhaps have implied wider choice of public transport services to the riding public, as well as to meet varying individual pockets. In reality, however, the so-called low cost transport" services such as *okada*, tricycle (called *keke Marwa* in Lagos) and *molue* are actually not very cheap and affordable to most commuters

3 'LOW COST' PUBLIC TRANSPORT

3.1 Rôle of the private sector in 'low cost'⁵ public transport service provision

As earlier mentioned, the Nigériian public transport market is dominated by private sector operators. As expected, this category of public transport service provider has always responded by attempting to fill the wide mobility and accessibility gaps of various social groups, even during the urban mobility crisis period of the late 1980s. While at that point in time, many public transport operators could not afford to buy new minibuses and taxis due to their very high prices, there was a steady shift to the procurement of relatively cheaper imported used vehicles (*tokunbo*) especially used minibuses and cars (for use as taxis). The situation at the moment, in terms of the type of vehicles being procured, has not changed dramatically; most public transport operators still depend on imported, used vehicles.

The foregoing notwithstanding, one striking feature about virtually all Nigériian urban centres is the presence of commercial motorcycle services operators. In fact, towards the end of the 1980s, there was a spontaneous entry of commercial motorcycle (*pkadd*) operators into the public transport market in many Nigériian urban centres. Hitherto, only in a few urban centres such as Calabar, Uyo, Bauchi and Makurdi were motorcycles playing a prominent rôle as public transport modes. Today, almost all urban centres have *okada* operators. The start up capital is relatively low. It usually involves the costs of purchasing a motorcycle, a crash helmet, uniform for identification purposes and payment for hackney permit, in the case of an owner-rider. For a hired operator, the capital that is involved is much lower. More specifically, in 1990, a fairly used Suzuki 100 was sold at about N6,000. By 1995, its price had risen to between N35,000 and N42,000, and the present cost is about N65,000 in Ibadan. This price is very small, when compared with the price of a used minibus (10-seater), which currently sells for about N650,000 to N750,000.

3.2 Government Assisted Public Transport Services

The direct involvement of governments in the provision of public transport services, particularly at the municipal and state government levels, is not a recent phenomenon in Nigeria. In the early 1930s, the Native Authority in Kano provided bus services in and around Kano city (Walker 1959). In Lagos, the Lagos City Council set up the Lagos Municipal Transport Services in 1958, while the Ibadan City Bus Service was established in 1964 by the then Ibadan City Council (Adeniji 1983). For the first time, in the early 1970s, there was increased involvement of the public sector in bus service provision as exemplified by the operations of Bendel Line, Kaduna State Transport Authority, Kano Line, Water Line in Rivers State, Kwara Line, North East Line and Plateau State Transport Corporation and so on. By the late 1970s, most of them had collapsed for varying reasons ranging from financial impropriety, inadequate financial support, dearth of qualified staff, undue political interference and uncontrolled competition from paratransit operators (Adeniji 1983).

As earlier argued, the severe urban transport crisis of the late 1980s prompted a swift response from the Federal government, with the initiation of the Federal Urban Mass Transit Programme (FUMTP). State governments that had not established any bus undertaking or whose bus corporations had collapsed were directed to create State Mass Transit Agencies (SMTA) and operate them as limited liability companies. In short, all state governments and extremely few local governments set up their bus undertakings or companies, through the support of the FUMTP, in order to meet the transport needs of the urban poor in particular among other things. The FUMTP later on metamorphosed into a fully institutionalized body or parastatal known as the Federal Urban Mass Transit Agency in August 1993, through Decree No. 67 of 1993. By 2000, the Federal Government directed that the FUMTA should start winding up its activities, as part of the rationalisation of government agencies, so as to increase efficiency and reduce waste.

