

Policy Consideration and Socio-economic Impact of Learner Transportation in Vhembe District Municipality, Limpopo Province of South Africa (PS-LETRA)

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ABSTRACT Travelling on the back of the bakkie, pick-up truck or open-bed trucks is inherently dangerous, but common in South Africa which is proving to be difficult for the government to tackle. The aim of this study is to better understand socio-economic impact and policy consideration concerning the practice. The study was a cross-sectional survey, conducted in Vhembe District Municipality. Five research sites were visited and a total number of 45 participants (10 LDVs operators, 25 passengers, 5 administrator and 5 senior law enforcement agencies) were interviewed. The knowledge about policy is low amongst the participants and the socio-economic impact was high in the researched area. Limited awareness and knowledge of policy pertaining transportation of passengers on the back of the bakkies[†] which is common in South Africa contributes immensely in the high death rate (the death rate per 1,000 fatal vehicle accident) of those associated with vehicle crashes. Legislation that prohibits such practice is weak and rarely enforced.

INTRODUCTION

The transportation of people, especially pupils to and from schools on the back of the bakkie is common in South Africa and proving to be difficult for the government to tackle. The practice is not only inherently dangerous, but is a policy nuisance in many developing world (Peters 2015; Mkhabela 2015). The policy on transporting passengers on the back of the bakkie is not crystal clear of what is expected from the operator, learners and law enforcement agency, resulting in the poor enforcement of the laws in South Africa.

The transportation of learners play an important role in social development of any society, whether urban or in rural areas of South Africa. However, the transportation of learners to their respective schools faces social or economic challenges in some instances, where learners, if they do not have enough cash to pay, have to walk long distances of about 10 to 15 kms to access education. The relative shortfall of the conventional transport mode of transport such as buses and taxis used in many areas led to the consideration of using illegal mode such as bakkie (Aworemi et al. 2008). The use of ille-

gal mode is proving to be difficult for the government to tackle.

Review of Literature

Policy Consideration

Transportation of learners on the back of a bakkies, is a worldwide problem. However, the practice is prevalent in rural areas where bakkies are extremely popular mode of transport due to their multi-purpose use (Howlett et al. 2014; American Academy of Pediatrics 2000). The law in various countries prohibit the transportation of passengers in the back of a bakkie (Howlett et al. 2014; Christoffel et al. 2015; American Academy of Pediatrics 2000).

In South Africa, Regulation 250 of National Road Traffic Act 93 of 1996, prohibit the transportation of persons on a public road, including school children in the goods compartment of a motor vehicle (93 of 1996). The National Scholar Transport Policy (2011) requires transport operators who want to transport/carry pupils to apply for a special licence like scholar transport license. This prohibition is further supported by the National Land Transport Act 5 of 2000, which prohibit the transportation of passengers for

reward including school children in the goods compartment of a motor vehicle (National Land Transport Act, 5 of 2000). These restrictions are rarely enforced as it is not clear what is expected from LDVs operators, learners and law enforcement agencies (Munwana 2014). The challenge is on the reward part as law enforcers could not establish if the operators are subjecting the passengers to some sort of cash payment. In case of learners, LDVs seem to be the only available mode of transport to and from school. This has resulted in numerous reports of horrific accidents relating to the transportation of passengers in the goods compartment (Peters 2015).

Passengers are often transported for reward in the back of the bakkies in South African roads all the time. This practice is regarded as illegal. The transportation of passengers, especially school children is a major occupant protection challenge and the situation is compounded by numerous factors ranging from road traffic accidents, the use of bakkie bad roads conditions, un-roadworthy vehicles and overloading (American Academy of Pediatrics 2000). Despite the risks people are commonly transported in the cargo or goods compartment of vehicles on South African roads (Howlett et al. 2014). The existence of laws such as National Road Traffic Act (93 of 1996) and National Land Transport Act (5 of 2000) in South Africa is not sufficient, as they are often poorly enforced. The National Land Transport Act (5 of 2000) deals with public land transport and LDVs are not regarded as mode of land transport. The National Road Traffic Act (93 of 1996) prohibits the transportation of passengers for reward in the back of the bakkie. Now in this situation law enforcement agencies often found themselves in a tight corner as they could not establish whether the transportation is free or passengers are paying. This creates a confusion as the policy is not clear or provide any guidance to law enforcement agencies.

