

Article

The taxi industry and transportation for people with disabilities: implications for universal access in a metropolitan municipality

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Abstract

This article focuses on the management of the taxi industry in the eThekweni Municipality. It examines how the financing of the taxi industry influences the provision of transport for people with disabilities highlighting the experiences of a variety of stakeholders of the Integrated Rapid Public Transport Network (IRPTN) and other interim measures to improve public transport provision. The research derives from a larger study on the factors that influence public transport service provision for people with disabilities in the eThekweni Municipality using data which was produced through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with a range of stakeholders. Whilst government and policy makers are desperately seeking to improve the transportation landscape, there seems to be little cognisance of the subversive power of the taxi industry as long as its interests are not acknowledged. Furthermore, the state's constitutional mandate to provide access for people with disabilities appears to be subverted by the taxi industry, which does not seem to regard people with disabilities as economically valuable, resulting in their marginalisation, potentially compromising the successful implementation of the IRPTN. The authors also highlight concerns relating to the lack of effective interim measures and contradictory suggestions by the participants, signalling that any solution needs to acknowledge the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the problem, and that no 'perfect' and simplistic solution is on the horizon. The authors contend that unless sufficient consensus is reached among all stakeholders, the future of public transport service provision for people with disabilities in the eThekweni Municipality remains uncertain.

Introduction

The 2011 Census indicates that 2.54 per cent of the population in the eThekweni Municipality are wheelchair users, 0.17 per cent are deaf and 0.19 per cent are blind (Statistics South Africa 2012a). Historically, there has been limited focus on the rights of and provision of transportation for people with disabilities. As is the case in other societal domains, people with disabilities remain marginalised and excluded, with unequal access to education, employment and healthcare. This unequal access is due, amongst other reasons, to the inaccessibility of transport (WHO 2011). This situation persists despite policies and legislation aimed at guaranteeing the inclusion of people with disabilities. These policies have been driven through various national and international treaties, Acts and offices, to ensure that the rights of people with disabilities are acknowledged. They include the Constitution (South Africa 1996a), the Integrated National Disability Strategy (INDS) (South Africa 1997) and the signing and ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and its Optional Protocol in 2007.

Despite the general neglect of the conditions confronting people with disabilities, in the past two decades, significant progress has been made regarding awareness of their needs and the need for their social inclusion. Regrettably, poor implementation and enforcement of these rights has led to the continued social isolation of people with disabilities. A significant contributor is that people with disabilities are unable to take advantage of the many emerging opportunities because they cannot access transportation. It is argued that if transport facilities were improved, people with disabilities would be able to more ably participate in society and thus lead more independent and economically productive lives. Improved ability to utilise strategies to fight poverty and social exclusion would thereby be created (Venter et al 2002).

Mobility is a more general problem in South Africa, which can be traced to South Africa's history of racial segregation which resulted in millions of people being separated from places they needed to access daily, including their place of employment. Many of these spatial divisions have continued since the end of apartheid, especially with regard to the major urban housing developments on land on the fringes of established townships (Walters 2013). The transport sector has developed, with the bus, taxi and rail industries becoming separate and unequally managed entities. During apartheid, public transport was provided at reduced cost within urban areas,

to promote affordable mobility. However, communities now rely on taxis, buses and trains to commute, with the mini-bus taxi being the most commonly used means of transport (International Labour Organisation 2003).

The eThekweni Municipality (the local government which includes Durban and surrounds) has stated that it intends to be Africa's most caring and liveable city by 2030 (eThekweni Municipality 2016). Part of this plan is to ensure that the city is supported by an efficient transportation system. Post-apartheid, much time, effort and money was spent on upgrading the low-quality, poorly-managed transport system. Since the Public Transport Strategy was approved by parliament in 2007, the municipality has designed a new and potentially effective system (South African Government 2007). The Integrated Rapid Public Transport Network (IRPTN) is designed to align transport provisioning in the eThekweni Municipality with other international metropolitan cities (The Local Government Handbook 2012). This plan, which consists of four phases, should be fully rolled out by 2027.

The IRPTN system is regarded as a wall-to-wall plan consisting of bus, rail and mini-bus transport throughout the eThekweni Municipality. The Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) nodes are expected to be solely dedicated to buses, but will contain a strong feeder component (from minibus taxis), allowing commuters to move from their homes to the station. The system is commonly known as GO! Durban, with construction having started in various areas across the city. As this article explains, an enduring threat to this master plan is the financing of the taxi industry.

