

## **JUST, FAIR, SAFE AND AFFORDABLE PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN THE GAUTENG CITY REGION**

**By Ayabonga Cawe, May 2022**

Walking, driving, or commuting out of Freedom Park is a reminder that much of what we live with in South Africa is 'new', but more significant, is what remains unchanged. The paved, albeit small pathways of this neighbourhood, signal what has been built and what has or has not withstood the test of time and the elements. The roadways and kerbs remain small, congested and contested spaces, and the entire local economy congregates around the transit nodes in the mini taxi ranks populated by queue marshals, drivers, expectant owners and anxious and impatient commuters.

Yet beyond the morning peak, the transit node is eerily quiet but for the hawkers and short distance taxi drivers lounging about between their marginal trips within the township, rather than to the city. Freedom Park is an example of an unjust and unusual spatial reality, whose manifestation is the daily commute to work, or to places of learning, or recreation and leisure. The public transport system dominated by the mini-bus taxi system is as informal and as ordinary for many as Freedom Park is, having started as an informal and temporary settlement, that has become a permanent spatial feature in the Gauteng City Region.

Post-Apartheid South Africa is the most unequal society in the world, and from the history of settler colonialism and Apartheid this is unsurprising. Yet the end of Apartheid has also given rise to a set of objective factors that have made Gauteng the focal point of this inequality.

Under Apartheid, Africans in South Africa were restricted in their choices of where they could live and work, and were rendered by legislation, 'alien' in urban South Africa, unless their labour power could be drawn on by some employer. The end of Apartheid led to the repeal of these restrictions, which led to not only a rapid inflow of people from the rural and semi-rural peripheral areas outside of Gauteng and further afield, subverting the Apartheid logic, but also the growth of the cities through new housing (and at times permanently informal) developments, and subsequently transport networks on the margins of the city, that further entrenched urban sprawl and dispersed settlement patterns.

Where many of these new residents live and where they work has always been spatially distant. Largely due to limited economic and industrial investments in the periphery of the Gauteng City Region, many of these workers can and only do find work in the city, far from where they live. From a public transport perspective, the most significant challenge confronting the Gauteng City Region is that Apartheid created an unusual density profile. Transport investments, both public and private, ideally follow 'concentrations' of people,

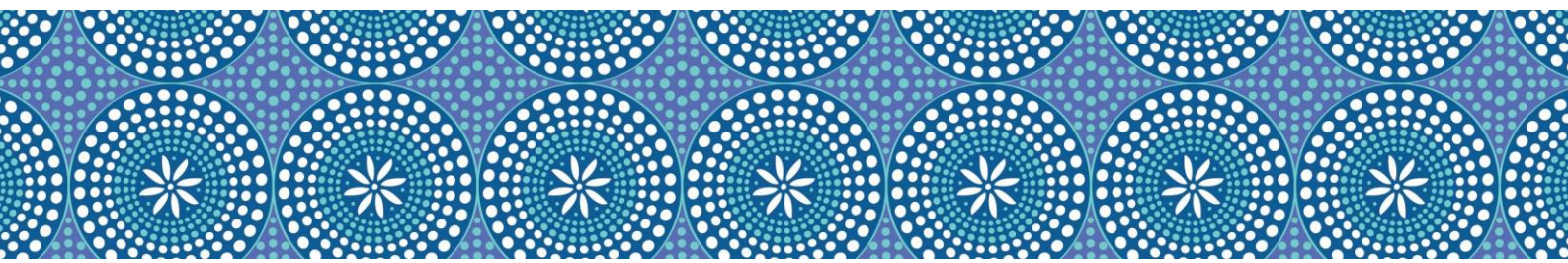
if people congregate in a particular area, a minibus taxi route often follows. Yet cities in Gauteng have 'islands of high density' in the townships with dotted 'matchbox houses' alongside empty expanses that flow into large areas of low density in the suburbs and the margins of central business districts.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) South Africa recently commissioned a report assessing the current quality of and access to public transport services in the Gauteng City Region. This report titled *Assessing Just Public Transport Outcomes in the Gauteng City Region*. Drawing on philosopher Henri Lefebvre's idea of 'rights to the city', the FES report concerns itself with the notion of social justice as a concern with how resources and opportunities are shared within a particular spatial form, *who is included and excluded, empowered and disempowered* in the design and functioning of cities as economic, social and political spaces? The Report emerges from the Just Cities Initiative spearheaded by FES programmes in Southern Africa, with a specific focus on countering 'Smart City narratives' which foreground hi-tech and market-driven visions of urban development, without consideration to social justice and confronting widespread inequality.

