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INFORMAL AND UNMAPPED, BUT RESILIENT

AUTHOR

▶ Ray Walsh

They're demanding public transport investment after decades of neglect. Yet planners, helped by the use of data to map and organise informal transport, must be careful that new projects don't prove counterproductive and disrupt informal networks.



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Cities in the Middle East and Africa are ancient and densely populated, yet most are missing the formal public transport typical to Europe and East Asia. Their cities remain committed to cars and buses, and while informal bus networks are thriving, the region's congestion is getting untenable.

Ian Jennings, senior specialist in urban transport for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), says that despite a lack of policy and funding, independent operators represent a diverse and fragmented public transport market.

Africa's informal networks are incredibly adaptive and resilient.

© Devin de Vries
Co-founder, WhereIsMyTransport

"There are a lot of people with livelihoods depending on running small buses. Adapting toward a new system that gives everyone a fair share of new projects is one of the big political issues going forward," he says.

To date, the EBRD has funded more than 300 public transport projects, and in recent years its focus has shifted to include Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon.

Despite the historical lack of investment, Jennings says that for public transport in the region, times are changing. "You see a different social dynamic than five years ago. People see that service is getting worse, and discontent with how things are is stronger. The political process is changing, and people are getting vocal."

Mapping the unknown

Devin de Vries is a co-founder of WhereIsMyTransport, a provider of transport data and services for African cities. He says the region has strong motivation to support informal transport alongside newer, formal systems.

"African cities have the longest way to travel in developing their infrastructure for

the most part, but many of them are actually rich in mobility assets. Africa's informal networks are incredibly adaptive and resilient," said de Vries. "Without subsidies, you would never find that kind of coverage in Europe or North America."

He said that in developing markets, as much as 80% of journeys are made with informal transport options, and he's optimistic that technology can enhance these networks' sustainability. "With the resilience these markets have demonstrated, we have to recognise that they look different to what you would see in developed markets, and so does the solution."

de Vries says that technology needs to be introduced in a responsible manner that supports incremental change, growth and development. "Reliable and accurate information on transport is extremely difficult, because the underlying system required to connect disparate modes of transport doesn't exist. We need to map the complete transport networks of cities so that we can provide a central repository to store all this transport data, in a way that it's accurate, up to date and representative of the entire network."

De Vries says that city governments don't subsidise the sector, but they recognise that it's the lifeblood of their transport networks. He cautions that cooperation will be difficult to initiate, because of a historic distrust between the informal sector and transportation authorities.

"WhereIsMyTransport hopes that digital solutions can create opportunity and have positive effects on their viability and sustainability. Independent operators are business owners, and they also need to find a way to digitise and improve the efficiency of their services."

Urban sprawl and the final mile

Perhaps the world's fastest growing city, Cairo operates a three-line metro with long-term plans to expand to six. Serving four million passengers a day, it is one of only a few metro systems in all of Africa and the Middle East.





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Mohamed Hegazy is director of Transport for Cairo, a research lab mapping transport networks in the city of 23 million. He says that starting in the 1970s, the city expanded communities into the surrounding desert to ease housing pressure in the central

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© Mohamed Hegazy, Director, Transport for Cairo

city. These 'desert cities' have not been the draw they were originally planned to be, and Hegazy says that they cover an area twice the size of Cairo.

Hegazy's organisation has mapped all transportation in all eight desert communities. He says that half of all journeys in the Cairo region are informal, and he echoes De Vries on that network's strengths. Its coverage areas are reasonably good, and they are faster than formal options. On the other hand he says, reliability and service levels are a problem and fares increase greatly with distance.

Hegazy says informal networks must be taken into account so that they can act efficiently as feeders. "Even if we get to the planned six metro lines, most of the city will not be covered geographically. Informal operators are part of the network, and we are not taking them into account enough yet. We really need to take a critical look at how we allocate resources and opportunity costs, and invest in paratransit and build on its strengths."

Preparing for a modal shift that must happen

Jack van der Merwe is CEO of Gautrain Management Agency, a rapid rail network in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Gauteng is a small but highly urban province that includes Johannesburg and Pretoria.

Van der Merwe says that establishing an infrastructure to provide an alternative to cars is no longer an option. "This is the first

time that the transport industry has bigger forces working on it that you can't ignore. We are running into bigger and bigger delays and more unpredictability because of congestion. Another is the issue of pollution, and a third driving force is availability of fossil fuels. We need more efficiency in mobility, and the worst solution is the private car."

van der Merwe says that in South Africa, people have historically favoured cars in part because people often lived great distances from where they work. Second, many living in rural areas identify with the freedom that cars represent. "There is a natural tendency toward private car use, and we're going in the opposite direction," he says.

Van der Merwe says that the country suffers from a fragmented transport model. But he says the passage of the National Land Transport Act in 2009 has allowed for greater coordination of long-term planning and operations of the country's public transport, something that has had positive effects. "Forty percent of Gautrain ridership is people who own cars. These are people with a choice, and they've made the modal shift."

Opportunities for long-term players

Hegazy says that transport tends to be project based, and he advises these projects to add funding to engage with paratransit. "When you have 40,000 drivers, it's not easy. But just because it's difficult to engage them doesn't mean we can afford not to," he says.

Jennings says companies in the transport sector would be wise to look for opportunities in the region, but they can't be focused on immediate gain. "There are emerging opportunities, if companies want engage from a long-term perspective and not a quick contract. They need to have longer term vision. In five to ten years, opportunities will open up increasingly." /