While in operation, FUMTA was charged, among other things, with the responsibility of advising the Federal Government on policy issues affecting urban mass transit planning, operation and management in Nigeria. It was also expected to formulate the overall national policy on urban mass transit, with emphasis on the regulation of fares structure, safety standards and comfort of passengers. In addition to monitoring

and supervising their operations, FUMTA also offered financial and technical assistance to mass transit agencies at both the Federal and State government levels, as well as to private sector operators involved in various mass transit assisted schemes (including state owned mass transit agencies schemes, private sector operators, cooperatives and trade union scheme, as well as special intraurban mass transit scheme). Some local governments, especially in Lagos state also received FUMTA's technical support.

More specifically, the objectives of FUMTA, as enunciated in Decree No. 67 of 1993, included evolving effective and efficient development of urban mass transit System, improving the commuting difficulties of workers in major Nigerian urban centers, as well as modernizing and laying a solid foundation for orderly and comprehensive programme of urban mass transit in Nigeria and promoting economic growth, employment generation and other multiplier effects. Meanwhile, FUMTA continued to focus attention on the implementation of the four basic components that formed the core of its activities. With respect to executing the road-based components, buses, vehicle spare parts and mobile workshops were provided to state owned mass transit companies based on requests, and assistance was also given in the construction of workshops and maintenance centers. Efforts were also made at providing and improving rail mass transit services in the Lagos, Ibadan, and Enugu areas, as far as the rail-based component was concerned, while old ferries and jetties were repaired and refurbished and new ferries bought, in order to boost urban water transport services in selected areas, through the implementation of the water-based component. The intermodal component involved FUMTA's research, training and human capital development activities.

While the beneficiaries of the urban mass transit assisted schemes continued to receive buses through soft loan arrangements under favourable terms (subsidized buses and a pay back time of three years), there was also in place a broader strategy (structural adjustment relief package) of improving urban transportation in general. For instance, the Federal government in 1989 reduced very considerably the import duties and tariffs on mass transit or large capacity vehicles, chassis and spare parts, from 25 per cent to 5 per cent, in addition to providing US\$ 30 million loan to transport operators across the board. Relatively cheaper fuels (premium motor spirit and diesel), through differential pricing, were sold to commercial vehicles, as a means of

reducing and subsequently stabilizing public transport fares. Ail of these measures were short-lived and did not have the desired far-reaching effect on the public transport market. It is also noteworthy that some form of state government assistance was provided to some categories of public transport operators such as tricycle operators in Lagos state and the partnership between Lagos State government and the private sector in running Eko Transport Services .

4 SUSTAINABILITY OF LOW COST⁵ PUBLIC TRANSPORT SERVICES

Sustainability, in the sense that it is used here, has to do with the prospects of survival for the public transport services in question. It is also linked to the concepts of financial sustainability and social sustainability (Gwilliam and Shalizi 1996). The financial sustainability dimension relates particularly to publicly owned bus undertakings in Nigeria, whose services are priced very low in comparison to other public transport modes that ply same routes and/or move between the same trip origins and destination. Indeed, in several cases, the fares charged by mass transit companies is usually about half or one-third of what private transport operators charge over the same distance. For their passengers, the fares are sufficiently low and affordable (Adesanya 1994). However, the situation on ground clearly implies that the current regime of low fare policy, among other factors, has made most publicly owned bus undertakings or mass transit companies (as they are referred to in Nigeria) to be financially unsustainable, thereby limiting their capacity to operate efficiently and serve those in the low-income cadre, who constitute the bulk of their passengers.

Undoubtedly, publicly owned bus undertakings in Nigeria constitute a 'low cost'⁷ public transport option from the perspective of the consumers of their services. This may be expected given the fact that there is a lot of interference and interest in their operations by politicians, who often insist on low fare charges without any reasonable allowance or provision for operating subsidies. Until May 1999, when civilians took over the mantle of leadership in Nigeria, more than three-quarters of the State Mass Transit Agencies were at the verge of total collapse, with many of them having vehicle turnout rate which was as low as 5 per cent. It is only in the last two years that attempts are now being made frantically by affected states and local governments to resuscitate their mass transit agencies. According to Bolade (1996), the ratio of operational buses in the fleet of mass transit agencies declined from 60 per cent in 1992 to 25.4 per cent in 1995. This current

situation of poor operating and financial performance of publicly owned transport companies and their unimpressive track record, as earlier observed, raise a serious question about their sustainability. The recurring collapse of state owned bus undertakings has defeated the purpose for which they are established. Hence, most urban residents, including the urban poor, are left at the mercy of private sector operators of minibuses, motorcycles, taxis and so on, who charge exorbitant fares, in addition to providing inadequate and poor services. Ironically, state and local governments are still investing in their respective mass transit companies.

