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“The impossible BRT? How imported large-scale transport policies fare in the face of pre-existing transport sectors regulatory norms in Lagos”

Cities are back in town research group

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1. Introduction

“The first phase of the Lagos BRT was opened on March 17, 2008. (...) Then, it was a pleasure riding in one of those buses and not a few people parked their vehicles at home rather than go through the rigorous and laborious experiences of moving in Lagos. (...) But the story is no longer as rosy and the experience is no longer as exciting as between then and now as most of the buses are now shadows of their former selves. While the fares remain higher than that of the yellow and red buses, because of the expected comfort, the services they offer now are not better than that of the other buses. (...) For all intents and purposes, the BRT buses are now glorified molue¹ buses devoid only of the rude and tactless bus conductors and their collaborative driver colleagues. »

Charles Okoh, ‘Bamise’s Murder And The Poor Services Of Lagos BRT’, Daily Independent, 14 March 2022

“Do we want an okada² mode of public transportation system? Or do we want a world class service like all the [other cities] - Depending on the answer, it determines what you do. Because if you want an okada mode, let's continue what we're doing. »

Managing Director of a bus operating company, May 2022

Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) systems are road-based mass transit transport projects which feature segregated lanes, ensuring a faster average speed than classic bus systems. After Bogotá's experience with the launch of its own BRT network in the early 2000s, a structured group of organizations started promoting BRT projects as an affordable mass transit solution in cities facing fast demographic growth (Hidalgo & Gutiérrez, 2013). Soon enough, they became popular mass transit solutions in cities of the Global South throughout the 2000s and have been adopted by more and more African local (and national) governments in the late 2000s and 2010s. The implementation of BRT systems is relatively faster and cheaper than rail-based systems with similar capacities, hence providing a quick fix in cities facing important demographic growth on top of the currently unattended transport demand. But beyond the practical need they are meant to solve, these projects are also infused with ambitions for modernization and reform of paratransit-dominated transport systems (Agbibo, 2022, p. 173; Klopp et al., 2019, p. 4).³ While artisanal transport operators provide most of the collective transport offer in many African cities, they tend to be stigmatized as bearers of chaos, deemed irresponsible as their vehicles are rarely roadworthy and criminalized by public officials and citizens alike. Large-scale projects are hence often advertised as options bringing modernity and order into seemingly chaotic transport sectors.

The notion of socio-technical imaginary illustrates how infrastructure can be loaded with implicit ideas about collective futures. Developed by Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, it

¹ *Molues* are vehicles built in Nigeria from imported secondhand trucks' chassis and turned into buses by artisanal transport operators (Agbibo, 2022, p. 104).

² *Okadas* are commercial motorcycles.

³ I will prefer the terms artisanal transport and paratransit over the 'informal transport' label to refer to small (or big) private operators providing collective transport services without being outwardly contracted to do so by public authorities.

refers to ‘collectively imagined forms of social life and social order reflected in the design and fulfillment of nation-specific scientific and/or technological projects’ (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015, p. 20). It is fitting to understand the BRT’s role in Lagos: implemented in the early 2000s, the Lagos BRT is the direct product and one of the most heralded flagship projects of Governor Tinubu’s urban reform, an emblem of institutional change and the first stone of an envisioned integrated, multimodal, modern, legible, privately-operated transport system. As such, the BRT and its associated transport projects are proxies communicating to the public as well as international partners forms of social life which are deemed desirable by Lagos State Government. However, most collective transport services are still provided by paratransit operators. The paratransit industry is a contested arena, with specific, at times opaque, arbitrary and violent regulation modes, which does not seem compatible with the gubernatorial global-city-adjacent transport masterplans issued in the recent years (Fourchard, 2021; Agbibo, 2022).

How do pre-existing regulation modes in the transport industry challenge the socio-technical imaginaries conveyed by the BRT? This communication looks at BRT operations in a time of crisis (2020-2022) to shed light on the outcomes of Lagos state’s attempts at birthing its modern urban transport system.

