

**‘Informal’ transport sector workers in the GHEA  
A perspective from the driver’s seat**

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## 1. Introduction

None of the major cities in the Greater Horn of East Africa (GHEA) be it Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Kampala or Dar es Salaam have a mass transit system to efficiently move hundreds of thousands of city residents around. Many researchers and analysts of urban planning and infrastructure point to the absence of an efficient public transportation system as the main cause of congestion, accidents and incessant traffic jams. This vacuum has been filled by privately owned transportation service providers using minivan taxis known as *matatu* in Nairobi, *daladala* in Dar es Salaam, or the *danfo* in Lagos. They have been joined by three-wheel rickshaws (known as *bajaji’s* in Dar es Salaam) and motorbikes (known as *boda boda* in Uganda).

This GHEA Outlook explores the relationship between the drivers and crew - collectively defined as informal transport sector workers since most work on a casual basis - and their employers, clients and law enforcement officials. While they offer an essential service, they also suffer from a very negative reputation. The broader social attitude towards the way they do their work is one of disdain and disrespect. Indeed, given that they seem to flout the law at every turn, they are considered to be just slightly better than petty criminals. However, until very recently, their voices have hardly been heard. They have had no ‘right of reply’ in the court of public, policy and political opinion.

This newsletter seeks to explore their perspective in this debate. These are stories and perspectives that are not well known due either to the silence of the drivers or an established sentiment amongst the public that these people are not worth listening to.

The recent *Al-Jazeera* documentary<sup>i</sup> and ongoing blog<sup>ii</sup> covered by James Kariuki, a *matatu* driver, has sparked an interesting debate on the lives and challenges that people in the *matatu* industry face. There has not been a significant amount of literature covering the challenges and livelihoods that the people behind the wheel face in Nairobi. What type of living conditions do these drivers and workers go through? Is urban transportation their way of being resilient to their poverty stricken livelihoods? What can be done to improve their conditions and incomes? Would the establishment of official urban transportation methods disrupt their livelihoods and have them descent to even more poverty and inequality?

## 2. The challenge of mass urban transportation

### 2.1 “These drivers are a making the city impossible!”

Writing in the December 24-30 edition of The East African newspaper, Charles Onyango-Obbo observes,

“When you read travel tales from Kampala these days, the “boda boda menace” — sometimes ahead of dirty tap water and electricity outages — tops the list of the city’s horrors. The boda boda problem, nay, boda boda question, has become so acute, even an early great defender of it as the most easily available job for young people in a country with over 80 per cent youth unemployment, has despaired. He told me, “I understand why we have boda boda, but it has become impossible. They are making the city impossible.”<sup>iii</sup>

These cities have become impossible due to the challenge of not having an official public transportation system. This is primarily due to the city’s inability to meet the growing demand of the population due to rapid urbanization. Although many of the cities at some point had large government owned busses serving as a crucial linkage for urban transportation, maintaining this and trying to keep the business afloat was difficult without any public subsidy. This led to a deterioration of these nationalized buses and in the vacuum the shift to minibuses began. The rise of minibuses and informal urban transportation units was not primarily due to the deregulation of public transportation but a local response to growing demand and commercial opportunity.<sup>iv</sup>

These minibuses are symbolized by the *matatu* in Nairobi and the *daladala* in Dar es Salaam. They are painted in a variety of colors, graffiti and have names, symbols and images of politicians and activists. The vehicles carry powerful, relevant and timely social political economic and cultural commentary. They reflect the sentiment of the ordinary citizens.

