

The Struggles of Informal Transport Workers in Tanzania: Debunking the Myth of Micro Solutions

by Matteo Rizzo, Department of Economics, SOAS

How are urban wage workers in Africa affected by the forces of globalization and domestic liberalisation? Given the rapid expansion of employment in the informal economies of African cities, it is striking how little research has been undertaken to address this question.

This Development Viewpoint presents evidence from an extensive longitudinal study (1998-2009) of informal transport workers in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania that attempts to respond to this knowledge gap (see Rizzo 2011).

One reason for the neglect of these workers is the influence of neoliberal and populist theories, which tend to associate informality exclusively—and misleadingly—with self-employment and work in small family businesses. Such theories often depict the plight of 'enterprising' micro-entrepreneurs, who supposedly have to *choose* to operate in the informal-economy in reaction to over-regulation by an oppressive or predatory state (see de Soto 2001).

Inspired by such a perspective, policy-makers in developing countries prioritise support to micro-finance, micro-enterprises and enhancing individual property rights—alongside standard measures of economic liberalisation—as the main ways to address urban poverty. Similarly, national and international NGOs focus on empowering the poor urban self-employed to press their demands for microcredit and property rights on unresponsive governments.

However, our Tanzanian study suggests that wage employment (frequently casual in nature) is both widespread and critical to the livelihoods of the urban poor. Developing a deeper understanding of the concrete realities of the working lives of the urban poor as well as the structural factors that reproduce their hardships exposes the inadequacies of micro-solutions. This research points, instead, to the importance of committing resources to macro policies that could generate a rapid increase in labour demand.

Working Conditions

Publicly run and undersupplied until 1983, the transport sector of Dar es Salaam has progressively evolved into a privately run, deregulated system. The distinctive features of the operations of private buses (called *daladala* in Swahili) are rampant speeding, endemic traffic congestion and numerous lethal accidents. Increased 'competition' has not led, as promised, to reduced fares. Even those passengers (such as students) who are supposed to be charged less are often denied access to buses.

There is a clear class distinction in the transport sector between a few bus owners and a large number of bus workers: there are very few independent 'entrepreneurs'. The stark reality is that most workers survive, day-to-day, by 'selling their labour power'.

Moreover, there is no real state regulation of labour relations in the sector: over 80% of these workers do not have an employment contract or a fixed wage. Since there is a huge oversupply of



Picture by M. Rizzo: The wording on a small transport bus, 'Money Torture', typifies how many workers view their jobs.

unskilled workers in the city eager to secure jobs in the sector, bus owners are in a strong position to dictate the terms and conditions of work on an individual by individual basis.

Workers operate buses on a daily franchise basis, earning income only after they pay a set fee to the owner and cover their petrol costs. Their access to jobs is insecure, their working conditions harsh and their economic returns meagre. On average, a worker does not maintain his job with a particular bus owner for more than eight months. His average working day is about 15 hours and his average working week 6.7 days!

The Struggle for Survival

The exploitative conditions faced by these casual wage workers are a far cry from the romanticised picture often depicted by populist writers on economic informality. For example, since the fee that bus workers pay to bus owners is non-negotiable, the workers can increase their daily income only by increasing the number of bus trips or the number of passengers. So buses are both chronically overloaded and invariably speeding.

The conditions in bus transport are an inevitable outcome of the intense struggle of the workers for economic survival. Yet these urban workers are usually blamed for the problems inherent in the system of public transport as well as for their own poor working conditions.

The local media often depict the workers as greedy hooligans, blaming them for the frequent accidents and the rude treatment of passengers. And the government has been obliged to intervene on many occasions to 'clean up' the bus system, such as requiring workers to use badges and uniforms and provide the required discounted transport to students.

Also, the police have often intervened to harass the workers. And many workers have spent time in jail as a result. But the oppressive conditions affecting both workers and passengers invariably reassert themselves after each effort at 'reform'.

The Fragmentation of Labour

Our current research focuses on the ongoing efforts—and partial successes—of *daladala* workers in organizing themselves to make claims on the state and their employers. We focus here on what has prevented the transport workers in Dar es Salaam from responding effectively, so far, to their oppressive conditions.