The paper shows how the BRT system in Lagos and the integrated transport system it supports are largely undermined by Lagos state’s double allegiance. Indeed, while successive governors claim to prioritize the regulated transport system, the state’s ties to the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) jeopardize the expansion of the global-city-adjacent envisioned integrated transport system. The impact of various crises on the transport network’s economic model are discussed and we analyze the convergence between the BRT’s and paratransit’s operational modalities (Adama, 2018).

This communication is structured as follows: I first discuss the theoretical relevance of socio-technical imaginaries in understanding the BRT’s role in their cities of adoption before detailing my methodology and providing background elements on the case study. This is followed by two empirical sections. In the first one, I discuss the challenges faced by the BRT in regard to its operational model from 2020 to 2022 as service decayed and became similar to paratransit’s operational models. I argue that while BRT is presented as the anti-danfo, its operators are held to a standard set by paratransit operators. In the last empirical section, I address various attempts at replacement of paratransit operators. The paper takes the deployment of a last mile service as the illustration of both the regulated transport sector’s ambition to swallow paratransit operations and the resistance and bargaining of paratransit operators facilitated by Lagos state’s double allegiance to both legs of its transport system. Ultimately, the section discusses the deliberate exclusion of paratransit from the ideal transport masterplan as a threat to the completion of said plan.

2. Socio-technical imaginaries and transport reforms

So long as we accept that futures are socially manufactured rather than the logical following of sequel of current events, it is only fair to assimilate policy-making to the creation of a desired

future (Müller-Mahn, 2020, p. 156). When it comes to urban planning and especially infrastructure projects, the mere choices of projects, regardless of their completion, is often telling regarding a given government's hopes for their urban future. I turn to the notion of socio-technical imaginaries in the attempt to dive deeper into the role of imaginaries in the adoption and implementation of large-scale urban transport projects. Socio-technical imaginaries were defined by Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim in their 2009 article about nuclear power in South Korea and the United States as 'collectively imagined forms of social life and social order reflected in the design and fulfillment of nation-specific scientific and/or technological projects' (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009). In their 2015 volume, the authors note that these imaginaries are not necessarily contained to the national sphere and can extend to other organizations, and emphasize that imagination is a collective practice as well as a 'crucial reservoir of power and action' (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015, p. 17). They locate their concept between political theory and science and technology studies, in what they identify as a lacking space where imaginaries as political tools apposed onto objects and projects can be theorized about. It has yielded important strides as authors have used the concepts to show how desirability carves out policies and realities in cities, notably when it comes to infrastructure projects such as development corridors (Müller-Mahn, 2020, pp. 157–158). Calling upon socio-technical imaginaries in this paper is an attempt to understand how project infused with specific imagineerings for the future fare in the face of regulatory realities: some stakeholders are deliberately ruled out of desirable futures even when they are key parts of present arrangements (Paul, 2004). Indeed, the desirability of imagined future urban lifestyles is defined in opposition to repulsive pasts and realities.

Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) is a relevant object to dissect under the light of the socio-technical imaginaries notion. Projects like the BRT were often studied by authors pertaining to the field of BRT is a travelling model: it was incrementally created in specific cities, namely Curitiba and other South American countries, and turned into a standardized, ready-for-travel project by a consultocracy composed by a few organizations such as the Institute for Transport Development and Policy (ITDP), Embarq and to some extent the World Bank (McCann, 2011, p. 114; Olivier de Sardan, 2021; Wood, 2019, p. 94). The BRT's *mise en récit* - the stabilization of a narrative associated with the material object designed to foster desirability around it by appealing to policymakers' emotions - is infused with the promise of sanitized, pacified and modernized urban transport systems (Montero, 2017, p. 69; Olivier de Sardan, 2021). These promises generally come from simplified stories of success attributing the outcomes of complex reform processes to specific projects (Montero & Baiocchi, 2022, p. 1546). Hence, successes became associated with the infrastructure's materiality, which is common when it comes to infrastructure projects and might be even more common in an era of increased competition between territories. There is a near-magical expectation among policymakers for objects to perform miracles in themselves, as if the sheer presence of dedicated lanes is essentially bound to foster change. One of the specificities of BRT, and its main sales argument, is the promise of a cheap reform as it is supposed to function with little to no operating subsidy. This testifies of the BRT's paradoxical situation, often used by public authorities to regain control over their public transport services while aiming for an unsubsidized transport option where operators bid to be a part of the scheme and carry a part of the risk (Paget-Seekins, 2015, p. 116). Since the early 2000s, the sales pitch for BRT has evolved to fit new expectations, it has been adjusted to account for the experiences witnessed in the case of numerous iterations of BRT which have

appeared in these years and has continued to convince policy-makers, notably in African cities as Lagos, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Dar-es-Salaam have their own systems in operation and Dakar, Abidjan and Nairobi are planning their networks as of October 2022.

