

Mushikashika in Harare: A Socioeconomic and Regulatory Analysis

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Abstract

Mushikashika, the informal pirate taxi system, in Harare, Zimbabwe, has become a dominant force in urban transportation. While it provides an essential service to commuters, it also poses significant challenges, including road safety concerns, regulatory issues and socioeconomic implications. This article explores the origins, impact and potential solutions to the Mushikashika phenomenon, drawing from recent studies and policy discussions. This study utilised a mixed-methods approach, combined quantitative data from surveys with 200 commuters and 100 mushikashika drivers and qualitative data from in-depth interviews with 15 key informants, including regulatory officials and transport union representatives. The results revealed that over 85% of commuters relied on mushikashika due to the unavailability of formal transport, while 70% of drivers entered the sector due to unemployment (Zulu, 2019). The findings also highlighted a significant correlation between the lack of regulation and increased road accidents, with 65% of commuters witnessing or experiencing reckless driving (Ndlovu, 2020). The study concluded that a hybrid approach, integrating mushikashika into the formal transport system through structured licensing, digital monitoring and cooperative models, was essential (Gomez, 2019). Such a strategy addressed both the economic realities of operators and the safety concerns of the public. This study provided insights into how informal transport systems can be integrated into formal urban mobility frameworks.

Keywords: Mushikashika, informal transport, urban mobility, regulation, socioeconomic impact

Introduction

Urban transportation plays a pivotal role in economic development, social mobility and effective urban planning. In many developing cities, formal transport systems struggle to meet the escalating demand for affordable and efficient mobility. Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, is a prime example of this challenge, where the informal transport system known as Mushikashika emerged to fill the significant gaps left by a declining formal public transport sector (Mbara, 2016). The rise of Mushikashika is intrinsically linked to the country's economic hardships, high unemployment rates and the operational inefficiencies of the state-run Zimbabwe United Passenger Company (ZUPCO) (Mbara, 2016). This informal system, while providing a necessary service, operates in a regulatory vacuum, leading to widespread issues that demand scholarly and policy attention.

Harare's urban transport landscape is increasingly defined by the presence of Mushikashika unregulated private vehicles operating as pirate taxis. These operators often function without

the requisite licenses or adherence to traffic laws, yet they provide quick and affordable transport for a populace grappling with unreliable or non-existent formal bus and commuter omnibus services. While Mushikashika offers a lifeline to many, its operations are fraught with significant challenges, including severe road safety risks, traffic congestion and conflicts with law enforcement agencies (Baker and Moyo, 2018). The lack of regulation has fostered an environment where reckless driving, vehicle overloading and even criminal activities disguised as transport services have become prevalent.

Previous attempts by authorities to curtail the operations of Mushikashika have been largely symbolic (Moyo, 2021). This is primarily due to the persistent high demand for cheap and accessible transport and the failure of the formal transport system to offer a viable alternative. The government's ban on privately owned commuter omnibuses in 2020 further exacerbated the situation, leading to an even greater reliance on Mushikashika (Moyo, 2021). This study, therefore, seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Mushikashika phenomenon in Harare. It aims to examine its multifaceted impact on urban mobility, public safety and the local economy. By identifying the core regulatory challenges and drawing lessons from successful informal transport integration models in other countries (Gwilliam, 2011), this research will propose viable, context-specific solutions for integrating Mushikashika into a structured and safe urban mobility framework.

The body of literature on informal transport systems is extensive, reflecting the global prevalence and complexity of this issue in developing regions. Research consistently shows that these systems emerge out of necessity, providing affordable and accessible transportation to populations that are underserved by formal public transport. In cities such as Nairobi and Accra, informal transport has become a vital component of daily life for commuters, filling the void left by inadequate formal services.

Common themes that emerge from studies across Africa, Asia and Latin America include the driving forces of economic necessity, the persistent challenges of regulation and overarching safety concerns. In Sub-Saharan Africa, economic instability is a significant factor in shaping urban mobility patterns, with weak governance structures contributing to the persistence of these unregulated systems.

The economic impact of informal transport is substantial. For many, it is a primary means of subsistence in the face of high unemployment. Research by Zulu (2019) highlights that informal transport not only provides a livelihood for drivers but also supports a network of ancillary businesses, such as mechanics and fuel vendors, thereby contributing to the local economy, albeit in an unregulated fashion. Socially, these systems are crucial for enhancing mobility for low-income individuals, enabling access to employment, healthcare and education. However, these benefits are often offset by significant safety risks due to the lack of regulation and the potential for exploitation.

Regulatory challenges are a central issue. The absence of effective oversight often leads to a culture of impunity among operators, a problem that is frequently exacerbated by corruption within enforcement agencies. Consequently, efforts to regulate the sector are often met with resistance from both operators and the communities that depend on them.