Some of the reasons for the failure of most mass transit companies, despite the operating guidelines provided by FUMTA, include:

- Poor monitoring of operations, and inadequate financial control and management,
- Huge operating losses, due to unrealistic low fares and poor cost recovery strategies,
- Dearth of funds and inadequate spare parts and workshops for vehicle repairs and maintenance, resulting partly in low vehicle turnout,
- High staff to bus ratio (18.5 and 10.9 staff per operating bus at the defunct Lagos State Transport Corporation and Yankari Express in 1992) and bloated workforce (Adesanya, 1994),
- Little or no concern for vehicle standardisation and other operational guidelines (prudent management, limiting models of buses to preferably two types)
- Unnecessary government interference

For a very long time to come, the private sector is still likely to dominate the urban public transport market. As noted, the 'low cost public transport provision strategy, in the context of this paper and Nigeria of today, has to do with investing in relatively cheap, fairly used and imported vehicles, and locally fabricated or adapted vehicles. The foregoing attributes have not in any way made public transport fares affordable to many urban poor and captive riders of public transport. Nevertheless, the Federal government has, as from January 2002, imposed a ban on the importation of vehicles that are more than 5 years old. This is partly in response to the indiscriminate dumping of vehicles that have outlived their useful lives into the country and the attendant environmental and safety implications.

The expected effect of the aforementioned policy action includes very sharp increases in the cost of vehicle procurement and public transport fares, or the steady worsening of service quality if available fleet of public transport cannot be easily replaced. The

current state of the economy vis-à-vis the restriction on the age of vehicles to be imported into Nigeria therefore raises a question on the dependability of the 'low cost' imported public transport and commercial vehicles and how to replace them in the nearest future, if the state of the economy does not improve substantially. Beyond this, appropriate government authorities must work concertedly with transport unions, in order to ensure that fares are kept at reasonable and affordable levels.

Furthermore, commercial motorcycles, which are also 'low cost' public transport modes, are known to offer door-to-door service, have the ability to wade through congested traffic as well as connect many low-income neighbourhoods that have little or no access to conventional public transport modes such as buses and taxis. There is, however, a growing concern about their safety and high fares. Studies have clearly indicated that commercial motorcycles are relatively more expensive than other public transport modes (Adesanya 1994 and Bolade 1996) and that most riders have little or no knowledge about traffic rules and regulations. Indeed, there is a growing debate on whether or not motorcycle operators should be allowed to provide public transport services, in the light of increasing cases of fatal accidents associated with them, their low passenger carrying capacity and steady contribution to urban traffic congestion. What is not deniable is that commercial motorcycles have become an integral part of urban public transport System in Nigeria. However, their sustainability would depend on the perception of their clients and policy makers, as being affordable, safe, efficient user of road space and environmentally friendly.

5 CONCLUSIONS

For a country like Nigeria where poverty is rife and the high rate of urbanisation is not abating, the mobility and accessibility needs of the urban poor in particular cannot be ignored. Indeed, state owned mass transit agencies still provide relatively cheaper services, but their sustainability as 'low-cost public transport outfit, given their poor operating and financial performance, is very much in doubt except drastic measures are made to genuinely address the identified problems. Attempts should also be made to control and improve the services of commercial motorcycle operators, regulate the fares charged by private sector operators, in addition to revitalising local vehicle assembly plants and the economy in general. This is to ensure that adequate, affordable, safer and sustainable public transport modes can steadily meet the transport needs of the generality of urban residents.

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