Transport sectors in African cities are often marked by an absence of publicly-funded mass transit options, and this can be traced back to the structural adjustment programs taking African economies by storm under the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s impulse in the 1980s (Riddell, 1997, p. 1301). As a result, small private operators either took over public transport services' delivery and became in a matter of decades the main or sole providers of urban transport (Behrens et al., 2016). These actors, designated under the term paratransit or artisanal transport in this paper, are often criticized due to the nature of their internal regulation processes which are often violent, subjecting transport workers and passengers to difficult conditions of life and travel (Agbibo, 2022; Bähre, 2014; Govender, 2016). However, large-scale urban transport projects have come back to the fore in the 2000s as Africa became the record holder for fastest urban demographic growth. Indeed, while paratransit operators tend to offer routes with unmatched levels of granularity, transport needs exceed the available offer as of now and this demand is expected to grow. Beyond the demographic motivations, national and local governments often backed by development banks or international financiers are also implementing large-scale transport as a pathway to a more desirable future. Indeed, paratransit has been criminalized and shunned in most cities, blamed for their violence but mostly their ungovernability: workers themselves are depicted as thugs, and paratransit operations perceived as road hazards (Agbibo, 2016; Hart, 2013; Rizzo, 2011). Hence, rail and bus projects such as the BRT are presented as a future free from chaos, advertised as statement projects demonstrating the possibility of an alternative, more desirable, sanitized future.

In these communications advertising a future of urban transport marked by seamless, standardized transport networks, the transition from the current structure of urban transport is depicted simplistically and more often than not boils down to replacement, with no afterthought for the specifics of the reform (Klopp, 2021). The BRT is supposed to work optimally if its competitors are replaced through inclusion in the scheme, compensation, or pure and simple exclusion. This fits in the dichotomy between paratransit's supposed 'chaoticness' belonging in the past, and making way to hyper visible, massive, efficient BRTs. Yet, replacement is rarely simple, nor realistic due to logistical factors – only a share of passenger actually switches from paratransit to BRT, paratransit routes tend to serve territories more finely, BRT isn't always as frequent – but mostly due to political reasons. Indeed, paratransit workers are often organized in larger bodies such as associations in South Africa, syndicates in Sénégal, or unions in Nigeria. While these larger bodies don't necessarily represent the interests of workers, they remain powerful players in local and national arenas. They can stall or stop large-scale projects when they fear it might endanger their livelihood. Another side to it which has now been documented in the academic literature is their cooperation with public authorities. In Lagos specifically, the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) is known to fund political campaigns for major parties, and disturbing elections in favor of certain candidates (Agbibo, 2022, p. 160). Besides, the Union is a twilight institution responsible for the management of motor parks transport sector and levying taxes on transport workers, effectively acting as any administration of a state government in many respects (Fourchard, 2021, p. 185, page 199). While the NURTW's top management was consulted and involved in

the launch of the BRT scheme in the early 2000s, the introduction of BRT was only the beginning of the integrated transport network detailed by Lagos state in its masterplan initially issued in 2010, updated in 2014 and currently under a new rework. The BRT marks the beginning of a slowly-but-surely growing regulated transport system co-existing tensely with the paratransit industry, and eventually meant to swallow it as there is no indicated room for artisanal transport in the masterplan in its present form.

Throughout this paper, I highlight how the socio-technical imaginaries encapsulated within the BRT in Lagos is challenged by the current realities and regulations of the local transport sector.