Methodology

The evidence underpinning this article is derived from a qualitative research study conducted in 2013, which examined from various vantage points, the factors influencing public transport service provisioning for people with disabilities in the eThekweni Municipality. The study participants were selected using purposive sampling 'based on their anticipated richness and relevance of information in relation to the study's research questions' (Yin 2010: 311), identified through the researchers' professional networks and by contacting various organisations and individuals. The participants included people with disabilities who need to utilise public transport (specifically those with mobility impairments, people who were blind and people who were deaf); transport providers (taxi operators and a taxi owner); city officials (from the eThekweni Municipality), and consultants and experts within the transport and disability sectors. Data was collected in 2013 using

individual interviews and focus groups with a number of participants. These include three persons with visual impairments; two persons with auditory impairments; two wheelchair users; three groups of six to eight people with mobility impairments; six taxi operators; one transport company owner; two city officials; two consultants and two experts.

The data was analysed using a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning by coding with Nvivo 10 software. The original study generated rich data on transportation experiences. However, for the purposes of this article, we zoom in on the financial regulation of the taxi industry and how this impacts inclusive and responsive transportation provisioning, particularly in terms of addressing the special needs of people with disabilities. Quotations cited in this paper are drawn from the original research study, and unless permission has been received to use actual names, pseudonyms have been used.

The taxi industry in the eThekweni Municipality

Identifying the Problem

Like other major urban areas in South Africa, the eThekweni Municipality has main taxi ranks within the city centre and smaller ranks in the outlying areas. This ‘ranking system’, is based on the principle of turn-taking. Each taxi is expected to wait in line to be filled with passengers, before the next taxi can be filled. Additionally, taxi operators pick up passengers along designated routes in the outlying areas. However, unlike other modes of transport such as buses, taxis do not have fixed operating schedules. While the services may be frequent, they are unreliable, particularly during off-peak periods (Department of Transport 2007a:72). This may be attributed to the primary concern with profitability or the lack thereof, complicated further by the attitudes of taxi operators and their levels of satisfaction with how they are compensated for their labour.

Taxi operators are paid in four different ways (International Labour Organisation 2003). The first is a fixed percentage of the week’s takings (to be referred to as cash-up) which does not include a basic wage. In the second method, taxi operators receive a basic wage and a fixed percentage of the daily or weekly cash-up. The third approach is where taxi operators give all the cash-up to the owner and receive a fixed, regular wage. The fourth approach involves the taxi operator taking the cash-up from one day of the week as compensation and giving the rest of the week’s cash-up to the taxi owner.

Manoj, a taxi owner who was interviewed, operates using the first system. According to him, a large percentage of the cash-up is stolen by taxi operators. They say that because they receive a minimum wage, they are forced to cheat (International Labour Organisation 2003). Furthermore, they often overload their vehicles and exceed speed limits in order to increase their take-home pay. Therefore, there is increased pressure from both the taxi owner and the taxi operator to manage their time and transport as many people as possible during the day.

However, taxi owners maintain that profit margins are low, preventing them from offering operators higher wages or better working conditions. They cite the poor socio-economic status of most of their passengers, the long distances that they often have to travel and the high cost of running their vehicles (International Labour Organisation 2003).

The pervasive profit motive

The evidence revealed that every link of the travel chain is characterised by taxi owners and operators optimising revenue. This is compounded by taxi associations' control of the rank fee, which may result in taxi operators having to accept reduced wages, which impacts on the choices they make in accommodating people with disabilities.

Moreover, to maximise profits, taxi operators may poach certain routes which are not on their permit-routes, or ignore the elderly, women and children and people with disabilities. These groups are seen as a burden because they take longer to board, compromising the driver's ability to transport more able-bodied customers in order to improve their take-home pay. Wheelchair users that participated in the study cited numerous instances of waiting up to two hours before they are able to board a taxi. Participants bemoaned the fact that taxis never transport them during peak hours as they rush to transport as many commuters as possible during this time. Even when they are ahead of others in a queue, taxi operators bully passengers into boarding the taxi hastily, often leaving the wheelchair user behind. Menzi, a wheelchair user described the taxi driver's reaction, 'because the taxi driver when they see disabled people, say, they are getting stressed. Because they know you are wasting their time, because they are hungry for money'. Asked about being left behind, Zenzele, another wheelchair user, stated 'that is our daily bread. It is a normal taxi thing'.