In Zimbabwe, the transport sector has seen significant shifts, particularly after the 2020 ban on privately owned commuter omnibuses, which has cemented Mushikashika's role in urban mobility. The decline of the state-owned ZUPCO has further increased this reliance. Past

attempts to regulate the informal sector have largely failed due to economic instability and challenges in enforcement, including corruption.

Globally, several cities have successfully integrated informal transport into their formal systems. Bogotá's TransMilenio system, for instance, has formalised informal transport through a model of route franchising, where private operators provide regulated services. This demonstrates that with structured policies and financial incentives, formalisation is achievable. South Africa's semi-regulated minibus taxi industry also offers valuable lessons, requiring operators to obtain permits and adhere to safety standards, which enhances accountability. These international examples provide a roadmap for developing policies to integrate Mushikashika into a more structured urban transport framework in Harare.

Research Methodology

This study utilised a mixed-methods research paradigm to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Mushikashika phenomenon in Harare. This paradigm combines the statistical power of quantitative data with the contextual depth of qualitative data. Data were collected through structured surveys, semi-structured interviews and a review of secondary sources, including government reports and academic literature.

For the quantitative component, a sample of 300 participants was targeted, comprising 200 commuters and 100 Mushikashika drivers. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. First, major commuter hubs and Mushikashika operating routes in Harare were purposively selected to ensure a representative cross-section of the city's transport dynamics. Second, at these selected locations, a convenience sampling method was used to administer surveys to available and willing participants. This non-probability sampling approach was deemed appropriate given the fluid and informal nature of the target population. The survey instrument was designed to capture data on demographics, travel patterns, reasons for using or operating Mushikashika, perceptions of safety and opinions on regulation (Cervero and Golub, 2007).

For the qualitative component, a purposive sampling strategy was used to select 15 key informants for in-depth and semi-structured interviews. This sample included 5 government officials from transport and law enforcement agencies, 5 leaders of transport operator associations and 5 daily commuters who have long-term experience with the Mushikashika system. This method was chosen to ensure that the data collected would be rich in detail and would come from individuals with direct and varied experience of the issue (Klopp and Mitullah, 2015). The interviews were designed to explore the nuances of the regulatory challenges, the socioeconomic drivers of Mushikashika and the potential pathways to formalisation.

Quantitative data from the surveys were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics with the aid of statistical software. This involved generating frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, and correlation analyses to identify key trends and relationships. Qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. This process involved identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data to understand the complex perceptions and experiences of the different stakeholders regarding Mushikashika.

Results and Discussion

This section presented the findings from the mixed-methods study on the Mushikashika phenomenon in Harare. The quantitative data from commuter and driver surveys were presented first in tabular format, followed by an analysis of the qualitative themes generated from key informant interviews. The results were discussed concurrently, integrating insights from existing literature to provide a comprehensive analysis.

The quantitative survey was designed to capture the prevalence, motivations and perceived risks associated with the Mushikashika system from the perspective of both commuters and drivers.

A survey of 200 commuters revealed a high dependency on the Mushikashika system for daily transport. As shown in Table 1, the unavailability of reliable formal transport was the primary reason for this reliance (Ndlovu, 2020).

Table 1: Commuter Survey Responses (n=200)

Survey Item	Response Percentage (%)
Use Mushikashika as primary transport due to lack of alternatives	85
Cite affordability as a key reason for using Mushikashika	75
Express concern over the lack of insurance and safety standards	80
Witnessed or experienced reckless driving by a Mushikashika operator	65

The findings in Table 1 clearly show that Mushikashika has become an essential service born out of necessity. The high dependency rate (85%) confirms the significant gaps left by the collapse of the formal public transport sector. This aligns with the arguments of Behrens et al.

Mbara (2016), who posit that informal paratransit systems arise primarily where state-run transit, like ZUPCO, fails to meet public demand. While affordability is a major draw for 75% of users, this benefit is heavily offset by significant safety concerns. The fact that 65% of commuters have experienced reckless driving is a stark confirmation of the safety risks highlighted by Ndlovu (2020) in his comparative studies. These risks leave passengers vulnerable and underscore the urgent need for a regulatory framework.

The survey of 100 Mushikashika drivers highlights the economic imperatives that fuel the informal transport sector. The results, summarised in Table 2, point towards unemployment as the primary driver.

Table 2: Driver Survey Responses (n=100)

Survey Item	Response Percentage (%)
Entered the Mushikashika sector due to unemployment	70
Operate without proper licenses or permits	90
Admitted to paying bribes to law enforcement officials	60

The economic motivation for drivers is a prominent theme. The finding that 70% of drivers entered the sector due to unemployment corroborates the work of Zulu (2019), who identifies informal transport as a critical survival strategy in the face of economic hardship. This reality

makes top-down bans and crackdowns ineffective, as the sector provides a vital source of livelihood. The widespread lack of formal licensing (90%) and the prevalence of corruption (60%) support the claims made by Moyo (2021) that regulatory efforts are systematically undermined by graft within law enforcement agencies. This creates a cycle of impunity that perpetuates unsafe practices and complicates any move toward formalisation.

The thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with 15 key informants, including government officials, transport union leaders and commuters, yielded three primary themes that capture the complex dynamics of the Mushikashika system.

A strong sense of inevitability and resilience was expressed by both commuters and drivers, who view Mushikashika as an indispensable part of Harare's economy. This reflects a deep-seated belief that the system exists because it serves a fundamental need that the formal sector has ignored. This theme is supported by the following voices:

"Without mushikashika, this city would come to a standstill. We have no other choice." - A Daily Commuter

"This is not just a job; it is survival. We will do what we must to feed our families." - A Mushikashika Driver

These statements underscore the socioeconomic drivers behind the system's persistence. The defiance against official crackdowns is not just a disregard for the law but a reflection of a survivalist economy, a point also noted by Adebayo (2021) in similar contexts. Until a viable alternative is provided, commuters and operators will continue to rely on this informal network.

All interviewed stakeholders acknowledged that the rise of Mushikashika is a direct symptom of the failure of formal institutions and is sustained by pervasive corruption.

A government official candidly admitted,

"The decline of ZUPCO created a vacuum that the informal sector naturally filled."

This admission highlights the systemic failure that has allowed Mushikashika to thrive. The issue is compounded by corruption, which renders regulation ineffective. As one transport union leader explained:

"Regulation is impossible when the enforcers themselves are complicit. Drivers build the cost of bribes into their daily earnings."

This voice confirms the quantitative finding that 60% of drivers pay bribes. It illustrates a deeply rooted problem where the lines between enforcement and complicity are blurred, making sustainable reform incredibly challenging.

Despite the significant challenges, a consensus emerged among participants that a structured path to formalisation is both necessary and achievable. This suggests a willingness from all sides to engage in constructive reform.

A regulatory official suggested a pragmatic way forward:

"We need a phased approach, starting with registration and basic safety training."

Drivers also expressed a desire for legitimacy, indicating that resistance is often a response to a lack of viable pathways to legal operation.

A driver added,

"If the government provides a clear and affordable path to operate legally, most of us would take it. We don't enjoy looking over our shoulders."

This theme aligns with global examples from cities like Bogotá, where informal transport has been successfully integrated into formal systems through structured policies and incentives. It suggests that a collaborative approach, rather than a punitive one, holds the key to reform.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined the complex phenomenon of Mushikashika in Harare, revealing its dual role as a critical urban mobility solution and a significant regulatory challenge. The findings demonstrate that the collapse of formal public transport systems, particularly ZUPCO, combined with high unemployment and economic instability, has led to an increased reliance on informal transport (Zulu, 2019). Mushikashika provides essential and affordable mobility for a large portion of Harare's population, particularly in underserved areas and sustains the livelihoods of many informal workers. However, the unregulated nature of this system has resulted in serious public safety concerns, including reckless driving, overcrowding, lack of insurance and incidents of criminal activity (Ndlovu, 2020). Efforts to control Mushikashika have often failed due to corruption, a lack of viable transport alternatives and strong demand from the commuting public. These findings align with regional and international literature, which shows that informal transport systems thrive in environments where formal services are inadequate or absent. Ultimately, Mushikashika epitomises the resilience of informal systems in times of crisis. While significant challenges persist, lessons from other cities (Finn and Mulley, 2012) demonstrate that an inclusive approach to formalisation, leveraging technology and stakeholder engagement, can transform Harare's transport sector.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the challenges posed by the Mushikashika system in Harare:

The government should:

- Prioritise investment in a reliable and comprehensive public transport network. This includes not only acquiring a sufficient fleet of well-maintained buses but also developing essential infrastructure such as designated bus stops and terminals. Integrating technology, such as real-time tracking applications, can enhance the user experience and encourage a shift back to formal transport.
- Establish a structured framework for the legalisation and regulation of Mushikashikas. This should involve clear, accessible and affordable licensing requirements for operators, which include mandatory safety inspections, vehicle insurance and background checks for drivers. This framework should be developed in consultation with all stakeholders, including current operators, to ensure it is practical and widely accepted.
- Promote Integration and cooperatives, rather than seeking to eliminate Mushikashika, the policy should focus on integration. This can be achieved by establishing cooperative models where Mushikashika operators function as feeder

services to the main public transport routes, creating a more seamless and comprehensive urban mobility network.

- Leverage Digital Technology for Monitoring to enhance regulation and safety. A mobile application could allow for the digital registration of operators, real-time tracking of vehicles, and a rating system for passengers, which would promote transparency and accountability.
- Engage the Community and Raise Public Awareness is vital. Public awareness campaigns should be launched to educate commuters on the benefits of using licensed and regulated transport services and to promote a culture of safety among operators.

A robust monitoring and evaluation framework must be implemented for effectiveness of these interventions. Key performance indicators (KPIs) related to safety, compliance and commuter satisfaction should be established and regularly assessed to ensure that policies remain adaptive and effective.

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