3. Case Study and Methodology. Researching the fate of an emblem of urban reform

The BRT in Lagos was launched within the Lagos Urban Transport Project 1 (LUTP 1), a World-Bank sponsored project led by the Lagos State Government (LASG) for the overhaul of the Lagos transport sector launched in 2003. The US\$165m project was symptomatic of a wider urban reform undertaken by Governor Bola Ahmed Tinubu and pursued by his successors in the effort of turning Lagos into a ‘world class city’ (de Gramont, 2015 and Kuris & Blair, 2014 in Agbibo, 2022, p. 172).

Lagos’ newly created transport agency LAMATA, birthed through the LUTP 1, planned and delivered a BRT corridor which was debuted in fanfare in March 2008. This first route provided LAMATA and LASG with a terrain for experimentation and a test-drive for state-controlled urban transport. The project was advertised as an innovative approach to BRT and it was proudly branded ‘Africa’s first BRT scheme’ (Mobereola, 2009). Transport became a locus of self-promotion on the international sphere, and the BRT was followed by a first Strategic Transport Master Plan (LSTMP) in 2010, updated in 2014.

[LSTMPP TO BE INSERTED HERE]

Figure 1. The Lagos State Transport Master Plan

Transport master plans are often tools of storytelling, spatial imaginaries depicting the ideal future urban transport landscape of a megacity (Granqvist et al., 2019; van Hulst, 2012). In the case of Lagos, rail lines and BRT routes form the core of the system as the main mass transit modes available. Standard bus routes, monorails, water transport routes and First and Last Mile (FMLM) routes are identified to complete mass transit mode services and ensure a more complete coverage of the State territory. While most of the masterplan’s announced routes haven’t been delivered, there have been advances: the first BRT route from Tafawa Balewa Square to Mile 12 was extended North all the way to Ikorodu, a new BRT line was launched in 2021, the Blue line’s first phase is planned to start operating in late 2022 and the Red Line’s infrastructure is coming to fruition.

I used qualitative method tools to collect data on the realities of and imaginaries surrounding Lagos’ regulated transport network. Within the framework of my doctoral studies, I completed two research stays in Lagos (February-March 2020 and April-May 2022). I conducted a total of 41 interviews, both on and offline, with stakeholders at LAMATA, LASG and transport

operators. I conducted a documentary review as well as a thorough press review in order to retrace project's timeline, identify turning points in the Lagos urban transport network story. During my research stays I conducted observations to get a sense of the passengers' experience in the State's transport system.

4. Cracking under pressure: operational challenges endangering the BRT's projected reality

The BRT's operational model in Lagos is based on public-private partnerships. In theory, private companies are supposed to bid for the operation of routes, procure vehicles⁴ and maintain them, as well as hire, train and manage staff. LAMATA, in its quality of transport regulator, contracts companies and awards them franchises to run bus services on specific routes. Each company is given a bundle of profitable and less-profitable routes to allow for cross-subsidization. The contracts are net costs route contracts, which means that operators own the fare revenue collected on their routes – except for the franchise fee collected by LAMATA.⁵ In this model, fare revenue is largely dependent on the number of passengers transported – rather than for instance the number of kilometers completed. This type of contract is supposedly an efficient way for the public authority in charge to retain control over the services while minimizing the 'risk of open-ended subsidies' and incentivizing the operator to optimize operations and collect more revenue (*The BRT Planning Guide*, 2017, p. 434). However, it also places revenue risk on the operator which can put the model in a strain in times of crises.

Successive shocks and events affected bus operations from 2020 to 2022. The beginning of the coronavirus pandemic in the first months of 2020 led Lagos state to implement stay-at-home orders from March onwards. Once lockdown eased, service started again in May but with a limited authorized number of passengers – initially set at 20 and raised to 42 at the end of the month (Akoni, 2020). Covid-related measures generated important revenue loss for regulated transport operators. October 2020 marked the beginning of #EndSARS, a widely followed social movement against policy brutality in Nigeria (Ojedokun et al., 2021). Numerous protests were organized in Lagos. While many consisted in peaceful marches, more violent direct actions were also undertaken and targeted at public assets: dozens of buses as well as bus stations and other road infrastructure elements were burnt (Asabor, 2021). Buses are branded under LAMATA's colors and are perceived by most commuters as direct emanations of Lagos state even though they are most often than not owned or at least leased by operating companies. Some operators clearly accused paratransit operators of being the arsonists using #EndSARS as an opportunity to get rid of competitors while blaming it on protestors. In 2022, operators experienced a fuel price hike: diesel prices increased 203% from June 2021 to June 2022, and the reported price per liter in September is 786 nairas (*Nigeria Diesel Prices, 26-Sep-2022*, n.d.; "Price Pressures Build in Nigeria as Diesel Costs Surge 200%," 2022). Diesel was already the