However, when taxi operators were questioned about their attitudes to wheelchair users, especially in rush hour traffic, Lindani contradicted the

testimonies of passengers with disabilities, ‘it doesn’t happen that the person [wheelchair user] end up not going in, never... during traffic hour, we still help; we still need that money during the bhakuzing time [off peak hours]’.

Discord between passengers and the taxi industry

The municipality is aware of the disjuncture between the claims of the taxi operators and those of people with disabilities. Logan, from the eThekweni Transport Authority (ETA) observed that people complain during the disability forums. However, when they engage with the taxi industry leadership, ‘they will say what they want us to hear, but [we know that] on the ground it is completely different’.

Manoj, a taxi owner, explained that taxi operators do not pick up people with disabilities during rush hour because the driver knows that it takes a significant amount of time for a person with a disability to be transferred into the taxi. According to June McIntyre, a disability expert, ‘it can take 15 to 20 minutes, depending on how weak the person is and how much help they need’. The extra time required for a wheelchair user to board the taxi means that the cash-up at the end of the day is reduced. Manoj explained that, ‘if a guy comes to me at the end of the day with only R600 [as opposed to for example R800] and says, but I transported a disabled person, I’m going to say, I don’t fucking care. That’s an insult [to me]’.

Manoj added that, in order to maintain his business’ profitability, taxi operators must return with a meaningful amount of cash-up at the end of the day:

If it’s in a busy period, you’re not going to do it [pick up a person with a disability], unless it’s financially rewarding... They won’t even look at a disabled person, not in terms of disgust, but in the interest of time... Time equals money.

Timing is crucial during rush hour because it is important to be at the front of the queue at the rank. Manoj stated:

If you get in there when there are 50 vehicles and there [are] not many people, then you come out empty, you’re not going to make it. So by taking this disabled person, you have now slotted in the wrong timing for the morning. So you would rather not take that disabled person to get better timing.

This is consistent with the findings of Mashiri et al’s (2005) study, which advances the same reasons for people with disabilities being ignored and

avoided by taxi operators.

People with disabilities are acutely aware of the overriding profit motive which results in their exclusion. In this context, the economic power which taxi owners and taxi operators exert, violates the human rights of people with disabilities. Oliver (1990 cited in Kitchin 1998) used a Marxist approach to demonstrate that people with disabilities were socially excluded because they were regarded as unproductive, and therefore hindered the process of capital accumulation for others.

The quest for solutions: Dial-a-Ride

In 1998, two specialist service designs catering for people with disabilities were piloted in South Africa. The first was the Dial-a-Ride system in Cape Town and the second a fixed-route, fixed-schedule system in the eThekweni Municipality called Sukuma.¹ Dial-a-Ride was a demand-response service where vehicles were adapted to accommodate more wheelchair users (between three and seven wheelchairs per vehicle). It worked according to a registration system, where users requested transport either on subscription or with 24-hours advance reservations (Venter and Mokonyama 2001).

In 2001, these services were reviewed as they serviced only a small group of users. Compared to the fixed-route system (Sukuma), Dial-a-Ride was far less effective in terms of costs and user benefits, and hence it was suggested to not be the optimal service design for South African cities where dispersed trip patterns and long distance travel are necessary (Venter and Mokonyama 2001). Furthermore, Dial-a-Ride's cost per passenger was 85 per cent higher than Sukuma, with less recovered through farebox² revenues; vehicle productivity was lower; and vehicles mainly followed fixed trip patterns during peak hours for the economically active user, thereby excluding non-work trips during these times. It was suggested that larger vehicles should run along specific routes with fixed schedules, complemented by a demand-response service. This would ultimately expand the service's catchment area. However, it was also realised that wheelchair users had difficulties with the fixed-route bus system because of non-existent sidewalks and bad roads.