Labour oversupply and high turnover of the workforce are important factors. Another major reason is the spatial fragmentation of the whole system: there are about 30,000 bus workers operating 10,000 buses scattered across a very large city.

The jobs of transport workers are also fragmented. One job category is labelled as 'workers for life', or '*daladalamen maisha*' in Swahili. These workers usually work in pairs (one as the driver and the other as the conductor). Their jobs are not permanent and they have no formal contract. But they are in charge of operating the bus and responsible for paying the owner his daily fee. The 'for life' designation applies, ironically, to their very lengthy working day and week.

The second major category of bus workers is 'workers on the bench', called *day waka* workers. These are part-time workers who fill in for the regular workers when they need a break from the long gruelling grind of a day's work. Most day workers are former 'workers for life' who have lost their job for some reason—e.g., an argument with the owner, a sale of the bus, involvement in an accident or a personal illness.

Usually, day workers labour for only an hour or so, receiving just enough to pay for a meagre meal. If they are lucky, they might be allowed to fill in for half a day. Though day workers earn very little and have no guarantee of employment, their numbers roughly equal those of regular workers. The reason: they have few other viable job opportunities.

The last major category of bus workers, at the bottom of the labour-force ladder, is the people who organize passengers to get on the bus. These are the *wapiga debe* ('those who beat the tin' to attract passengers at final stations of a route). Their main skill is the ability to shout and attract attention.

But they consider their work demeaning and they are widely viewed with contempt. Often, they organize themselves into gangs to strengthen their precarious position. The regular drivers and conductors resort to their services usually out of fear of retaliation if they refuse.

Attempts to Organise

Our longitudinal study of the way in which a particular group of bus-transport workers has tried to organize itself helps us understand more clearly the imposing structural constraints that these workers

face—as well as the illusions involved in romanticizing economic informality.

In 1998, the three categories of workers on one route banded together to form an association. Prompted by the jailing of a worker for a bus accident, the workers collected enough money among themselves to bribe the jail personnel to allow him to escape.

This initial effort to help a colleague in trouble evolved into a regular association—based on the membership of workers on the same route and designed to build up a savings fund as a cushion against such future problems. Once formed, this association also sought to eliminate the customary cut-throat competition over fares and passengers on the common route. This effort resulted in higher overall income for all workers.

The savings fund could be used as grants or loans only for certain purposes. Grants were strictly limited to covering the cost of the burial of family members, the hospitalisation of members or the bribing of jail personnel to release jailed members. Loans were made only on a case by case basis, such as for purchasing food or paying for the hospitalisation of family members.

However, the workers' association ultimately succumbed to structural factors over which it had little control. For example, the members' needs far outstripped the association's inherently limited capacity to provide help. In addition, the workers began to haggle over the rights of different categories of members, such as those who have a regular job versus those who do not.

Though the association survived for about six years, it disbanded in 2005. Basically, the association represented an attempt to *manage* the precarious conditions of labour in the transport sector rather than *challenge* them. But the oversupply of workers in bus transport along with the sector's liberalisation posed formidable barriers to the association's sustainability despite its relative early success.

Concluding Remarks

The oversupply of unskilled labour in bus transport in Dar es Salaam represents a microcosm of conditions in many sectors of the Tanzanian economy. And these conditions are similar in sectors throughout other African economies.

The collective action of transport workers could certainly play a key role in improving their labour conditions at the sectoral level. But the deep-seated structural sources of the generally low pay and woeful working conditions of informal-economy workers imply that solutions should focus more on generating alternative sources of productive employment at the economy-wide level.

This research suggests that focusing on improving self-employment and emphasizing micro solutions in response to the plight of informal-sector workers is a misguided policy direction. Clearly, the main asset 'owned' by the great majority of such workers is their labour: most of all, they need better jobs. Thus, there should be an increased effort by policymakers, both at the national and global level, to generate more labour demand throughout African economies.

References

De Soto (2001). *The Mystery of Capital. Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else*, London: Black Swan.

Rizzo, Matteo (2011). "Life is War! Informal Transport Workers and Neoliberalism in Tanzania, 1998-2009". *Development and Change*, 42, no. 5, 179-206.