⁴ In fact, there have been several occurrences of vehicle purchases by Lagos State: Governor Akinwunmi Ambode notably approved the purchase of 800 vehicles under the Bus Reform Initiative scheme ("Ambode's Bus Reform Initiative Receives Applause," 2017).

⁵ Development bank transport specialist, March 2022

primary cost for operators when it costed around 200 nairas per liter. On top of this, a continuous, long-lasting depreciation of the naira also affected operators' revenue as most of the buses' spare parts as well as the vehicles themselves are bought in foreign currencies. These crises resulted in a spiral: the revenue loss encountered by operators prevented them from replacing burnt buses or repairing damaged ones as the price of parts continually arose, which in turn led to a decrease in comfort for passenger. Some operators stopped servicing certain routes altogether, and all of them adopted a fill-and-go model: bus drivers wait until the vehicle fills up before departing from the bus terminus as an attempt to complete the least number of journeys while collecting the largest possible volume of passenger fare revenue. The service is not scheduled anymore as which created further revenue loss as passengers choose to ride danfos instead of waiting for 24-seater buses to be full before departing, especially in the case of mixed traffic routes in off-peak hours.⁶

As a result of this situation, a debate over whether or not BRT operators should be granted subsidies has become more and more recurrent in restricted spaces such as meetings organized by LAMATA as well as in the media.⁷ Specifically, the BRT's status as a public service is at play. The head of Primero, the landlord operator running the route has been extremely vocal on the matter to deflect the responsibility for degrading services onto Lagos state.

'So the number one cost has tripled, your price (as in fare) stays the same?! It's a recipe for disaster! And that's why I keep telling what nobody seems to be listening: this system will collapse unless somebody decides to do the right thing, it will collapse. The BRT concept is a laudable concept. But all over the world, everywhere, with the exception of Nigeria, the government one way or the other subsidizes. (...) But in Nigeria, we like building things, but we don't think about running it or maintaining it. Oh yeah it looks good. But what about sustainability? It has to be sustainable and right now it's not sustainable. (...) They don't want to meddle in the operations, which is fine enough. But you do not pass the social responsibility of the state to a private company. It's not done anywhere. It's not a private company's job to make people happy. That's the government's job. It not the private company's job to subsidize people. That's a government's job! But it looks as if we've put the cart before the horse here. We are now subsidizing the Lagos state government. They get all the political benefit, all over the world, people are all like "oh Lagos has done BRT", they get all of that. But at whose

⁶ Extract from an observation note on board written at the Oshodi terminal, on board of a BRT bus servicing the Oshodi – Abule Egba route at 9:30AM.

"[A colleague] meets me, we top up his card and go find the next departing bus to Abule Egba. There are many, and we naturally hop in the first one in line and tap our cards. The bus windshield has a bullet hole, and we are among the first passengers to board. We wait for a solid half hour, and [my colleague], all irritated, tells me that this is precisely why he never takes BRT buses: it takes too long and the same trip traveling by danfo would've cost him N250-N300 [instead of N350].

⁷ 'Tinubu said the continuous dramatic increase in the cost of operations had affected the company in the quick repair of their buses in a timely manner. He said that in spite of the increase in the cost of operations, the management had worked hard to make the fares stable for their services to be affordable for commuters. The Primero boss urged the Federal Government for an urgent intervention by subsidising public transportation in Nigeria as it is done all over the world. He said such would enable the operators to provide effective operations so that commuters could continue to enjoy its services.' ("350m Passengers Boarded BRT Buses in 7 Years," 2022)

expense? At whose cost? That's the question . It's a political will issue, it's not the money. The political will is not there.'⁸

The BRT is conceived in Lagos - and often promoted by its advocates - as a scheme which requires an initial investment in capital expenditure and eventually sustains itself, if it is done correctly. Hence, a common argument tends to veer attention away from the state and onto the operator's management abilities. Since Lagos State has a high number of overall potential passengers, according to some voices, BRT operators should generate enough revenue to sustain themselves. However, it is a fallacious argument as passengership also depends on several other factors such as route design and the overall repartition of employment and housing in the agglomeration. When asked about the matter, Lagos state's transport commissioner is straightforward.