Notwithstanding this information, the eThekweni Municipality started running the Dial-a-Ride system within the municipality in 2011. The objectives of the initial Dial-a-Ride service were to 'cater for widely dispersed trip-patterns and to provide a service in either low-density suburban areas, or to assist people with disabilities who are unable to make use of the public transport service offering' (Universal Design and IDC Consultants 2013b:

18). However, internationally-run services such as Dial-a-Ride have been criticised for various reasons including high costs, difficulty in managing high demand, and their lack of flexibility in adapting their route planning (Universal Design and IDC Consultants 2013b).

Within the eThekweni Municipality, this service originally transported all people with disabilities to their places of employment, hospitals and shopping centres. However, demand far outweighed supply. With over a thousand people on the data-base, the service was temporarily discontinued in mid-2012 to enable management to find a solution. In December 2012, the service resumed, catering only for scholars and employed passengers. This discriminates against those wanting to attend a job interview or seek health services.

Other problems within the eThekweni Municipality related to the cost of the Dial-a-Ride service (even though the service is heavily subsidised) include: vehicles arriving late; the service is over-subscribed (and takes no new bookings); and the monitoring system which the company uses to ensure an efficient service, appears to have limited effect. Wiseman, who is blind, used the service initially but then discontinued it. He calculated that his monthly costs amounted to R580, which increased to R660 per month in May 2012. He said, 'no way... I'm sorry I can't [continue using this service]. I won't be able to afford because in the bus I'm paying R108 a month for a coupon [for Durban bus services] so I'm saving something there. With Dial-A-Ride, I'm losing'.

Monitoring quality and management of services

There appears to be a lack of proper planning and monitoring of the quality of the service, especially in relation to people with disabilities. The service does not have a booking system to manage subscribers. Wasteful operational practices include instances when two vehicles are sent to the same place to pick up two different passengers. Dumisani, a wheelchair user said, 'so there was no proper planning, they didn't know where to start. They just go'. Excluded passengers complain of the poor service, but allege that they receive no follow-through or feedback from the service providers.

Some respondents criticised the way in which the tender to run the Dial-a-Ride enterprise was awarded. Aside from the usual problems associated with tenders in South Africa, such as patronage and nepotism, the tender system prejudices the mobility of people with disabilities. Some of the passengers utilising the service noted that the owner of the service should

be a person with a disability to appreciate the difficulties people with disabilities endure, and thus to be able demonstrate more empathy to users. Dumisani noted, ‘he can’t even understand the situation where you are in; and I’ve been crying, crying like a crying baby’.

Even though the owner of Dial-a-Ride had a parent with a disability, users of the service are not satisfied that he understands their needs. Dumisani said, ‘This tender is millions, but it doesn’t help us. Let’s be fair and firm about it guys, it doesn’t help us’. Furthermore, suspicion surrounded the awarding of tenders. Maphikelela, a wheelchair user, said:

In our government of ours in these times, everything is tender, tender, tender. So we know what is happening in tenders, there is corruption... so now it shouldn’t be a tender this thing, it should be transport catering for people who are disabled, maybe from municipal.

Debate continues on the provision of specialist services to cater for people with disabilities versus having inclusive services for people with disabilities as articulated by Zuki from the ETA. She notes that specialist services have been ‘seen as discriminating against people with disabilities, because sometimes we do get that accusation that we are being discriminatory, if we are going to be providing a service solely for these people’. While the need to accommodate people with disabilities equitably in the provision of public services ought to be a constitutional imperative, this goal continues to be elusive because economic motivations routinely triumph over social justice concerns.

The Integrated Rapid Public Transport Network (IRPTN) policy and plan

With the changes to the public transport landscape in South Africa, there is much focus on the implementation of the Public Transport Strategy and the National Transport Action Plan. The initial vision was to have operating systems in place in 12 cities and six rural districts by 2014. By 2020, it was planned to service ‘85% of the metropolitan city’s population [which] would be within 1km of an IRPTN trunk [road or rail] or feeder [road] corridor’ (Department of Transport 2007b: 4). The implementation of these strategies varies between different municipal areas. A seamless service depends on the cooperation of all stakeholders to ensure that people with disabilities are meaningfully accommodated by an accessible public transport network.

Integration of the taxi industry: the confounding policy process

The Public Transport Strategy (Department of Transport 2007b:9) specifies that, ‘minibus [taxi] operators and employees are full participants in providing services in the corridor network – but only in terms of the integrated plan’. Therefore, existing owners and operators are to have a ‘guaranteed stake in a new mass rapid public transport network [that] leads to a win-win-win breakthrough’ (Department of Transport 2007b:17). The system will be planned and managed by the public sector, but existing public operators will run it. The network will be monitored by information technology.

