

Analysis of the Public Transport Management Policies in Zimbabwe

Zvisinei Gwatsvaira¹, Prof R. Khumalo¹

¹Zimbabwe Open University

*Corresponding Author's Email: maphosaz2024@gmail.com

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Abstract

Public transport is an essential component of urban life in Zimbabwe, yet it is beset by operational inefficiencies, regulatory fragmentation and safety concerns. This paper examines the effectiveness of public transport management policies by analysing the roles, coordination and challenges of key regulatory bodies, including the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), Ministry of Transport and Infrastructural Development (MOT), Harare City Council (HCC), Vehicle Inspection Department (VID), Traffic Safety Council of Zimbabwe (TSC) and the Zimbabwe National Road Administration (ZINARA). A mixed-methods approach was adopted, utilising document analysis of statutes, semi-structured interviews with 20 key stakeholders and a quantitative survey of 120 transport operators and users in Harare and Bulawayo. The results reveal significant dissatisfaction among commuters regarding safety and service reliability, with 75% of surveyed passengers reporting safety concerns. Qualitative findings highlight major themes of fragmented coordination among regulatory bodies, severe resource constraints hindering enforcement and the necessary but unregulated role of informal operators (Mawere, 2017). The study concludes that while a robust legislative framework exists, its implementation is undermined by a lack of inter-agency collaboration, inadequate funding and decaying infrastructure (Moyo, 2018). The paper recommends the establishment of a national task force to harmonise policies, increased budgetary allocations for enforcement, strategic investment in transport infrastructure and the development of an integrated policy that formalises and regulates informal operators.

Keywords: Public Transport, Urban Mobility, Policy Implementation, Regulatory Framework, Informal Transport

Introduction

Public transport plays a critical socio-economic role in Zimbabwe's urban centres, especially in major cities like Harare and Bulawayo, where a large portion of the populace depends on it for daily mobility. The sector's landscape was fundamentally altered following the deregulation of urban transport in the early 1990s, which led to the proliferation of private commuter omnibuses. While this initially addressed service gaps left by the state-run utility, it also ushered in an era of intense competition and regulatory challenges.

Over the years, the sector has been characterised by operational inefficiencies, infrastructural decay and significant safety risks. The dominance of informal transport operators, who often function outside the legal and safety frameworks, has exacerbated traffic congestion and increased the rate of accidents. Despite the presence of multiple government agencies and

statutory instruments designed to manage the sector, their efforts are often siloed, leading to policy overlaps, enforcement gaps and a lack of coordinated strategy. This historical context of a fragmented and poorly regulated system forms the basis of the persistent challenges facing urban public transport in Zimbabwe today.

Efficient public transport systems are fundamental to urban productivity, environmental sustainability and social equity. However, in Zimbabwe, the public transport sector is plagued by systemic issues that undermine its effectiveness. The primary problem is the disconnect between established policies and their practical implementation, largely due to fragmented governance and a lack of coordination among key regulatory institutions. Agencies such as the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), Harare City Council (HCC), Vehicle Inspection Department (VID) and others often work in isolation, creating a confusing and inefficient regulatory environment (Moyo, 2018).

This article assesses the effectiveness of public transport management policies in Zimbabwe by examining the roles and coordination of these key bodies. It investigates the implementation of existing legal frameworks, identifies the challenges affecting enforcement and compliance and explores the perceptions of both commuters and operators. Through a comprehensive analysis, the study seeks to provide evidence-based insights to inform the development of more cohesive, sustainable and effective transport policy solutions for urban Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe has a comprehensive set of statutes intended to govern its public transport sector. The Road Traffic Act [Chapter 13:11] is the foundational law for road safety, mandating the ZRP to enforce regulations related to vehicle road worthiness, licensing and driver behaviour. The Transport Services Licensing Act [Chapter 13:14] specifically regulates the licensing of public transport operators, requiring them to meet safety and operational standards to obtain and maintain their licenses.

Urban governance is addressed by the Urban Councils Act [Chapter 29:15], which empowers local authorities like the Harare City Council to manage transport systems within their jurisdictions, including the designation of routes and terminals. Vehicle safety is further enforced by the Vehicle Inspection Department (VID), which is mandated to inspect all vehicles for road worthiness before registration. Complementing these are the Traffic Safety Council of Zimbabwe (TSC), which focuses on promoting road safety through education and awareness campaigns and the Zimbabwe National Road Administration (ZINARA), which is responsible for collecting road user fees to fund road maintenance and development.

Despite this extensive legal framework, studies show its implementation is weak. Chirisa (2016) notes that weak enforcement mechanisms and a widespread disregard for regulations are major hindrances. This is exacerbated by the dominance of informal operators who bypass legal requirements, creating safety risks as highlighted (Mawere, 2017). The issue of fragmented governance is a recurring theme, which argues that a lack of coordination among regulatory bodies hampers effective transport management (Moyo, 2018).