'So I'm not going to shy away from the fact that we're a poor country. So we know that we don't have the kind of money that is required to subsidize some of the operators, and that's why we are prioritizing subsidy in the form of infrastructure development.'⁹

However, another important line of thinking is here described by LAMATA's former Managing Director.

Interviewer: And what's the rationale behind that [passenger-based service level agreements] on the side of the regulator, is it due to a lack of means or is it just not the philosophy they want to give it or are they afraid that people are going to find loopholes? Interviewee: Well, I think, from my own experience... When you look at the system here, you have the unregulated buses who are not subsidized in any shape or form, whose buses are not safe, nor reliable so they are not getting any subsidy from the government and they are sustaining themselves. So the question is, "why can't you, who has been given vehicles, sustain yourself or run a bus system?". So in effect, subsidies for urban transport has never been something that's been totally looked into in most African countries because of the unregulated buses being in operation and when they are tired of the bus they just dump it and go get another bus. The government doesn't think along that line that most urban transport needs to be subsidized.¹⁰

Paratransit has set a standard in delivering transport services. Paratransit operators have provided an imperfect, insufficient, unpleasant and at times dangerous yet continuous collective transport service for years with no subsidy.¹¹ However, paratransit remains largely outside of Lagos state's scope of action whereas BRT and formal public service experienced as a sphere of transport where Lagos state gets to act like a regulator through LAMATA. Yet, the operators are held to standards set by the paratransit industry, and the BRT as it is: neither efficient, nor

⁸ Primero's Managing Director, April 2022

⁹ Lagos state's transport commissioner, May 2022

¹⁰ LAMATA's former Managing Director, May 2022

¹¹ Bus operators argue that paratransit is in fact subsidized because their vehicles use petrol, which is subsidized by the federal government in Nigeria, contrary to BRT buses using diesel.

fast, nor seamless. The passenger experience is marked by long waiting times, discomfort, and unreliability.

BRT is supposed to be the first stone of Lagos state's integrated transport system and it is effectively a laboratory for the management of a publicly owned and privately delivered transport service. Yet, 14 years after the initial launch of the first BRT route, the scheme's operational model is under great stress, outperformed by paratransit operators and held to a standard of operation set by danfos and molues. Ironically, this bus scheme rolled out to represent an alternative future for urban transport has grown to offer a passenger experience which is close to that offered by its direct competitors, straying further from an envisioned seamless service.

5. The replacement conundrum

Paratransit in Lagos provides 90% of collective transport services in the city (Jones & Williams, 2022). The estimated number of danfos varies between 75 000 and 145 000, there are at least 37 000 commercial motorcycles in operation, 83 000 molues and 50 000 tricycles (Anudu, 2021; Daniels, 2019; Mahmood, 2019). It is a major employer. Yet, as of now, there is no room for paratransit in the public transport masterplan.

Paratransit remains officially envisioned and narrated as an obstacle on the path towards the imagined and longed for world-class city transport by actors across the board. The current commissioner of Lagos State himself explains that minibuses and commercial motorcycles were 'chaotic' and that the masterplan would allow for an optimization, modernization and restructuring of operations.¹² Lagos State's attitude towards paratransit operators when it comes to the implementation of its transport masterplan have varied. The approach in the early 2000s was based on turning the Union as a stakeholder in the first BRT scheme while phasing them out. NURTW executives were taken along on study trips to South America organized by the World Bank and the first BRT operators were a cooperative formed by paratransit operators (Mobereola, 2009). LAMATA expected to steer passengers away from paratransit on the long-term, as the regulated transport system would grow to outperform its competitors. As the partnership with the cooperative fell apart and more and more regulated bus routes were implemented, the terms of the cooperation between the State and the Union regarding the role of paratransit in the transport master plan are not clear.