The plan states that negotiations should take place to determine the specific local options for the taxi industry to fully participate in the trunk and feeder services. It is acknowledged that the strength of partnerships with these existing transport providers and employees as well as their commitment and willingness to buy into the strategy will determine the success of the outcome. However, while the plan purports to be inclusive, detail and options on how this should be facilitated are not provided.

Browning (2006) highlights the paradoxical position of the taxi industry, particularly as it relates to transportation policy development and implementation. He argues that ‘there are extreme differences in the mindset of the so-called ‘informal’ taxis and the formal sectors of government and business’ (2006: 2, cited in Woolfe 2013: 76). He quotes a past president of the South African National Taxi Council, who said that the government does not understand the taxi industry, since it is completely different from the formal system (Browning 2006). He implores policymakers to fully understand the complexity of the taxi industry before the integrated commuter transport plans are finalised.

For some eThekweni officials, the taxi industry appears to be regarded as an unnecessary impediment to the implementation of the master plan. Asked about the integration of the taxi industry, Logan from the ETA said: ‘the way we have conceptualized the plan, we are saying, forget about what there is now. What do we want to see in the future?’

When Phillip, the Universal Access consultant, was asked how the municipality was ensuring buy-in from taxi associations, he replied:

They haven’t done a very good job with that at all. They tended to regard that as something that has to happen in the next phase ... eThekweni took the sort of blind eye approach. They (the taxi industry) are there, and somehow we are going to deal with them one day when the time comes.

Most of the people with disabilities that were interviewed seemed to be very aware of the power of the taxi industry, and the difficulty in negotiating with them. So much so that participants are concerned about the overall success of the IRPTN. Dumisani, a wheelchair user, argued:

We cannot be sure that in 2020 we will be having that plan implemented because we know the taxi people are only fighting and killing. So it means the government will be intimidated to implement the plan because the taxi people the only thing what they know they want to fight to get money.

Manoj, a taxi owner, said that they are fully aware that the IRPTN is coming and that their permits are only valid until 2016. He warned, ‘the taxi association, in my opinion, is not going to allow that to happen. Because there is money involved. There have already been indications of violence, with members saying in their meetings, “we all go there and we deal with it”.’

Manoj was unambiguous about his views on the future of the IRPTN as it relates to the taxi industry:

Those systems work well in first world countries... but in our society, it’s a rougher game. So, you are not going to get sympathy for the disabled from the operators, it is [all about] how much is my cash up for the day. I can feel sorry for you one day, tomorrow, who is going to feel sorry for me when I cannot pay my bills and [provide] for my family. When I cannot pay Standard Bank for the loan? There is that kind of thinking, if the government felt sorry for me, I would pick those disabled people up every day. But nobody feels sorry for me. It’s about paying the bills.

The challenge of inadequate policy dialogue

It is a truism that successful policy implementation is deeply connected to thorough dialogue to achieve consensus. This was a neglected dimension in the integration of the taxi industry into the IRPTN. During the study, there was evidence of growing dissatisfaction amongst taxi owners that municipalities require them to transport people in the interim while the policy process unfolds. Manoj concedes that the process of negotiations is difficult: ‘people that own taxis aren’t educated. They don’t talk eloquent. My guys in my association, they rely a lot on me to say what they can’t say. They just get so frustrated, they get angry [because] they are saying in two years’ time, screw you, we are now taking your permits away’.

Lessons should have been drawn early, from the numerous challenges confronting the implementation of Rea Vaya, the public transport system in

Johannesburg. It was envisaged that the taxi industry would be incorporated into BRT as the sole operator. This required numerous negotiations, since it proved difficult to move an informal business into a formal business model (Walters 2013).

Since this study was conducted, the eThekweni Municipality has attempted to create a relationship with the taxi and bus operators by planning to call for tenders ‘for technical advisers to help implement the public transport network’ (Madlala 2013: 1). This was rejected by the operators, leading the city to decide to use Section 36 of the Municipal Finance Management Act which allows for the bypassing of the tender process and appointing advisory technical support teams anyway, which ‘meet the approval of the minibus taxi industry and small bus operators’ (Madlala 2013:2). Additionally, the taxi leadership signed an agreement with the City in February 2014, which outlined ‘the framework to guide negotiations around the project’ (Ramkissoon-Pillay 2014: 16).