Socio-economic Impact

In many urban and rural areas of the developing world variety of modes of transport play an important role in providing transport to school pupils in order to access education services (Mbare 2016). Transport has a significant impact on learners to access education. Such transport should always be safe, reliable and affordable (Mashiri et al. 2007). Availability and af-

fordability of transport has been always a major constraint, especially for learners from poor households whose incomes combined is less than R1500, 00 a month and as such could not afford to pay for the available transport (Peters 2015). The typical weekly or monthly charges for a formal transport such as buses and taxis ranges in between R250 and R500 per week or per month, whilst LDVs ranges from R130 to R250 per week or per month (Munwana 2014). These present a high significant socio-economic challenges on learners, as they often travel in an overloaded transport, exposed to dust or bad weather and sometimes arrive late to school. The choice of transport mode is dependent and influenced by factors such as location of the villages, places of basic services, such as schools, clinics or shopping centers (Pretorius et al. 2006). The population density also plays a role as more passengers might mean better availability of transport mode in the area.

Owing to vulnerability of young learners, where schools are far from their residential areas, the journey is often characterized by long travel times, unsafe modes of travel, exposure to weather and traffic related dangers (Motatsa and Mokwena 2014; Pretorius et al. 2006). Learners often travel between 5 to 15 kilometers during school days and with risks like being attacked either by wild animals or any other related violence. LDVs become the only alternative means of transport for those in deep rural areas, far from schools. Starkey (2001) viewed bakkies, as one of the preferred transport modes, popularly used in rural areas, transporting different kinds of passengers, including learners. Ericson (2011) further indicated that bakkies are used in an area where formal transport mode such as buses and taxis are inaccessible due to the condition of the road and geographical location of the villages.

In South Africa, bakkies represents a relatively new mode of a public transport, which fills the niche demands such as door to door services and carrying passengers with their luggage which the organized or legal operators such as taxis and buses do not meet and are more flexible in terms of time and operational routes (Mbare 2016). In other countries LDVs operate as taxis, that forms a vital economic development to the rural communities (Ericson 2011). However, in certain areas such as deep or remote rural areas hardly serviced by buses or taxis, people use almost any form of transport

regardless of the obvious risk to life and limbs as there are no other choice of transport, and operators also conceded that the practice is not safe. Many parents have little or no access to safe mode of transport for their children to school, and as such bakkies look set to be their only transport for their children to school (Mkhabela 2015).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Vhembe District Municipality, Limpopo Province of South Africa. The research was undertaken at Musina town, in Musina Local Municipality, Tshilamba and Thohoyandou, in Thulamela Municipality, and lastly at Dzanani and Elim in Makhado Municipality. These areas or localities were chosen by the researcher as these areas have shown a high number of bakkies that play their trade transporting passengers and goods to various destinations.

As revealed by the literature, bakkies represent a relatively new mode of public transport which are so flexible, filling the niche demand not met by the public or other formal modes of transport. It is relatively new because only LDVs were used to transport goods and after 1994, the transport industry changed. This paper sought to ascertain the policy consideration and socio-economic impact relating to passengers, existing public transport operators as well as the community at large.

In order to obtain information pertaining to the researched topic, a variety of sources and methods were used to collect data. Literature review, participative observation, desktop research coupled with interviews were used to collect data. Information was obtained from passengers, drivers or owners and administrators, the latter mostly law enforcement agencies in the area. This was done either in the form of direct interviews, discussions or in-direct interviews.

The researcher spent at most four hours per day, two hours in the morning and two in the afternoon in areas where bakkies, frequently play their trade. These were mostly shopping centers, hardware markets, schools and bus ranks. The focus was on the type of passengers, safety and compliance on the part of operators in relation to the legislation pertaining transportation of especially school children.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

South Africa is a country in desperate need of a viable and sustainable public transport,

which is safe, affordable and reliable, that conforms to the current transport legislations (Christoffel et al. 2000; Mkhabela 2015). Bakkie transport in South Africa often compliment the formal transport as a feeder and operated in the geographical areas where there is no formal transport (O'Neill 2011; Mbare 2016; Peters 2015). Bakkie is popular in rural areas, where the conditions of roads are typically poor, gravel or earth constructed roads, full of potholes with no signage (O'Neill 2011; Motatsa and Mokwena 2014). However, this mode of transport is still technically illegal in South Africa, and its status has become a national issue. This has been driven by the Department of Transport (DoT) to evolve proper legislation to regulate such kinds of transport.