Interviewee: Looking at the way we started, we are on the right path. But for me, it's continuous collaboration with the union to ensure that they are brought under regulations with proper monitoring and enforcement.

Interviewer: Do they have an interest in that? Isn't that a decrease in their revenue if they're regulated?

Interviewee: Mmmh, yeah.

¹² Lagos state's transport commissioner, May 2022

Interviewer: I can see how it would be interesting for like drivers, for instance (...). But for owners and upper management I'm questioning what their interest in collaboration is. (...)

Interviewee: Take it from me they have been operating for a very long time without regulation, haphazardly so when a policy comes like that, you know, to regulate them, there's always this kind of resistance to change, resistance to policies and things like that, so it basically affects the way they do things, it basically affects their revenue generation and their mode of operation. So that is why they are always resistant. But from the government angle it is always good to make it clear, to let them see the benefit aspect of regulating them, let them see the other side.

Interviewer: ...Which is?

Interviewee: They are better reformed.¹³

Official discourse about reform is sternly and absurdly apolitical. A new initiative was launched to pursue these reform efforts. The French Agency of Development (AfD) in partnership with LASG is in the process of hiring industry transition specialists to start a Bus Industry Transition Program. While the negotiations are yet to start, classic solutions such as fleet scrapping and retraining of drivers are currently envisioned.¹⁴ None of these solutions demonstrate any possibility of a desirable and desired future which includes paratransit workers not solely as an afterthought but as integral parts of the system. Barely any solution actually involves an honest dialogue with paratransit operators as stakeholders, and none of these actually offer the option of a hybrid system as was envisioned notably in some South African cities (Diallo, 2022; Schalekamp & Klopp, 2018). In the meantime, the regulated transit network expands through new schemes, creating more and more competition for paratransit operators.

In May 2021, Lagos launched its First Mile Last Mile (FMLM) service. The scheme's ambition is to serve shorter routes with 7-seater vehicles, allowing commuters to join the closest major axis from their point of departure (BRT or standard bus route). Commuters can pay their fare using their transit card, and hence potentially complete entire journeys from their departure point to their destination while never leaving the circuit of the State's integrated transport. It has been denounced as an odd policy choice as operators and former LAMATA staff alike have worried that this represented a diversion of resources which might have been more useful to sustain a skeletal bus offer. However, FMLM is yet another brick laid on the path to seamlessness for the passenger and legibility and control for the regulator. It also speaks to Lagos state's strategy when it comes to curating its international image: regardless of the performance of said modes, presenting a variety of available travel modes in the city grants the right to declare one's transport system as 'multimodal'. It is also a clear attempt at conjuring an imagined future where transport integration is complete.

¹³ LAMATA executive, April 2022

¹⁴ Development bank representative, May 2022



Figure 2. FMLM minibuses near the Tafawa Balewa Square BRT terminal. Photo taken by the author.

FMLM are a direct threat to danfos. While they aren't necessarily servicing the same routes, they operate similarly by dropping passengers off along the road. Numerous incidents were reported by LAMATA as well as FMLM operators I got to interview. A respondent from the transport agency felt uneasy admitting that the rollout of the FMLM scheme hadn't been peaceful.

Interviewer: And how has this resistance manifested?

Interviewee: Right now, they manifest it through... They put up like a fight with some of our busses.

Interviewer: A physical fight?

Interviewee: ...At times.

Interviewer: OK, so hampering operations.

Interviewee: Like, we have some routes that we had to suspend because of the... activity.¹⁵