However, *matatu* and *daladala*, drivers and conductors provide a crucial service to a society, which nevertheless sees them as somewhat undesirable. They are simultaneously part of society and alienated from it. This duality of being both

included and excluded into society represents the dilemma faced everyday by the drivers and crew from this informal transportation industry. The dominant narrative about the transport sector workers is negative. When in an informal, unscientific poll, this GHEA Outlook asked a few residents of Nairobi and Dar es Salaam what words came to mind when they thought about *matatus* or *daladalas*, the following was the result:



Such strong stereotyping is further entrenched by official analysis. In a World Bank study on urban mobility the report clearly states that these minibuses ‘present clear disadvantages from the perspective of the public interest’:

- **Road congestion**-these matatus and daladalas account for the majority of traffic jams due to their reckless style of driving and not abiding to traffic laws;
- **Accidents and road fatalities** – a significant amount of motor vehicle accidents have a high probability of involving one or two matatus or daladalas. They may not even be the cause of the accident but are accused nonetheless.
- **Sheer Unpredictability** – a sense of ‘my way or no way’ attitude by the drivers and crew leads to changes in routes, schedules and fares which create a chaotic environment at the cost of passengers.

## 2.2 The solution should be to abolish them all

Most of the solutions provided by researchers, academics and government officials consist of phasing out the informal system partly or entirely. The debate arises on if

and how to include these drivers and crewmembers into the new “formal” mode of urban transportation. The phasing out aspects have already begun in Nairobi as the Government of Kenya has attempted to get rid of the 14-seater minibuses and establish policies to mitigate the problems caused by matatus. The Michuki rules, implemented in 2004, sought to regulate the industry by eliminating standing on city buses, overcrowding, establishing speed governors and safety belts. This was seen as a step in the right direction because it tackled a lot of the issues regarding safety and overcrowding. Matatu owners opposed it for being costly. They relented after their clients, the passengers, boycotted their services.

Other recommendations have been to establish various forms of bus rapid transit (BRT) systems, but it is not clear how these would incorporate those who were previously involved in the *matatu* and *daladala* industry. The December 2011 African Business magazine had a cover story entitled “The Future of Africa’s Cities.” It had the following to say about the potential future of public transport strategies in African cities:

***UN Habitat State of African Cities Report 2010*** wants central and local governments to set an example by, “Discouraging the use of private vehicles through pricing, taxation and/or restriction of vehicular access to city centres during specific hours of the day, supported by better public transportation options.”<sup>v</sup>

### ***Kinshasa***

“A new public transport network, called KINrapid is being developed to make use of the new roads. Operated by Citilinks and AEC Congonext, it will feature central platform stations in the style of an underground train system. At this stage the government hopes to provide dedicated bus lanes for the vehicles, although it will be interesting to see whether this plan is maintained in the face of growing traffic volumes.”<sup>vi</sup>

### ***Nairobi’s Metro 2030: A World Class African Metropolis***<sup>vii</sup>

Key highlights of the ambitious plans are to establish a mass rapid transit system, rapid light rail, non-motorized transportation, closed circuit television and efficient GPS mapping, together with an effective parking system to give Nairobi an edge.” Jennifer Graeff of the Center for Sustainable Urban Development of the Earth Institute feels that strengthening civic associations and the possible creation of unions for the drivers and crews may be a very constructive way to address the challenges and concerns. Representation is key, and she feels everyone should be represented in some capacity, from the drivers to the owners and even the passenger.

## **3. Money Torture-A matatu driver’s perspective**

### **3.1 A Reintroduction**

James Kariuki, the matatu driver covered in a documentary by *Al-Jazeera*, wrote a telling letter to *The Daily Nation*, one of Kenya’s major newspapers, that in many

ways explains the life of a matatu driver and their relationship to a society that hates and needs them:

*"I am one of those you just love to hate. We're the backbone of Kenya's black market, expected to pay off everyone from police to criminal gangs. Perhaps you don't have any idea what it's like to be the black sheep of the country, but let me explain: We wake up at three every morning to bring milk to Nairobi, from there we take cops who have been on night duties home, then pick up newspaper vendors, company drivers, office workers and your school kids. After we are done with you, we take your housewife or houseboy to their secret lovers.*

*Then comes Sunday and the entire Christian community depends on us. The pastors ought to pray for us, seeing we are assisting them in their missionary work, but instead they condemn us for missing the Sunday service. We are lucky that it is not them, but God who judges us, otherwise we could be the most cursed human beings on the face of the earth."*

The narrative above puts a human face to those who have been delegitimized and in some ways dehumanized.