With the scope limited to the Gauteng City Region, the report focuses on how public transportation is viewed within the context of urban development, and whether it is seen as public good with no rivalry in access, or as a commodified space, where transport services are sold and exchanged to those who are willing to pay, on terms determined by the risk-return matrices of the marketplace. Gauteng also provides a useful case study, not just as a site of significant investment in public transport, but also as a space where transport systems are not institutionally coordinated nor integrated in a meaningful way that is designed with the end-user in mind. The funding mechanisms are fragmented and complicated and in the case of scholar transport for instance, one finds that the policy making function rests with national department of transport and the resourcing resting with the Department of Education. There are many other examples – such as various subsidised bus services funded by the provincial administration, which may sometimes share infrastructure with municipally administered bus services, with no clear sense of route distribution nor financial and other responsibility over shared infrastructure.

The accessibility and the quality of public transport is influenced by these policy and institutional dimensions. Furthermore, the spatial planning and design of cities in the Gauteng City Region are complicated by the locational spread of road and other infrastructure investments, the subsidies and contracts for publicly supported services and the regulations that govern an increasingly diverse set of private providers.

The Report further outlines other challenges that confront our fragmented public transport system. Access to public transport in the province, determined by **service coverage** and **household income**, tells a striking tale. Drawing on work by the Gauteng City Region Observatory, the FES Report considers what is called the 'transport



deprivation index', which illustrates the differences across different areas, in so far as access to provincially contracted bus services and minibus taxis is concerned. From this assessment we can see that places like Khutsong, Boipatong, Ratanda and Winterveld, have the least access to minibus taxi and bus services.

Places like Tembisa, Soweto, Katlehong and Daveyton, in close proximity to industrial activity, had considerable service coverage. Yet, while many in these townships, may reside in an area with great coverage, the first and last mile the journey to and from the home to the closest, taxi rank, bus stop or train station may require a lengthy walk. The FES Report found, on this score that the picture had become worse. Walking time to access the first public transport service had increased from 9 minutes in 2014, to 14 minutes on average in 2019.

From a household income perspective, those with higher monthly incomes, while likely to spend larger amounts on travel, spend less time in transit. Ostensibly, this may be due to most relatively affluent households having access to faster transport modes (i.e. private cars and motorbikes) and being 'spatially located' close to amenities, such as schools, hospitals and shopping centres, and more importantly places of work. Furthermore, the poorer one's household is, the larger the proportion spent by that household on public transport.

These income dynamics interface with the race and gendered dimensions of transport inequality. Africans on average spent more than a quarter (27%) of their incomes on transport, as the FES report records (drawing on the Gauteng Household Transport Survey published by the Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research in 2020), while white households spent just over a tenth (11%) on transport, reflecting not only high incomes, but relatively lower time spent in commute. The Report also indicated that women were more likely to use public transport than men, who were more likely to drive a motor vehicle.

One might assume, because Gauteng is the economic heartland of South Africa and the Continent, that the significant investments in public transport via the Gautrain and the Bus Rapid Transit System, and existing municipal bus services and a competitive mini-bus taxi sector, all ensure that coverage would be widespread and universal. Yet as the Report highlights, while improvements have indeed occurred, key questions remain about whether the 'integration of various modes' will occur institutionally. This would require the kind of inter-governmental co-ordination, synergy and collaboration often so elusive in South Africa.

