

**AKSU Journal of Social Sciences (AKSUJOSS)**
**ISSN: 2504 – 933X**
**Vol.4,No.2 (September) 2024,pp.155-161**
**DOI:https://doi.org/10.61090/aksujoss.202.028**
**URL: htpp://www.aksujournal.com/vol.4.2**

***Received:*** **4th May, 2024**
***Accepted:*** ***17th*** **August, 2024**
***Published online:*** **1st September, 2024**

# The Role of Informal Transport Systems in the Urban Transport Landscape of Lagos State, Nigeria

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**Abstract**
This study explored the role of informal transport systems in the urban landscape of Lagos State, Nigeria. Through a comprehensive analysis of historical context, characteristics, challenges, socioeconomic impacts, and prospects, the study sheds light on the integral role played by informal transport in facilitating mobility for millions of Lagosians. Findings reveal the diverse modes of informal transport, including minibuses, motorcycles, and tricycles, and their significance in providing accessible, affordable, and flexible transportation options. Despite facing regulatory and safety challenges, informal transport systems contribute to employment generation, social cohesion, and economic development. Drawing lessons from successful integration efforts and global best practices, the study highlights the importance of regulatory frameworks, collaboration with formal transport systems, and sustainable management practices. The findings underscore the need for inclusive urban transport planning that recognizes the value of informal transport and harnesses its potential to create a more resilient and equitable urban mobility ecosystem.

**Keywords**: Informal transport, urban transport planning, urban mobility, integration.

## Introduction

Lagos State, located in the southwestern part of Nigeria, is one of the most populous and economically vibrant regions in Africa. With an estimated population exceeding 20 million people, Lagos is not only Nigeria's commercial capital but also serves as a major economic hub for the entire West African sub-region (Suleiman 2023). The state encompasses a diverse range of communities, from sprawling urban centres to informal settlements, reflecting both its rapid urbanization and socio-economic disparities (Oluwakoya & Ogundipe 2019). Informal transport systems, also known as paratransit or 'kabu-kabu' in the local parlance, refer to transportation services that operate outside the formal regulatory framework and are often characterized by flexibility, informality, and sometimes illegality (Peters & Bhusal, 2020). These systems typically include minibuses, motorcycles ('okadas'), and shared taxis ('kekes') that provide essential mobility for millions of Lagosians daily. Unlike formal transport modes such as buses and trains, informal transport is largely unregulated and tends to fill the gaps left by inadequate public transportation infrastructure.

Understanding the role of informal transport systems is crucial for effective urban planning and sustainable development in rapidly growing cities like Lagos. As noted by

Agbiboa, (2020), informal transport plays a significant role in providing affordable and accessible mobility options, particularly for low-income residents who may have limited access to formal transportation services. Moreover, informal transport often complements formal systems by serving routes and areas that are underserved or ignored by traditional public transport operators (Cervero, 2000). Therefore, studying informal transport is essential for policymakers, urban planners, and transportation experts to devise inclusive strategies that address the diverse mobility needs of urban populations while promoting safety, efficiency, and sustainability.

**Statement of the Problem**

The development of formal transport systems in Lagos can be traced back to the colonial era, with the introduction of railways and waterways to facilitate trade and transportation of goods (Olukoju, 1992). However, it was during the post-independence period that significant investments were made in road infrastructure and public transport services to accommodate the city's growing population and economic activities. The Lagos State Bus Services Limited (LSBSL) was established in 1983 to provide mass transit services, followed by the introduction of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system in 2008, aimed at improving mobility and reducing traffic congestion (Oluwakoya, 2014). Moreover, the emergence of informal transport in Lagos can be attributed to various factors, including rapid urbanization, inadequate public transport infrastructure, and socio-economic dynamics. In the 1970s and 1980s, the collapse of the public transport system, coupled with the increasing demand for mobility, created opportunities for individuals and small-scale operators to enter the transport market using minibuses and motorcycles (Ajayi & Oluwakoya, 2011). Over time, these informal transport services expanded to fill the gaps left by the formal sector, providing last-mile connectivity and serving routes not covered by established bus routes.