From the blogs written by James and the documentary on him produced by *Al-Jazeera* a subtle breakthrough is made where the audience is finally compelled to recognize the humanity in the *matatu* and *daladala* drivers and crew. They face immense challenges and constant threats to their livelihoods and well being. These individuals have to fight a quartet of enemies and demons; the state (symbolized by the police), passengers, targeted attacks of violence from criminals and most importantly, themselves.

### **3.2 High risks, low rewards**

From the onset, one of the major themes pronounced in the blog of James and the documentary is the high-risk low reward lifestyle that *matatu* industry consists of. Another theme is how the blog serves as a defensive mechanism against the majority of the criticisms that were previously discussed. James explains that the *matatu* sector is one of the major employers of the city as it employs over a hundred thousand members of the youth and helps in securing jobs for thousands of mechanics and petrol station attendants.

However, despite the public service that the industry provides, the risks are very high and dangerous. The main dangers that *matatu* drivers face come from competition with other drivers, accidents, police harassment and the risk of being put in jail, the anxiety that comes with making and reaching profit targets and maintaining vehicles that are already in bad shape. The primary risk drivers face is accidents and road fatalities, which are constantly on the minds of *matatu* drivers. The majority of accidents that involve *matatus* are head on collisions and as a result the driver is usually the first to die. The reckless driving and operating without any

official form of licensing and understanding of traffic rules contribute to the constant threat of accidents. The challenge for the drivers is that they face a strong incentive to carry full loads of passengers so they can maximize revenues and minimize variable costs like fuel and guaranteeing the targets set out by the owners.<sup>viii</sup>

They also have the pressure of reaching their destinations quickly since they are competing with other *matatus* and the constant complaining by the passengers. These two pressures are what lead to the high accident rates and fatalities. The added trouble of not being properly insured also puts a strain on drivers and families so even if they survive an accident, they may sustain heavy injuries that are not treated and eventually lead to death. Employers of the drivers and owners have no legal obligation to assist the drivers since there is no written contract. These owners may try to seek more concessions from the driver for any damage to the vehicles. As a result, these *matatu* drivers are excluded from Kenya's healthcare system.

The second risk the industry faces is from the police and effectively the state. There is a great deal of mistrust between the police and the informal public transportation industry. Ironically, a significant amount of *matatu and daladala* owners are either policeman or retired and acting government officials. James talks about two traffic laws in Nairobi, one for ordinary motorists and a special one for the *matatu*. Drivers are pulled over constantly by the police due to high corruption levels and illegal tax collections. The police understand that many *matatu and daladala* drivers break traffic laws every day and some have criminal records and thus easier to book them.

In the *Al-Jazeera* documentary, a telling moment that captures the relationship between those in the industry and the police is when Kariuki states, "when the police is not on your side then that means the state is against you" and in essence these individuals are treated like second-class citizens with no human rights or representation. This goes back to the duality of the world the drivers and crewmembers face, they are included in the system but only to a certain point because the state excludes them from representation.

The other risks are the passengers and drivers themselves. As mentioned earlier, the *matatu* driver can be seen as his own worst enemy. Passengers perpetuate the recklessness of the industry because they have unrealistic expectations from the drivers to get them through the traffic very fast to make impossible time. These expectations lead to the drivers breaking the law and risking the lives of everyone in the car but the drivers have to make that sacrifice in order to survive. Each day is a battle for crewmembers and drivers due to their casual employment status. This job insecurity begets reckless behavior, which in turn increases the chances of death, demonstrating the vicious cycle these *matatu and daladala* drivers are living in.

All of these high risks have very low rewards. The average working day consists of a 15-hour stretch almost seven days a week in a high intensity and stress environment. Within those hours drivers can be beaten, killed, have their cars hijacked by criminals and still not make enough money to meet the needs of their families. In his blog, James asks fellow drivers how much they make per day and the responses varied

from Kshs 200 - 1500 (\$2-17) per day, or Kshs 4,000 (\$47) a week which equates to about Kshs 800 (\$9) a day. Income is sporadic and hardly guaranteed. Family needs range from, at minimum, Kshs 300 - 600 (\$3-7) per day. How do families survive? The burden weighs heavily on women as well since the drivers are predominantly men and are away from the home for extended periods of time, leaving the women to care for the children, home and other stresses that arise in poor urban environments.