The introduction by the provincial government of the Transport Authority of Gauteng, as a co-ordinating body, while welcome, may have to confront the challenges of defining roles, responsibility and authority over different actions that can integrate transport modes, support measures (such as financing, contracting and infrastructure) and

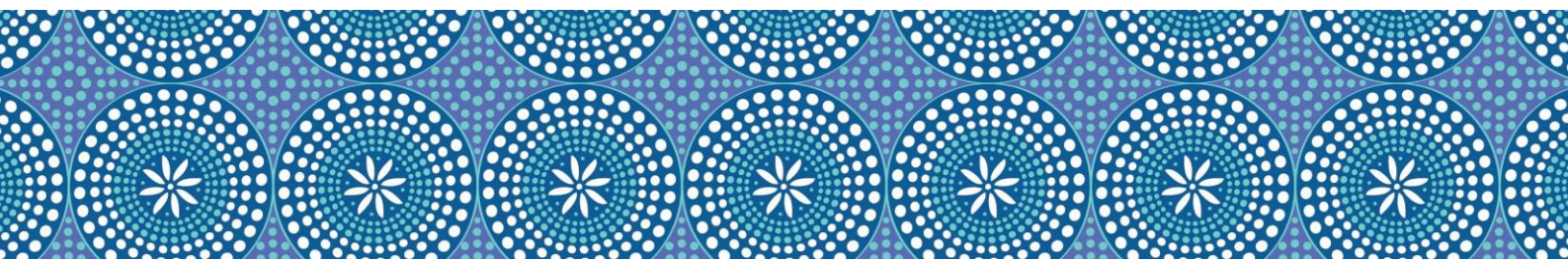
regulatory functions. The Transport Authority of Gauteng in playing this co-ordinating role will aim to give effect to the 1996 *White Paper on Transport Policy* and its call for integrated land and transport use, multi-modal planning, and the provision of guiding principles for all tiers of government.

The *White Paper on Transport Policy* sought to fundamentally transform the public transport sector, but it was developed in a context where transport services globally were undergoing significant change. These changes occurring globally and locally, limited the transformative possibility of such policy reforms, through widespread deregulation and privatisations of transport services across the world.

Unfortunately, even the 1996 White Paper suggested that the state become a 'contract manager' in some cases, a regulator in others, and at times serve as investor and ultimate operator, in a 'system' that remained fragmented and unsynchronised. The White Paper's suggestion that 'where public transport can be rendered as a profitable commercial services', competition would be encouraged, and the role of government would be for 'welfare, traffic management and strategic reasons' in the form of tendered contracts, reflecting the focus on outsourcing and decentralising the provision of transport rather than consideration of it as a 'public good', subject to non-rivalry and non-exclusivity in consumption.

This approach gave rise to new funding approaches, such as securing finance via concessions and 'build-operate-transfer' mechanisms. In the case of rail, for freight and passenger purposes, any further investment would be determined by market needs, commercial viability and social considerations. How these considerations have been balanced has been a matter of 'struggle' and contest. For instance, in the current moment it is clear that the state and efficacy of rail infrastructure meets neither commercial nor social needs of industry and low-income users of passenger rail. This unfortunate outcome may to some degree have been an outcome of policy framed in response to concerns of fiscal neutrality, rather than universal access as a crucial feature of any transformative economic strategy.

Viewed in this way, public transport is yet to be a 'public good' funded for non-rivalrous ends and the public support system envisaged is still very reliant on 'user-pay principles' for investments in underlying infrastructure, cost recovery for subsidised services, and an 'under-class' of minibus taxi operators, who receive meagre capital subsidies notwithstanding their role as the most used transport mode. This 'mechanistic' view of the state, as first a 'deliverer' of rents via subsidies, operator contracts and licenses or taxi recapitalisation funds and second, as a 'watchdog' enforcer of regulation and competition and little else, forecloses the enormous potential to use political power to reimagine not just how and where public transport can be accessed, but the entire make-up of our cities.