Several factors have contributed to the growth of informal transport in Lagos. The first is population growth. Lagos has experienced rapid population growth, resulting in increased demand for transportation services, especially in underserved areas (Oluwakoya and Ogundipe, 2019). The second is inadequate public transport infrastructure. The formal public transport system has struggled to keep pace with the city's expansion, leading to overcrowding, long waiting times, and inefficient service delivery (Onanaye& Oluwakoya, 2023). The third is economic opportunities. Informal transport provides employment opportunities for thousands of individuals who may not have access to formal employment or alternative livelihood options (Salako, 2018). The fourth is flexibility and affordability. Informal transport operators offer flexible routes, schedules, and fares, making them attractive to commuters, particularly those with low incomes or irregular travel patterns (Afolabi & Akibo, 2020). These factors, combined with limited regulatory oversight, have facilitated the growth and persistence of informal transport in Lagos, shaping the city's urban transport landscape in significant ways.

However, one of the primary challenges facing informal transport systems in Lagos is the lack of effective regulation and the ambiguity surrounding their legality. Unlike formal transport operators, informal transport providers often operate without proper permits or adherence to safety standards, leading to conflicts with regulatory authorities (Afolabi &Akibo, 2020). The absence of clear regulatory frameworks not only hampers efforts to improve service quality and safety but also creates opportunities for corruption and exploitation within the sector (Oluwakoya, 2014). Moreover, the uncertain legal status of informal transport makes it vulnerable to arbitrary enforcement actions, including harassment, fines, and vehicle confiscation, further exacerbating the challenges faced by operators.

Safety is a significant concern associated with informal transport in Lagos, affecting both passengers and road users. The proliferation of motorcycle taxis ('okadas') and tricycles ('kekes') has contributed to an increase in road accidents and fatalities, as these vehicles often operate in congested traffic conditions and disregard traffic rules (Ajayi, & Oluwakoya, 2011). Additionally, the poorly maintained condition of many informal transport vehicles, coupled with inadequate training for drivers, poses risks to passenger safety. Furthermore, the lack of insurance coverage and legal recourse for victims of accidents involving informal transport exacerbates the challenges associated with ensuring passenger safety and well-being.

Also, the system in Lagos faces stiff competition from formal transport operators, particularly as the government seeks to expand and modernize public transportation infrastructure (Ogunkoya, 2008). The introduction of initiatives such as the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system and plans for rail expansion has intensified competition for passengers and routes, leading to conflicts and tensions between informal and formal transport operators (Ogunkoya, 2008). Moreover, informal transport operators often face discrimination and marginalization in regulatory policies and infrastructure investments, further exacerbating their competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis formal systems. As a result, informal transport operators struggle to maintain their market share and profitability in the face of increasing competition and regulatory pressures.

**Research Methods and Materials**

A qualitative approach was adopted to provide an in-depth understanding of informal transport systems in the urban landscape of Lagos State, Nigeria. The research focused on gathering detailed insights through document analysis and case studies. Document analysis involved reviewing relevant policy documents, government reports, academic literature, media articles and specific examples. This method provided a historical and institutional perspective on informal transport systems in the Lagos urban ecosystem, allowing for a contextualized understanding of the qualitative data obtained from the literature search.

**Case Studies and Comparative Analysis**

In Lagos, informal transport encompasses a variety of modes that cater to the diverse mobility needs of its residents. Minibuses, popularly known as "danfo" and "molue," are ubiquitous on the city's roads, providing point-to-point services along established routes (Xiao, 2019). Motorcycle taxis, or "okadas," offer quick and flexible transport options, particularly in congested areas with limited road access (Agbiboa, 2020). Tricycles, known as "kekes" or "kekenapep," are also widely used for short-distance trips and provide a more affordable alternative to traditional taxis (Cervero & Golub, 2011). Additionally, informal water transport plays a vital role in connecting waterfront communities and islands within the Lagos Lagoon (Fakoya, Oloko & Harper, 2022). Informal transport in Lagos operates within a decentralized and often chaotic organizational structure. Individual operators or small-scale associations manage most vehicles, with drivers typically leasing or owning their vehicles (Akiyode, 2017). There is minimal formal coordination or regulation, leading to competition among operators for passengers and routes. Despite this lack of formal oversight, some informal transport associations enforce their own rules and codes of conduct to maintain order and resolve disputes within the sector (Klopp & Mitullah, 2015).

Therefore, informal transport plays a critical role in meeting the mobility needs of specific demographics within Lagos, particularly low-income residents and those living in informal settlements. For many urban dwellers, especially in underserved areas, informal transport is the primary mode of transportation, providing affordable and accessible options for daily commuting, shopping, and social activities (Venter, et.al., 2019) Moreover, informal transport services often fill the gaps left by formal systems, serving routes and areas that are inaccessible or poorly served by traditional public transport operators (Alcorn & Karner, 2021). As such, informal transport contributes significantly to enhancing the mobility and quality of life for a wide range of urban residents in Lagos.

The Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system in Lagos has successfully integrated with informal transport modes such as minibuses and motorcycles, improving overall urban mobility (Ogunkoya 2008 & Oluwakoya, 2014). By designating specific bus lanes and terminals for BRT operations, informal transport operators can seamlessly connect with formal transit services, reducing congestion and enhancing passenger convenience. The city of Medellín has implemented innovative strategies to integrate informal transport into its formal transit network, including the implementation of cable car systems and escalators in

hilly areas where traditional public transport is impractical (Vega Centeno, Robert & Román, 2023). These initiatives have improved accessibility for residents living in informal settlements while promoting social inclusion and economic development. Curitiba's integrated transport system, featuring a combination of bus rapid transit, feeder buses, and pedestrian-friendly urban design, serves as a model for sustainable urban mobility (Suzuki, Cervero &Iuchi, 2013). The city's emphasis on prioritizing public transportation over private vehicles has reduced congestion, pollution, and travel times, demonstrating the importance of holistic planning and investment in transit-oriented development.

In India**,** Bangalore's experience with informal transport, particularly its reliance on auto-rickshaws and shared vans, highlights the importance of regulating and formalizing informal transport operations to enhance safety, reliability, and accessibility (Ghosh, &Schot, 2019). By engaging with stakeholders and implementing smart regulatory frameworks, cities can harness the potential of informal transport to complement formal transit systems effectively.

**Results and Discussion**

Informal transport systems play a crucial role in enhancing urban mobility by providing accessible and affordable transportation options to a wide range of commuters in Lagos (Peters & Bhusal, 2020). Unlike formal public transport modes, which may have limited coverage and higher fares, informal transport services operate on flexible routes and often offer lower fares, making them accessible to low-income residents and those living in underserved areas (Alcorn & Karner, 2021). The affordability of informal transport allows commuters to save on transportation costs, enabling them to allocate resources to other essential needs such as housing, food, and education (Peters & Bhusal, 2020). Moreover, informal transport services fill the gaps left by formal systems, providing last-mile connectivity and serving areas that are not adequately served by traditional public transport operators, thereby improving overall accessibility for urban residents (Afolabi &Akibo, 2020).

One of the key strengths of informal transport systems in Lagos is their flexibility and adaptability to changing demand patterns and urban dynamics (Omisore, 2018). Unlike fixed-route formal transport modes, informal transport operators can quickly adjust their services in response to fluctuations in demand, traffic conditions, and passenger preferences (Cervero, 2000). This flexibility enables informal transport to fill critical gaps in the transportation network, particularly during peak travel periods or in areas with inadequate public transport infrastructure (Agbiboa, 2020). Furthermore, the decentralized nature of informal transport allows for innovation and experimentation in service delivery, leading to the emergence of new routes, fare structures, and operating models that better meet the needs of urban commuters (Afolabi & Akibo, 2020).

Despite operating outside the formal regulatory framework, informal transport systems in Lagos often complement and integrate with formal transport networks, contributing to a more holistic and efficient urban mobility ecosystem (Afolabi &Akibo, 2020). Many commuters use a combination of formal and informal transport modes to complete their journeys, leveraging the strengths of each system (Afolabi &Akibo, 2020). Informal transport services provide first and last-mile connectivity to major transit hubs such as bus stops and train stations, reducing walking distances and improving overall accessibility (Peters & Bhusal, 2020). Moreover, informal transport operators often coordinate with formal transport authorities to synchronize schedules and routes, reducing duplication of services and enhancing overall system efficiency (Cervero, 2000). By integrating with formal transport networks, informal transport contributes to a more seamless and interconnected urban mobility experience for commuters in Lagos.

Informal transport in Lagos serves as a crucial source of employment and livelihood for thousands of individuals, particularly those with limited formal education and job opportunities (Alcorn & Karner, 2021). Many drivers, conductors, and motorcycle taxi riders rely on the sector for their daily income, to support themselves and their families. The flexible nature of informal transport allows individuals to enter the industry with minimal barriers to entry, providing a pathway to economic self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship Afolabi &Akibo, 2020). Moreover, informal transport generates indirect employment opportunities in areas such as vehicle maintenance, informal ticketing, and roadside vendors, further contributing to local economic development and social mobility.