Consultation with people with disabilities

In order to ensure inclusivity and people-centred development, dialogue with people with disabilities should have been a key component in the planning of the IRPTN. The municipality claims there was extensive engagement with the Disability Alliance. However, when the engagement was reviewed through the information provided by the Universal Access consultant, it appeared to have been limited. The information pertaining to disability was obtained from various stakeholder meetings, which were poorly attended (people with disabilities were unable to attend due to transport difficulties) and there were inconsistent responses to the surveys conducted, with sections in the questionnaire remaining blank. Therefore, the information obtained was generally limited (Universal Design and IDC Consultants 2013a). The lack of this crucial data should have triggered alternative participatory, empowerment-orientated, client-centred approaches (Townsend and Wilcock 2004). Since people with disabilities were often unable to access the forums created for the purpose of engagement, the approaches and methods to gather their views need to be reviewed.

Furthermore, there needs to be proper feedback. The researchers were only aware of the QuadPara Association of South Africa (QASA) providing feedback through their forum, which has a limited number of members. Thus, many of the participants interviewed in this study had not yet heard of the IRPTN.

Implementation of the IRPTN in the eThekweni Municipality

Plans have been made to ensure universal accessibility of the entire IRPTN so that all persons, no matter their limitations, have full access to the service. However, there is no guarantee that this will occur because, as Logan noted, the operating costs are likely to be exorbitant. In contrast, some members of the ETA are very positive. Zuki from the ETA noted that the municipality is committed to accommodating people with disabilities, ‘so there is a whole lot happening behind the scenes that is going to be implemented in the long run, that is not being seen, unfortunately, by the person who has got a disability at this point in time, but the future is very bright for a person with a disability in the city’. Furthermore, the Public Transport Strategy (Department of Transport 2007b: 7) envisages a legacy that ensures that the ‘core Network (both road and rail corridors as well as their precincts and stations) is 100% accessible to wheelchair users and others with special needs such as the blind and deaf.’

However, problems with the implementation of the IRPTN in the eThekweni Municipality are already evident. Consultants to the ETA are concerned that there is minimal commitment to universal accessibility as is evident in the implementation of the Muvo Card (a single smartcard that can be used across all three of Durban’s transport systems) in 2012 (ITWeb 2012). Wiseman, who is blind, said that it is difficult to use this card with the machine in the bus, since ‘the driver won’t open the door to show you where is the machine... remember earlier I said the drivers)[operators] are rushing people, they got no patience’. He has had problems with the smart card not working, and since the machine does not have a signalling-facility, blind passengers do not know whether the transaction is successful. He added that people have not been trained to use the machine on the buses which sometimes does not work, representing a direct form of exclusion.

While it is not possible, as Titheridge et al (2010:9) note, ‘to model each and every person separately, taking into account their state of health and mind at a particular moment in time’, and provide a transport system which is accessible to everyone, it is reasonable to expect guidance and feedback from people with disabilities, so as to ensure that the applications do indeed improve the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged people.

A proper monitoring system is also required to ensure compliance with the system. Govender and Mostert (2011) note that even though it was clearly highlighted that a well-functioning monitoring and evaluation programme is essential in improving service delivery, the document does not

include any aspects of disability or universal access monitoring. This again displays a lack of inter-departmental coordination regarding issues that affect people with disabilities.

Interim measures and alternative plans

While the IRPTN is being rolled out, there are concerns about the interim measures put in place to address ineffective transport for people with disabilities.

This entailed the short-term visions of ‘consolidating the passenger rail sector; rolling out the National Passenger Rail Plan; Implementing Taxi Recapitalisation – including improved regulation and law enforcement; and Transforming and optimising current subsidised bus services’ (Department of Transport 2007b: 12). The second component of this plan, to stabilise and recover (2007 – 2010), included promoting

low-cost and accessible and class 1 type features (painting designated areas with high contrast colours, providing sufficient grab rails and push bells at certain accessible points, use of visible sign language, etc.) and improve(ing) operational service for special needs users [and] pilot(ing) full accessibility for users with special needs in all newly implemented mass rapid public transport corridors. (Department of Transport 2007b:20)

It remains unclear how the eThekweni Municipality has included the above vision in its current plans. Phillip, the Universal Access consultant, attempted to make suggestions on how to improve the current service whilst conducting the Universal Access Review. However as he stated:

The reality is that their [the Municipality’s] attitude was ultimately that you have been commissioned to work on the integrated transport systems and specifically the new routings and don’t look at anything that we are doing at the moment.

