

# Rewriting the rules of engagement

*Although the infrastructure and operational components of Cape Town's rapid transit system appear to be largely on track, the stakeholder engagement component of the project remains substantially unresolved. HERRIE SCHALEKAMP suggests that unless the engagement process is refocused, the likelihood of a successful outcome is limited.*

**T**he City of Cape Town is planning an integrated public transport system that aims to overhaul and expand existing public transport services as part of the National Department of Transport's Integrated Rapid Public Transport Network (IRPTN) programme. Cape Town's IRPTN – the Integrated Rapid Transit system, or IRT – would also address the growing reliance on private car travel in this city by offering competitive alternatives.

As in other cities in South Africa, the proposed network would rely on the phased introduction of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) as a core mode to replace a significant proportion of current bus and paratransit operations. Operators of existing road-based services, of which paratransit (comprising both minibus and informal sedan taxis) is the dominant player, would be contracted to run the BRT services. To be eligible, thousands of paratransit operators would either have to formalise their businesses, or merge into new or existing operator entities as shareholders or employees.



*A recent protest by taxi drivers over Cape Town's proposed Bus Rapid Transit system.*

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## What is Paratransit?

Paratransit encompasses a diverse range of unscheduled public transport services that typically utilise midibuses, minibuses and smaller vehicles. While such services are commonly run as informal, cash-based businesses, some are nevertheless owned and operated as part of formal business concerns. The extent to which paratransit operations are publicly regulated through permission or quality control systems varies considerably, although it is typical to have operator associations or federations that provide a degree of internal regulation. (In North America the term paratransit has a more specific meaning, referring to flexible transport services for people with disabilities.)

The paratransit sector has indicated its resistance, sometimes violently, to the BRT component of the IRT, on the grounds of insufficient consultation, lack of clarity on its future role in the system, and the likelihood of employee redundancies in the sector. Should this deadlock not be resolved, it seems unlikely that the planned system will be realised within the proposed timeframe, if indeed at all.

### Selling the BRT idea

To date, the City has formed a project office, commenced with construction of the first phase of busways and non-motorised transport routes, and initiated stakeholder engagement. Engagement has followed a two-pronged approach, the first aimed at the public, and the second targeting existing road-based public transport operators. A public participation consultancy was contracted to conduct information meetings during October and November 2008 in areas affected by the first IRT phase. More recently, the City has also distributed project updates on its IRT website and by placing articles in community newspapers. With respect to operators, the City has engaged the broader minibus taxi sector in a number of summits to disseminate information about the IRT and how it will affect existing operations. The City awarded the contract to develop the business plan to facilitate the transition to the IRT, and ongoing weekly meetings have also taken place with bus and minibus taxi operators affected by, or interested in, first phase IRT services, as well as with operators not included in the initial phase.

While the infrastructural and operational components of the project appear to be largely on track, the arguably more untested and unpredictable

stakeholder engagement component of the project has seen significant delays, and remains substantially unresolved. The first general public meeting in October 2008 was disrupted by minibus taxi operators, and the latter meetings in that series were cancelled and have not been rescheduled. Also, as the proceedings of the weekly meetings with the minibus taxi sector have not been made publicly available, it is not possible to account for progress that may have been made during these sessions.

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There is a similar dearth of information around the business plan: while an IRT progress report in 2008 indicated that, at a conceptual level, existing minibus taxi and bus operators would be required to form amalgamated companies to tender for trunk or feeder contracts, the details of specific contractual and transitional arrangements for incorporating existing operators in the IRT have not been publicly released.

### A history of mutual antagonism

Given the complexity of the engagement process, it is unsurprising that there is an impasse between government and minibus taxis, both locally and nationally. It is clear that there are shifting factional dynamics that influence engagement between local government and the minibus sector, and that the informal, fragmented nature of the sector does not lend itself to collective engagement.

Recent events in the process leading up to the current impasse, but also the history of interaction between the spheres of government and minibus taxis, demonstrate a significant level of mutual antagonism.

In deregulating the minibus taxi sector in the

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late 1980s, and subsequently aiming to return to regulation through formally structured interventions such as the Taxi Recapitalisation Programme and the creation of a government-sanctioned representative structure (ie SANTACO), government has not created conditions conducive to the formalisation of minibus operating or business practices. Past interventions have, rather, contributed to the entrenchment



of informal operating practices, the creation of 'warlord' figures fervently opposed to a loss of control of the sector; representative structures and operator associations well organised to violently disrupt the transport system and threaten public safety; and fluid loyalties within the industry.

Assumptions that the industry would be a willing player in the formalisation process, and that it would respond positively to the truncated timeframe under which Cape Town's IRT proposes that it make this radical shift, appear to have ignored the path dependencies set up in the past. It is entirely



understandable that the sector has balked at exchanging its decades of experience in informal, day-to-day, cash-based operations in favour of the as-yet intangible benefits of being shareholders in, and employees of, a future company. The likelihood of a successful outcome to the current engagement process in Cape Town is, consequently, limited.

### Changing tactics

In order to address these challenges it would be necessary to refocus the engagement approach.

The first step would be to cultivate a more constructive relationship between the City as implementer and the minibus taxi industry as operators. This would enable the identification of a more beneficial engagement strategy that addresses not only the collective needs of the sector but also the particular concerns of individual operators.

For such a strategy to emerge it would, however, be essential to separate the engagement process around reform in the minibus taxi sector from the negotiations around the proposed incorporation of paratransit and bus operators into the IRT, as these two processes are likely to have divergent outcomes.

A further step in a revised engagement approach would be to review the implementation timeframe substantially. This would necessitate delinking the

engagement process from the 2010 FIFA World Cup, which has on the whole proved to be a limiting influence on engagement, to ensure that the process is long enough to accommodate adequate provision for detailed and protracted negotiation of the terms of the sector's transformation.

### What about the commuters?

Prospective operators are, however, not the only stakeholders that should be drawn into the engagement process to improve the city's public transport system. There is little evidence of interaction with other parties with a stake in the IRT, such as current and prospective passengers, and the city's residents and businesses.

Lack of engagement with the public, as the largest stakeholder group, is a critical omission that should be addressed not only through the dissemination of information on the operational, business and infrastructural aspects of the proposed IRT, but also through consultation on the mobility needs in the city.

The possibility exists that the transformation of public transport in Cape Town may yet be driven not by the public sector or minibus taxi operators, but by public demand for improved public transport, or other factors such as energy costs and affordability. ☀

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