This 'neoliberal' vision of the state, and its expression in public transport policy, conceals the possibility to imagine transport planning as a critical feature in reimagining economic development. In the case of township high streets connected to taxi ranks or the nascent congregation points of short distance taxis and e-hailing transport providers, public transport serves as a catalyst of economic activity.

High streets as areas of mixed mobility, are able to generate positive spill overs via regular and predictable passenger flow. The recently enacted *Township Economic Development Act* in Gauteng, recognizes this and laments, the 'failure to position transport nodes as enablers of economic development' that can serve as dense backbones of 'province-wide networks of commercial districts (in townships)'.

Responding to this challenging context, The FES Report uses the 'pillars of just transport systems' framework, to make recommendations and consider some areas for further policy reflection. These consider availability, safe and affordable access, inclusion, human rights and equity.

The first, with an impact on availability, is that government needs to direct funding allocations away from roads towards public transport expansion, whilst clarifying roles and responsibilities across the spheres of governance to improve integration, and improve on contract management of service providers. The national department of transport's subsidy policy may be an avenue for further advocacy, agitation and organization, to ensure a just public transport system

Furthermore, investments in infrastructure enabling public transport and its expansion, also present opportunities for industrialisation. The rehabilitation of road surfaces, acquisition of buses or rolling stock, can all catalyse industrial activity in other sectors of the economy. The Report considered many other questions in greater detail, such as levels of expenditure, utilisation, schedule adherence and personal safety of public transport, which all considered, give significant insight into the experiences of policymakers, operators, commuters and other affected groups.

Secondly, transitioning many informal operators (especially in the minibus taxi sector, who may enjoy a significant share of commuters relative to other modes) to formal operating companies, will require actions that focus on the upgrading of skills, better regulation and oversight, and inclusion of transport workers in ownership and management arrangements of new companies. The same could be extended companies operating bus services, with a prospect of competitive and inclusive contracting for bus services in future.

Thirdly, the FES report found that while relatively robust data exists on the scale, scope, coverage and relative availability of public transport services, there is poor analysis and

use of the existing data, where practitioners do not seem to be using the data to develop evidence-based interventions. As such, the Report recommends the bringing together of disparate datasets into a consolidated public transport data review, to inform understanding of the status quo – with its various internal tensions and incoherence. The extensive information that is collected should be better utilised to give effect to evidence-based planning and programmatic action; primarily by government, but with active participation of transport union, commuter bodies and other interested parties. Efforts have to be brought to bear, to mobilise and support commuter representatives and other traditionally less active transport stakeholders to engage authorities.

What remains indisputable, as the Report suggests, is that universally accessible, quality and safe public transport is not a 'nice to have', but has implications on the productive and reproductive spheres of our economy and lives. Moreover, the costs of a fragmented public transport system, have major impacts on wages and prices across the economy. Viewed in this way, no transformative socio-economic strategy is complete nor plausible, let alone believable, without a strategy to reimagine the role of the state and the market in the provision of public transport, able to respond to our unusual and highly challenging spatial context.

It remains to be seen whether Reports of this sort, may give rise to greater and more targeted reflection in policy circles, and further and importantly, favourably influence the concrete experiences of commuters, hawkers, touters, taxi owners, short distance operators and train ticket marshals in places like Freedom Park and other parts of Soweto. It is here, one wonders, whether better co-ordination and integration of public transport as a public good, may give rise to different distributions of value and power in the currently fragmented public transport system and beyond it, and whether we can learn more as we listen to what commuters and users say, and the daily drum beat of their feet in passage to and from the rank and station, to and from the workplace, to and from the home.