Envisioning solutions: suggestions for the taxi industry

Numerous suggestions have been made for the transport industry to receive a subsidy or a coupon to transport people with disabilities, so that taxi operators view people with disabilities as being financially viable for them to service. Phillip said that the primary strategy has been for the taxi industry to realise that transporting people with disabilities offers commercial benefits and that government should provide subsidies to taxi owners that purchase vehicles that included a wheelchair lift. However, Themba, a wheelchair user,

alleged that ‘the government was just running away from that one’.

Ashok, a wheelchair user, emphasised the need ‘to make these people see that we are also human beings... we are valuable somehow... they don’t see us’. He proposed that the Muvo Card offers bonus incentives to transport operators ‘for picking up certain number of disabled people’ to elevate their importance in the economic chain. This was echoed by Manoj, a transport owner, who cautioned that the coupon would also have to relate to the time that it takes for that person to board the vehicle. He proposed that a percentage of the disability grant be converted into coupons.

His position reflects limited understanding of the purpose of the disability grant, its value, and the costs (over and above transport) associated with living with a disability. The disability grant is often the only means of income for households, and hence is primarily used to cover basic needs and utilities (Johannsmeier 2007). Reducing the cash transfer may increase people with disabilities’ vulnerability to poverty. People should be allowed to decide how they spend their disability grant. Having part of it allocated to transport coupons takes away their freedom of choice.

The municipality appears to have made minimal calculations of the cost-effectiveness of the current proposed plan versus another incentive-driven plan. However, Phillip, the Universal Access consultant, stated that they had done the calculations and that if the money which was used for Dial-a-Ride had instead been used to create a subsidy system, where operators were paid five times the normal fare, they would have been able to transport thousands of commuters for the cost of the Para-Transit system (Dial-a-Ride). He felt that this subsidy could have been incorporated into the disability grant and hence would have been funded by national government. This could have been an interim system, until all transport is universally accessible.

However, Rob, an independent researcher, felt that the coupon should benefit the operator and not the owner (as, for example, a tank of petrol would). In this manner, the system cannot be abused and be subjected to corruption. He proposed that free vouchers be issued to taxi operators to put towards education or skills training. Rob said, ‘For every hundred people [with disabilities] that you pick up, you get your next course paid for. Now I pick up the handicapped [people with disabilities], I get a direct benefit’. He was involved in a study, whose results have not yet been published, where taxi operators indicated that they would like to receive education during the time when they are not transporting commuters. The government

subsidy system for public transport has remained unchallenged for decades. Major subsidies are available for rail services while no subsidies exist for the taxi industry.

Mostert, an independent researcher, said that taxis should be given contracts to operate as buses, with a route number and fixed times, and a fare system that is compatible with the overall one for the city:

You wouldn't pay the taxi driver anymore, but just swipe your card. They would be paid by a contract... The sequence will be to get them all onto contracts and after that once they are in effect, to start looking at the design of the vehicle. How many they can carry. This will cost money, if you are running a better vehicle.

Mostert argued that this would be better than having BRT services everywhere, since BRT is too slow and too expensive:

The needs of special groups can be satisfied more easily with small vehicles, than trying to change a railway station or making a bus depot accessible [that is a top-down approach]. The bottom-up approach would be using small vehicles to do general work.

This is a similar idea to that of the Buxi project, which was suggested in 1993 in Johannesburg. Taxi operators were subcontracted to operate on routes previously serviced by buses. Mostert stated:

In that particular situation, the taxis were interested, but they didn't want to be sub-contracted to the bus department. This is where you have to deal carefully with them... they don't even like the word 'feeder'; they want to be complementary, or full partners. I think they must be treated as such. But there was this patronising approach which council used at this stage, and they didn't like it.

Mostert suggested that they be contracted to the municipality or the province, since this would offer more permanence. If taxi operators and taxi owners were to be given the opportunity to volunteer to be contracted, 'it won't be long before the contracts will start attracting passengers, and people will not want to be starting [standing] in the road [to be picked up]'. He added that formal rather than informal services are required for people with disabilities.