### 3.2 Drivers do provide solutions

Despite the numerous challenges *matatu* drivers face, they do have solutions and recommendations that could help alleviate the pressures they face and potentially establish a functioning urban transportation system. James proposes various recommendations and solutions, some that even match what academics, and policymakers suggest.

**Circulation of highway codes:** It is no secret that the majority of the drivers do not know safety rules and regulations. Some of them have never driven prior their respective *matatu* or *daladala* jobs. James suggests that Kenyan authorities should donate highway codes to *matatu* drivers so that they are aware of their environment instead of driving blind.

**Official recognition by unions:** James does not seem to be supportive of the Matatu Owners Association (MOA) and there seems to be a disconnect between drivers and the MOA as well as other unions. James believes drivers need to be officially recognized by unions, instead of being excluded in decision-making processes like the recent strike in Nairobi, drivers and workers in the industry should be included. A unified union will be very effective in meeting the needs of the drivers and simultaneously having constructive dialogue with authorities.

**Comprehensive registration system:** Advances in technology should allow and ensure every vehicle to be registered by specific owners and be linked up into a system that is accessible by to the police. This would help curb stolen *matatu* vehicles and car jacking and in some ways mitigate bribery.

**Insurance for drivers and crewmembers:** James does not state outright whom or how drivers should be insured but he endorses an effective insurance plan that covers at least the basic needs of drivers and crewmembers during emergencies. He believes that if drivers were treated like other Kenyans are treated, then at the very least basic insurance should be given to them.

### **Easy-Pay Pension Scheme to Benefit Transport Workers**

“The Retirement Benefits Authority (RBA) plans to launch a scheme targeting the transport industry next month to encourage savings in the informal sector. The scheme, which aims to recruit 50,000 members, will help drivers and conductors to save a minimum of Sh20 every day on top of their employers' contribution of Sh30. RBA chief executive Edward Odundo said drivers and conductors could secure their livelihoods upon retirement in a sector that employs workers on a casual basis. "We will launch a retirement scheme for workers in the public transport industry before the end of this year," said Mr Odundo.”<sup>1</sup>

## **4. Key Insights**

### **Insight #1 –The *matatu* and *daladala* industry highlight a class divide**

If you look at the criticisms leveled at the *matatu* and *daladala* industry, you will notice that the majority of them stem from people who do not use them as a mode of transportation. The sentiments and feelings towards people in the industry, demonstrated by the descriptions earlier (criminals, reckless, hustlers etc.), come from middle to upper class people and the elites. Most users of *matatus* and *daladalas* come from poorer neighborhoods and live a little outside the city. The condescending tone from people you speak with and diagnostic reports highlight the class divide that exists in urban circles as well as in the debate of urban transportation.

The recommendations provided also come from the very same people who do not ride on the *matatus* and *daladalas*. Recommendations such as abolishing the industry all together and pinpointing them as the major cause of traffic jams, congestion and accidents are some examples of how a class divide is perpetuated. In stating that *matatus* and *daladalas* should be abolished there is an underestimation of what is to happen to these drivers and crewmembers after they abolish the industry. Most of the recommendations exclude those who work in the industry and by doing so will increase the unemployment numbers among the youth and isolate them more in poverty. Although they industry does not provide an essential service to the elites and upper class, the criticisms ignore the real value of these services to the poor and vulnerable who are the majority of those living in urban areas.