Informal transport plays a significant role in fostering social cohesion and community integration within Lagos, particularly in densely populated urban areas and informal settlements (Alcorn & Karner, 2021). Shared transportation experiences create opportunities for interaction and social exchange among diverse groups of passengers, facilitating the formation of social networks and solidarity bonds. Moreover, informal transport operators often have deep-rooted connections to the communities they serve, providing personalized and culturally relevant services that enhance the sense of belonging and identity among residents (Peters & Bhusal, 2020). By facilitating mobility and connectivity, informal transport contributes to the social fabric of urban life, promoting inclusivity and mutual support among residents.

The sector makes significant economic contributions to the local economy in Lagos through various channels. Informal transport operators generate income through fare collection, which circulates within local communities and stimulates economic activity (Agbiboa, 2020). Additionally, the sector supports ancillary businesses such as roadside eateries, informal markets, and vehicle repair shops, creating employment opportunities and income streams for small-scale entrepreneurs (Afolabi &Akibo, 2020). Furthermore, informal transport facilitates trade and commerce by connecting producers, consumers, and markets across different parts of the city, thereby enhancing market access and economic integration (Peters & Bhusal, 2020). Overall, the economic contributions of informal transport are essential for sustaining livelihoods and driving local economic development in Lagos.

## Conclusion

Throughout this exploration, we have delved into the multifaceted landscape of informal transport in Lagos, uncovering its pivotal role in urban mobility. From its historical roots to its socioeconomic impacts, we have witnessed how informal transport systems have become ingrained in the fabric of the city, serving as a lifeline for millions of residents. Despite facing numerous challenges, including regulatory hurdles and safety concerns, informal transport continues to thrive, offering accessible, affordable, and flexible transportation options to diverse demographics. The insights gleaned from our examination underscore the importance of integrating informal transport into urban transport planning efforts in Lagos. Recognizing the complementary nature of informal and formal transport modes, policymakers must adopt a holistic approach that leverages the strengths of both sectors to create a more efficient, inclusive, and sustainable urban transport system. This entails developing regulatory frameworks that formalize and regulate informal transport operations while promoting collaboration, innovation, and investment in infrastructure and service delivery.

As Lagos continues to grapple with the complexities of urbanization and mobility, a concerted effort is needed from stakeholders and policymakers to address the challenges and harness the opportunities presented by informal transport. This requires a commitment to dialogue, cooperation, and collective action aimed at fostering a more equitable and resilient urban transport ecosystem. By prioritizing the needs of commuters, promoting social inclusion, and embracing innovation, we can build a future where informal transport plays a vital role in shaping a more sustainable and livable Lagos for all. In conclusion, the journey

towards sustainable urban transport in Lagos is a shared responsibility that demands collaboration, creativity, and commitment from all stakeholders. By working together, we can unlock the full potential of informal transport as a catalyst for positive change, driving urban development and prosperity in the years to come.

**Recommendations**

From the findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. There is a need for the development of comprehensive regulatory frameworks that formalize the operations of informal transport systems while addressing safety, operational, and environmental concerns (Omisore, 2018). This should involve consultations with stakeholders, including informal transport operators, to ensure that regulations are fair, transparent, and enforceable.
2. Implementing licensing and permitting schemes for informal transport operators can help ensure compliance with safety standards, vehicle maintenance requirements, and fare regulations (Afolabi &Akibo, 2020). These schemes should be accompanied by capacity-building programs to improve operators' understanding of their rights and responsibilities under the law.
3. Promoting seamless integration between informal and formal transport modes is essential for improving overall urban mobility (Peters & Bhusal, 2020). This can be achieved through the development of intermodal transport hubs, shared ticketing systems, and coordinated scheduling to facilitate smooth transfers between different modes of transportation.
4. Encouraging collaboration between public authorities and informal transport operators can help leverage the strengths of both sectors in providing efficient and sustainable transportation solutions (Ibitoye & Yaya, 2019). Public-private partnerships can involve joint investment in infrastructure, service provision, and capacity-building initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality and reliability of urban transport services.
5. Providing training and skills development opportunities for informal transport operators can improve their professionalism, customer service, and business management skills (Afolabi &Akibo, 2020). This can include training programs on road safety, financial management, and regulatory compliance to empower operators and enhance the overall quality of service delivery.
6. Offering financial incentives such as subsidies, grants, or low-interest loans can help informal transport operators invest in vehicle maintenance, fleet renewal, and safety upgrades (Peters & Bhusal, 2020). These incentives can be targeted at operators who demonstrate compliance with regulatory requirements and contribute positively to the urban transport system.

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