Mostert was of the view that there are so many existing problems with public transport that it is unrealistic to expect it to cater for people with disabilities. He noted:

never mind bringing the taxis on board, never mind making them wheelchair accessible – those [are not the] issues in my opinion, I'm

focussed on getting the existing operators to sort themselves out, which can only happen when the authorities step in. If against that background, now you coming in, you want the challenged people [people with disabilities] having a say in all of this, now I'm telling you how low on the list of priorities they are... the chances of the special needs groups will be that much stronger, once certain other things have happened first.

This again demonstrates that the rights of people with disabilities are not acknowledged and are not prioritised by stakeholders in systems planning.

Training and education

While Venter et al (2002: 22) maintained that efforts were being made 'to train operators on a voluntary basis on disability awareness issues, through the involvement of taxi collectives', it is unclear how or where this occurred. Mashiri et al (2005) also stated that disability awareness and sensitivity training was being conducted and that general awareness would be raised through press releases and distributing pamphlets. However, there is limited evidence of this occurring and unfortunately very limited change in behaviour.

There is still a significant lack of understanding among transport operators and owners of the needs of people with disabilities. Hence, there is a significant need for education and training on disability issues. The study participants with disabilities emphasised that all members of the travel chain need to be trained. This includes the public, transport operators, passengers and the conductor.

As Sandra, who is blind and partially deaf, said, 'the public don't always know what to do, they do stupid things and sometimes they complain about the way you handling your dog [guide dog] when they don't understand what you are supposed to be doing'. She suggested that the training offered to operators and conductors should incorporate the entire spectrum of disability. It should include where to stop, the different categories of needs, how to let persons who are blind know where to stop, assistive devices and guide dogs.

Study participants also emphasised the importance of education in the home and schools. Zenzele, a wheelchair user, said, 'As for me, most of what the community needs to know is that you are human beings like everyone else. Education has to start in the homes. Those who see me in the roads, I didn't just come from anywhere, I came from a home'.

The ETA offers training on road safety at schools. Logan said that

teaching the public how to treat people with disabilities with respect is beyond their scope; this should be escalated to the Education Department. Sifiso, a wheelchair user, agreed and added that:

I think school is very important because most of those people, they have got their children and if ... at school we learn these things about disability. If the disability is going to be part of their lives, they will end up understanding more and now they know how to treat people with disability.

Concluding comments

This article focused on people with disabilities' access to transportation in the eThekweni Municipality. An examination of the policy landscape and an analysis of practices through the eyes of people with disabilities, transport operators and owners and policy makers reveals that while the municipality's transport plans show promise, without a clear understanding of all the aspects relating to transport exclusion, as well as cooperation from the taxi industry, the implementation of these plans will face challenges. This is evidenced by the fact that since this study was conducted, and construction of the transport network has begun, there have already been taxi service strikes (*BDlive* 2015), which herald the beginning of resistance to policies that do not find resonance with beneficiaries.

This emerging crisis can be attributed, at least in part, to the municipality's failure to take into account the financial power currently held by a small minority of taxi operators who have the capacity to subvert any system. Ignoring the suggestions made by less powerful stakeholders in the IRPTN is also problematic.

Given the rapidly changing infrastructure and development in the transport system in South Africa, this article highlights the importance of ensuring meaningful policy dialogue with all sectors before implementation of a new system. Furthermore, systems that work in other countries might not be applicable, given the context-specific and historical problems which militate against the success of the current system. While an 'out-of-the-box' system may not be practicable at this stage, the authors contend that the ETA is under an obligation to seriously embrace and engage with the complexity that characterises provisioning for people with disabilities rather than imposing reductionist ad-hoc solutions. This would go a long way in ensuring that the new transport system is truly people-centred, universally accessible and sustainable. As Dumisani, a wheelchair user noted, 'we

[people with disabilities] are increasing, we are having accidents; we are here to stay. Even if I die today, other people will become disabled after me’.

Notes

1. The isiZulu word for ‘Arise’.
2. The farebox recovery ratio is calculated as the percentage of operating costs (excluding capital costs) recovered from fare income. The system requires subsidy levels of between 87% and 94%.

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