Policy Consideration

It is not yet clear from the government, as to which direction it will take about the status of the bakkies, in South Africa. This is in respect of regulation, classification and/or either to regulate bakkies as passenger transport in terms of National Land Transport Act 22 of 2000 or regulate them purely as goods vehicles in terms of National Road Traffic Act, 93 of 1996. The current situation is that it is still illegal as explained above regarding the transportation of passengers at the back of bakkies, however given the fact that this mode of transport is so popular, it is not certain if the legislation should remain the same. In terms of the National Road Traffic Act (93 of 1996) and National Land Transport Act (22 of 2000), the transportation of passengers in a goods compartment is prohibited and any mode of transport that transport passengers for reward should have operating licences. Despite such restrictions, passengers and goods are often seen transported on the back of the bakkies as already pointed out above on the South African roads (Howlett et al. 2014). The practice is common in Dzanani, Elim, Tshilamba, Musina and other parts of rural South Africa. In some instances, passengers are carried with some dangerous goods such as zink, flammable liquids (paraffin/petrol in plastic containers), gas cylinders or hardware materials sitting in a precarious positions.

On the other hand, transportation of learners on the back of bakkies is rife in South Africa and it has become a national issue to find a way to regulate it (O'Neill 2011; Mkhabela 2015). It

has become a key challenge to the level that the government has drafted National Scholar Transport Policy of 2009 and amended some of the section in the National Road Traffic Act 93 of 1996 in order to deal with the challenge of learners transported on the back of back of bakkie.

School children were not specifically mentioned in the act, however, in the amendment, in terms of regulation 250 of National Road Traffic Act, 93 of 1996, no school children or any person is allowed to be carried in goods compartment for reward. Furthermore, National Scholar Transport Policy, highlighted the fact that school children frequently use un-proclaimed mode of transport such as light delivery vehicles to and from schools. In the light of the above, new regulations has been put in place in the school transport policy, where anyone who wishes to transport pupils would be required to apply for a special license to so (Felix 2014). The policy seeks to address safety, accessibility by learners and law enforcement aspect. From the above it can be observed that travelling in the back of the bakkies is still prevalent in most parts of South Africa.

Socio-economic Impact

Despite the illegality of bakkie transport in South Africa, scholars often use bakkies as a means of transport, and such action have some socio-economic impact. These are issues relating to: safety, comfort or convenience, affordability, reliability and sustainability.

Safety

Public transport commuters face significant public transport problems, and South Africa often experiences a major burden of injuries and deaths related to road traffic crashes (Felix 2014). Majority of commuters are overloaded, which is not only an offence in terms of the National Road Traffic Act, but also safety risk. According to Howlett et al. (2014), the situation is not unique in South Africa, but a worldwide phenomenon in the developing world. The mode of transport has a significant impact on commuter's ability to access, education, and place of interest, basic service and movement of goods. The use of bakkies, is common in South Africa, and yet the practice is plagued with health and safety issues, with a track record of high crashes (Peters

2015). Despite its inherently dangerous nature, one could draw a similar picture almost everywhere in South Africa that the practice of transporting commuters on the back of the bakkies is widespread in South Africa.

In KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and North West province, it is common practice for pupils to travel in the back of the bakkies to and from schools and it is proving to be difficult for the provincial government to tackle this (Mkhabela 2015). The situation is compounded by the fact that many parents have little or no access to safe transport for their children to school, therefore bakkies, look set to transport learners on a daily basis to and from school.

Again the transport operators are often old people who are on pension or rely on government grant or poor people whose income is often less than the pension grant, with no capital to start a proper transportation business. Mostly the vehicles used are older than five years, driven by the owner and often overload passengers as there is no legislated carrying capacity for bakkies, in order to maximize profits. By so doing, the owner often compromise on the safety of the passengers and other road users.

Comfort and Convenience

Travelling on the back of the bakkies, is not a comfortable ride at any given time, because they are not designed to carry passengers or to be fitted with passenger's seats. Passengers are often overloaded, carried with goods and the situation causes discomfort to commuters. According to Pretorius et al. (2006), Howlett et al. (2014) and Motatsa and Mokwena (2014), commuters are either standing, overloaded or exposed to bad weather all the time when travelling in the back of the bakkies, on South African roads. Therefore, a general lack of transport will mean that if there is any available transport with limited space, commuters will force themselves in and obviously cause some discomfort and inconvenience in travelling.

