

# Winners and losers in Johannesburg's BRT

When South Africa hosted the football World Cup in 2010, visitors to Johannesburg were among the first to be able to use what has become one of the models of sub-Saharan African public transport innovations.

The city launched its bus rapid transit (BRT) system, Rea Vaya, more or less on schedule. However, there was a two-week delay to the start of services between downtown Johannesburg and the Soweto township, and the reasons for this hold lessons not only for the rest of Africa but for the whole world.

Rea Vaya was not welcomed by owners of the minibus taxis that had previously been the main form of public transport along the route and throughout the city. The new system replaced those "combis" with two much more modern vehicles: articulated 18-meter high-floor buses with right-hand doors for level boarding; and standard 13-meter high-floor buses with doors on both sides and facilities for wheelchair boarding.

The new bus network operates three types of routes: the trunk route involving the articulated buses running on separated busways; feeder routes on which the standard buses are used and take passengers to the interconnecting stations for the articulated buses; and complementary routes, on which standard buses not only take passengers to the stations but also run along sections of the busway.

The new system's problems arose from the issue of who drives those buses and on what terms. Firstly owners of the old taxis, and many of the workers they employed, were up in arms -- literally in some cases -- about the loss of their livelihoods. According to one 2010 account ([Johannesburg Rolls Out New BRT Routes Against Odds](#)):

"From the project's beginning in 2006, the city chose to negotiate the 12-year bus operations contract with local affected taxi operators instead of opening a competitive tender. Taxi operators affected by BRT routes could [exchange their operating licenses](#) for equity in the new bus operating company, and

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compensation would be on a per kilometer basis instead of per passenger as many taxi drivers are accustomed to.”

Eventually the disagreements were solved on the basis of the taxi operators’ licenses being revoked and their taxis sold at auction in a way that enabled them to obtain capital to invest in the operating company that runs buses in the new system, while many of their employees were taken on to run those services.

Rea Vaya was operating quite well until a new set of labour relations problems led to a strike that began in August 2011 by former taxi drivers by then working in the new system. Their employers are a company, Piotrans, owned by nearly 600 of the former taxi operators.

The drivers’ grievances arise from the fact that their terms and conditions are worse than those enjoyed by employees of the Metrobus services owned by the city authority, who earn about three times more than those employed by the BRT’s private operator.

The Johannesburg case underlines a key challenge in modernising and improving bus services in cities in which public transport has been largely the preserve of informal economy operators and their causally employed staff.

Firstly that, although the new system clearly benefits passengers and the city as a whole, their can be losers as well as winners, and they have every reason to undermine progress unless their livelihoods are taken into account.

Secondly, using a PPP to set up a two-tier public transport workforce will eventually be perceived as unfair by those in the lower tier, and their determination to improve their terms can undermine the success and viability of the whole system.



*Artwork at Orlando Police Station stop on the Rea Vaya BRT in Johannesburg*

With thanks to [Rea Vaya website](#), where there are many more examples of the art work at BRT stations in the city.

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**ITF**

**49-60 Borough Road**

**London, SE1 1DR**

The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) is a global union federation linking 690 unions representing over 4.5 million transport workers in 153 countries.

[www.itfglobal.org](http://www.itfglobal.org)

**Public World**

**34b York Way**

**London N1 9AB**

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