Infrastructural deficits are another critical challenge. Zimunya (2019) points out that limited resources hinder the VID's ability to conduct regular and thorough inspections, particularly in the informal sector. Furthermore, Ndlovu (2020) critiques the TSC's educational campaigns, noting their limited reach and effectiveness due to insufficient funding. Finally, the management of funds for infrastructure remains a concern, with Maposa (2021) citing

challenges in ZINARA related to the transparent and effective use of toll revenues for road maintenance.

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, specifically a convergent parallel design, where qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently to develop a comprehensive understanding of public transport management policies. This approach allowed for the triangulation of data, where quantitative findings on compliance and satisfaction were explained and contextualised by qualitative insights from key stakeholders. The case study focused on the urban areas of Harare and Bulawayo.

A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected key informants. The sample was composed of officials from key regulatory bodies (ZRP, MOT, HCC, VID, TSC and ZINARA), commuter omnibus operators and urban transport planners. Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure that participants had direct professional experience and in-depth knowledge of public transport policy, operations and enforcement, thereby providing rich, context-specific data (Mawere, 2017).

A structured questionnaire was administered to 120 respondents, including commuter omnibus drivers, conductors and passengers in Harare and Bulawayo to gather quantitative data. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure a representative sample. The cities were divided into three strata: Central Business Districts (CBD), high-density suburbs, and peri-urban terminals. Within each stratum, respondents were selected randomly at designated bus ranks to minimise sampling bias. The survey collected data on commuter satisfaction, operator compliance with regulations and public perceptions of enforcement effectiveness. Qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to institutional effectiveness, regulatory challenges and infrastructure concerns. Quantitative data from the surveys were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) with the aid of statistical software to summarise key indicators of policy effectiveness.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings from the commuter and operator survey, followed by the themes that emerged from the stakeholder interviews. The results are discussed in relation to the existing literature and the study's objectives.

The survey of 120 transport users and operators in Harare and Bulawayo revealed significant challenges in service quality and regulatory compliance.

A vast majority of passengers expressed serious concerns over safety and service reliability. As shown in Table 1, 75% of passengers reported feeling unsafe during their commute, citing issues such as poor vehicle condition, reckless driver behaviour and routine overloading. Furthermore, 82% of passengers were dissatisfied with the reliability and punctuality of the services offered.

Table 1: Commuter Satisfaction and Safety Perceptions (n=120)

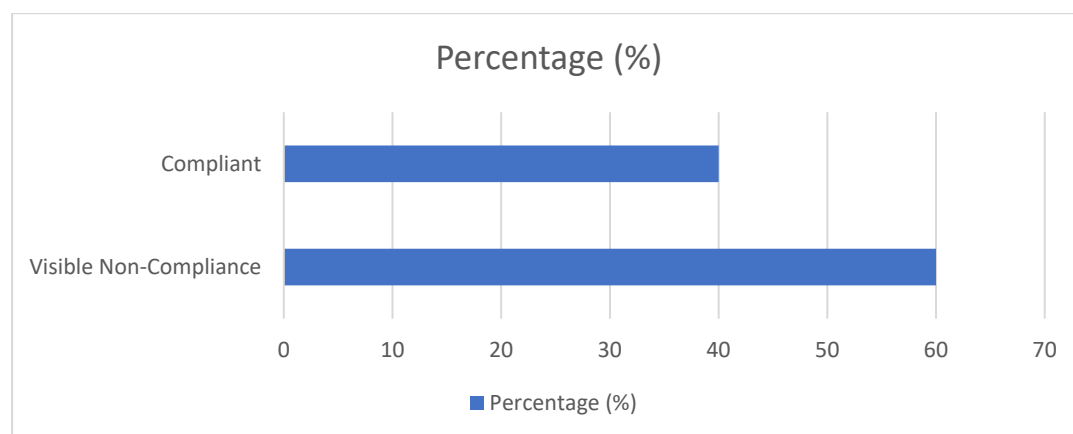
Indicator	Percentage Reporting Issue
Feel Unsafe (due to vehicle condition, driver behaviour or overloading)	75%
Dissatisfied with Reliability and Punctuality	82%

Source: Field Survey, 2024

These high dissatisfaction rates suggest a public transport system failing to meet the basic expectations of its users. The overwhelming feeling of being unsafe points to a critical failure in regulatory enforcement, directly impacting commuters' daily lives and well-being.

Compliance with regulations among the surveyed operators was alarmingly low. Only 35% of drivers were able to produce all the required documentation, including a valid driver's license, defensive driving certificate and an operator's license during spot-checks. This indicates a systemic disregard for legal operational standards.

Visibly, the condition of vehicles also pointed to a lack of compliance. As illustrated in Figure 1, 60% of the observed vehicles exhibited clear signs of non-compliance, such as dangerously worn tires or non-functional lights, posing direct safety risks to passengers and other road users (Ndlovu, 2020).