### **Insight #2 – An official urban transportation system could destroy informal transport workers livelihoods**

Many of the recommendations provided by the diagnostic studies claim that establishing an official urban transportation system complemented with metropolitan transport authorities is the solution to the challenges in urban



transportation. Bus rapid transit (BRT) implementation and using larger buses instead of the minibuses used by the informal sector are also suggestions promoted by “official” assessments of urban transportation. “Large buses provide greater comfort, safety, and speed than minibuses, particularly on high density corridors, if they can be managed efficiently and sustainably. They also hold out the promise of relieving the growing congestion of African cities.”<sup>ix</sup> The assumption here is that these large buses will solve the majority of the problems but it isn’t clear whose problems it will solve and what is to become of the informal sector. Will they be brought into this new bus service? According to a report titled “Sustainability Assessment of a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) System: The Case of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania” if *daladala* drivers were asked to join and drive a bus service owned by the government, 37% of them would decline the offer.<sup>x</sup>

In an attempt to improve the efficiency on aggregate of urban transportation, there is a very real risk that “informal” transport providers will be completely cut out due to the tendency to exclude them from any discussion. This pattern is not dissimilar to the transport corridors where you can lower the aggregate costs to the economy but you raise it for the poor and vulnerable. A BRT system in Dar es Salaam or Nairobi or any of the major cities will surely kick the drivers out of the labor market. By establishing a formal bus system, there will be certain rules and regulations the drivers will have to follow. Who will teach and train them these rules? Most of the drivers do not have licenses, what will happen to them if they cannot pass a drivers test? The BRT report states that *daladala* drivers who have secondary education and above will be trained and recruited as BRT bus drivers. Most of the drivers only have a primary education.

### **Insight #3 - Matatu drivers have solutions, but who is listening?**

After dissecting the blog of James Kairuki and the documentary on him, it is obvious that the people in this informal transportation industry understand the problems and have solutions. However, do people listen to them? Conventional wisdom has usually guided officials and transportation gurus to ignore the word of *matatu* and *daladala* drivers because they are uneducated thugs that have nothing of value to say.

The blog paints a different picture and shows that James and his colleagues do have solutions to improve their industry and urban transportation in general. A lot of their solutions correspond with official recommendation such as education campaigns about traffic rules and regulations, regulation and oversight focusing on data information, vehicle registration and establishing effective unions for the drivers. Streamlining the recommendations of the drivers in the industry with official policy may go a long way into improving the urban transportation system. More inclusion, less exclusion may be the best way to have the best solutions implemented.

## Insight #4 – Religion is an important coping mechanism for drivers

There are two known ways drivers in this industry cope with the stresses and challenges they experience, taking drugs or drinking alcohol. Drug and alcohol consumption serves as an outlet for these drivers who feel trapped with no real way out. In most cases, the drivers and crewmembers are under the influence when they are operating their respective vehicles. Nonetheless, a third outlet that seems to be prominent among drivers is religion. In analyzing the blog posts by James, it was clear that religion was an underlying theme that is mentioned quite often, signifying its importance to the drivers. He writes “because of our poor reading culture, what with the daily struggle to meet the ever-increasing cost of living and paying for our kids education; all that is left is to listen to pastors and preachers that speak about God.” Religion is a resilience tool used by *matatu* and *dala dala* drivers to get through their very dangerous and unpredictable lives. Everything about their jobs is inconsistent and sporadic, however religion is a constant.

### Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup>[http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2011/12/201112510241428663.html?utm\\_content=automateplus&utm\\_campaign=Trials6&utm\\_source=SocialFlow&utm\\_medium=MasterAccount&utm\\_term=tweets](http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2011/12/201112510241428663.html?utm_content=automateplus&utm_campaign=Trials6&utm_source=SocialFlow&utm_medium=MasterAccount&utm_term=tweets)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://wambururu.wordpress.com/category/matatu-matters/>

<sup>iii</sup> “ <http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/OpEd/comment/-/434750/1294992/-/item/0/-/gd5bkaz/-/index>.”

<sup>iv</sup> “Stuck in Traffic: Urban Transport in Africa,” Africa Infrastructure Country Diagnostic

<sup>v</sup> “UN Habitat’s blueprint” p. 24, African Business no. 381, December 2011

<sup>vi</sup> “Case Study: Kinshasa, DR Congo” p. 28, African Business no. 381, December 2011

<sup>vii</sup> “Nairobi’s new master plan” p. 230, African Business no. 381, December 2011

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid

<sup>ix</sup> “Stuck in Traffic: Urban Transportation in Africa”

<sup>x</sup> Sustainability Assessment of a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) System: The Case of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania by Merahi Teklemariam Afherom