Comfort and convenience becomes a second priority or not an issue except for the sick or expectant mothers than reaching the intended destination by the commuters. There were some degrees of bakkie transport convenience observed by the researcher, which amongst others includes door to door service. It has been observed that if a particular passenger has some

heavy load or luggage, they are dropped at their door step, with an extra nominal fee, unlike formal transport that drops passengers at designated bus stops. The fare price can also be negotiated as most of the operators are local people. Learners who are of tender age are picked up from their home or next to their home, accompanied by an adult, then dropped at the school gate, which also create a sense of security to the children. The fare price is negotiable and operators normally do not follow schedule or a particular route that might inconvenience commuters (Mbare 2016; Peters 2015; Mkhabela 2015). Route of the LDV transport flexibility gives an added advantage.

Affordability

Travelling on the back of the bakkie is illegal and such practice is currently prohibited in South Africa as already noted above. However, the practice is prevalent in rural areas and some urban areas in South Africa. Given the illegality nature of the practice, fare prices are not fixed as in the formal transport sector. In some instances, un-written credit or monthly payment are some of the services available. Payment of some sort, gratitude or discounted price was not ascertained by the researcher, but which might as well be possible. Nominal fee is charged for door to door services, and some commuters have mobile numbers for the operators in case of the need for a particular transport whilst some operator's ascribed their numbers on the vehicles (Mbare 2016). This gives the commuter and operators a chance to negotiate price beforehand, in terms of affordability of the transaction. The price charged is also not regulated so there is no fixed price for a particular item, place or area. Most of the commuters show great appreciations of the service rendered by the operators despite the fact that the practice is illegal in South Africa.

Reliability

Commuters viewed the transport as reliable, as they are local based, operated by known people who are also members of the community. Some parents who use to return in order to pick up their children from crèche or school have an informal contract or agreement with operators to take their children from school and drop them

at home. The service is reliable based on the past experiences, as some of the legal operators fail to pick up children for any array of reasons. Some of the reasons raised by legal operators are workload, conditions attached to their operating licences, which sometimes prohibit them from entering or to operate in a particular area. These and other reasons make formal transport unreliable.

Sustainability

South Africa is a country that needs viable and sustainable transport that complement the needs of passengers and freight. Many people who use public transport have no other option than to use any available mode, legal or illegal in order to reach their destination. The change might occur if there is significant development that will show a safe, reliable and sustainable mode of commuting than the current situation. Travelling on the back of the back of the bakkies, has become increasingly popular in South Africa (Howlett et al. 2014). The cost involved to start up such transportation operations is minimal, as the same vehicle used for transportation can be used for something else by the owner. Maintenance of the vehicle is low as most of the mechanics are self-taught mechanics and often operated by a family member, owner or relative. In case of breakdown of the vehicle, operators assist each other to transport commuters without any extra charge to commuters. Lastly, the sustainability of the operation is not dependent on the number of available commuters as the vehicle might also be used for other purposes such as carrying wood, taking sick to hospital in the event of need. These shows some degree of sustainability of the transport mode in the sector.

CONCLUSION

Efforts to improve transport system should also focus on the legalizing and regulating bakkies, transportation in South Africa. The practice is inherently dangerous in nature, unsafe and not documented or regulated. The danger of this practice has been recognized, prohibited by law, yet poorly enforced by law enforcement agencies in South Africa.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite all these, people are transported on the back of the bakkies. Obviously the complex-

ity of transport needs will differ, depending on the area and needs of the people, and as such a holistic approach to the current situation might be the way to go. The need for a proper mode of transport, alternative means of transport is a matter of a priority and necessity especially for the rural poor in South Africa. The outline of the socio-economic impact acknowledges the dangers of this mode of scholar transport but it is also points out the rationale for the continuation of the practice. It is clear that legislative initiatives to regulate this practice are required as part of engagement that would ultimately result in the provision of reliable, safe and sustainable transport in South Africa. This might go a long way in preventing the high rate of fatal crashes and injuries as a result of travelling on the back of the bakkies.

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