**Figure 1: Visible Non-Compliance in Commuter Omnibuses (n=120)**

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The perception of law enforcement was overwhelmingly negative (Maposa, 2018). A significant 68% of all respondents believed that traffic laws were not consistently enforced. Compounding this, 55% of respondents felt that corruption among enforcement officials was a primary reason for the widespread lack of compliance in the sector. This perception undermines public trust and suggests that bribery may be enabling unroadworthy vehicles and unlicensed drivers to operate with impunity.

A thematic analysis of the 20 interviews with stakeholders yielded three primary themes that explain the systemic failures in public transport management.

Theme 1: Fragmented Coordination and Overlapping Mandates

A consistent view among participants was that the lack of coordination between regulatory bodies undermines policy effectiveness. The various agencies involved in transport management often operate in isolation, leading to conflicting directives and regulatory gaps (Moyo, 2018).

An official from the Harare City Council stated:

"We are responsible for designating routes and ranks, but the ZRP is responsible for on-the-road enforcement. Sometimes we receive conflicting directives from the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructural Development (MOT) and operators exploit these gaps. There is no central command."

This sentiment was echoed by a transport planner who noted that:

"Agencies work in silos, leading to duplicated efforts and regulatory inconsistencies that ultimately confuse operators and commuters alike."

This fragmentation supports Moyo's (2018) assertion that urban governance in Zimbabwe lacks coordination. The disconnect between the HCC's mandate for route planning and the ZRP's role in enforcement creates operational chaos, which informal operators are quick to exploit

Theme 2: Resource Constraints and Ineffective Enforcement

Participants from regulatory bodies frequently cited a lack of resources as a major barrier to effective enforcement (Zimunya, 2019). This aligns directly with the quantitative finding that 75% of passengers feel unsafe, as under-resourced agencies cannot adequately ensure vehicle roadworthiness or police driver behaviour.

A senior ZRP officer explained:

"Our mandate under the Road Traffic Act is clear, but we lack the vehicles, manpower and modern equipment to monitor the thousands of kombis on the road effectively. We can only be reactive, not proactive."

Similarly, a VID official lamented:

"We are supposed to inspect every public vehicle, but with our limited capacity, we can only do so much. Many unroadworthy vehicles slip through the cracks, especially in the informal sector."

These voices from the ground confirm the findings of Zimunya (2019), who argued that inadequate vehicle inspections are a major contributor to poor road safety. The resource shortages paralyse the ability of regulators to implement the existing legal framework, rendering it ineffective.

Theme 3: The Unregulated Dominance of Informal Operators

While all participants acknowledged the essential service provided by informal operators ('mushikashika') in underserved areas, they agreed that their unregulated nature poses a significant threat to safety, order and the viability of the formal transport system.

A formal commuter operator lamented:

"We pay for licenses, insurance, and maintain our vehicles, but we compete with 'mushikashika' who follow no rules. They overload, speed, and operate without any paperwork. It is impossible to run a formal business this way."

This highlights a core conflict where the formal transport system is systematically undermined by the widespread and unchecked practices of its informal counterparts (Mawere, 2017). This finding illustrates how the absence of regulatory oversight for informal operators directly undermines the formal system, creating a "race to the bottom" in safety standards and accountability. The low compliance level found in the quantitative survey (only 35% of operators had all required papers) is a direct outcome of this unregulated environment, where following formal rules becomes an economic disadvantage.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the effectiveness of public transport management policies in Zimbabwe and found significant deficiencies in enforcement, inter-agency collaboration and infrastructure. Despite a robust legal framework, the public transport system is failing to provide safe, reliable and efficient services to the urban population. The core challenges stem from the fragmented and uncoordinated efforts of regulatory bodies, severe resource constraints that cripple enforcement and the unregulated dominance of informal operators who operate outside safety and legal frameworks. Ultimately, the issues are not due to a lack of policies but to systemic failures in implementation, coordination and accountability. Addressing these deeply entrenched problems is critical to creating a functional urban mobility system in Zimbabwe (Maposa, 2021).

To address the challenges identified, the government should consider a multi-faceted and coordinated approach as essential by:

- Introducing a digital ticketing systems, real-time vehicle tracking and a centralized regulatory compliance database. This will improve operational transparency, allow for data-driven policy adjustments and enhance accountability for both operators and regulators.
- Establishing a National Urban Transport Task Force with representatives from the ZRP, MOT, HCC, VID, ZINARA and operator associations to harmonise policies, reduce redundancy and ensure coherent action across all agencies.
- Increasing budgetary allocations to the ZRP, VID and local councils to address critical resource shortages, including the need for more personnel, monitoring equipment and digital tools for tracking compliance.

- Prioritising investment in the construction of modern bus terminals and the establishment of dedicated bus lanes in major cities to reduce congestion and improve service reliability. Public-private partnerships should be encouraged to fund these developments.
- Creating a cohesive policy that formally recognizes and regulates informal operators. This could involve phased licensing, mandatory safety training and incentives for compliance to gradually integrate them into the formal system.

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