¹⁵ LAMATA executive, April 2022

When these conflicts arise, the transport agency deploys a set of solutions: they will either suspend routes as mentioned above, send a team of employees on site to appease tensions, call meetings with chairmen of the specific park or unit of an incident or move passengers to other routes.¹⁶ At times paratransit operators warn that they will only cease from disrupting FMLM operations if LAMATA raises the fare, and the transport authority obliges – which effectively compromises the regulated transport system’s promise of a fixed fare.¹⁷ In some areas such as Ojuelegba, the FMLM vehicles were barred from operating altogether at the time of fieldwork. As I interviewed an FMLM vehicle operating company, members of the management noted that these solutions weren’t sufficient: they wanted secured layback ensuring their vehicles have separate loading docks from danfos and tricycles because their drivers were regularly being slapped by *agberos*¹⁸ for loading their vehicles in the wrong area.¹⁹ However, they understood that the transport agency had their hands tied. They reminded me that ‘LAMATA has an *oga*²⁰ too’, referring to Lagos State government. They also added that the NURTW had the same boss, making it hard for LAMATA to take action against the current abuse of FMLM vehicle drivers. By now, Lagos state’s political parties’ allegiance to the NURTW is known. This gives paratransit operators leverage and it is common to hear from regulated transport operators beyond FMLM that danfos or *agberos* have entered into open conflicts with them in several occurrences. Drivers are reprimanded quite violently by the State administration for plying the lanes, however this often takes place in episodes when the State administration feels the need to stage and perform their supposed control of the roads (Agbibo, 2018). The deployment of this scheme which is supposed to bridge the gap between passengers’ destination or arrival point and the nearest major axis and meant to allow Lagosians to ride full journeys on the regulated transport system. However, it mostly showed where LAMATA’s power over transport operations begins and ends: at the end of the day, its hands are mostly tied when it comes to enforcing regulation on paratransit operators, its authority is not recognized, and it is actively challenged.

This section’s point isn’t that paratransit is out of control, nor that it has the upper hand on the State as paratransit operators are regularly subjected to violence at the hands of the State’s traffic police and deliberately prevented from operating in some cases (Agbibo, 2018). Rather, it shows that when push comes to shove, the supposedly priority of the regulated integrated transport network isn’t upheld because it cannot be. The beliefs and hopes carrying Lagos State’s transport masterplan are oblivious to the city’s massive paratransit sector. The deployment of the FMLM scheme is an obvious demonstration of LASG’s will to replace and

¹⁶ LAMATA executive, April 2022

¹⁷ LAMATA employee, April 2022

¹⁸ ‘The nomenclature *agbero* is a euphemism for a cohort of dreaded urban youths who survive through their parasitic dependence on the spatial regulation of public transport in Lagos’ (Agbibo, 2022, p. 146). Often referenced under the term ‘union touts’, they are young men in charge of collecting taxes on behalf of the NURTW. They also monitor loading and unloading processes, which explains their conflictual relationship with FMLM drivers who use danfos’ loading bays.

¹⁹ FMLM vehicle operating company management team, April 2022

²⁰ *Oga* is a Pidgin word used to refer to people in positions of authority, and hence often used to designate one’s boss.

swallow paratransit operations, but the actual rollout of the scheme points to the paradoxical stance of Lagos State which ultimately jeopardizes regulated transport options.

6. Conclusion.

BRT and regulated transport in Lagos is powered by a socio-technical imaginary held dear by policy-makers, development partners, as well as a section of the population. It embodies the perspective of a future where collective transport is a closed circuit, sanitized and legible, compliant with the latest international standards and placed under the State's direct and complete control. Yet, this imagined future omits current realities of the transport network. This communication has demonstrated that in times of crises, this imagined future seems out of touch and out of reach. The 2020-2022 years accelerated the BRT operational model's collapse and revealed how much Lagos State's expectations are shaped by the standard set by paratransit. The hazardous replacement attempts discussed in the second section indicate that after years of running regulated transport in parallel with unregulated transit, tensions continuously arise as new modes complementing the regulated mass system are competing with paratransit operations. The State government's unofficial ties with the Union creates limitations to the transport agency's ability to exert its authority. Yet, the government's official narrative still portrays artisanal transport operators as undesirables. As a result, paratransit's regulation modes hover over, define, and restrict the regulated transport system's operational realities while artisanal transport operators are excluded from the transport master plan.

All in all, this communication is the tale of a maximalist, exclusionary socio-technical imaginary projected over and encapsulated in a BRT system and its adjacent masterplan, which is being progressively dismantled by the realities of Lagos' transport regulation. It questions the harms caused by the inability to imagine better futures of urban mobility which fully include paratransit operators.

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