

"Trade Unions and Informal Power Dynamics: Exploring Tout Operations in Nigeria's
Metropolitan Transport Systems"

Dr Michael Oyelere

Coventry University

Email: Michael.oyelere@coventry.ac.uk

Dr Adejumo Adeoti

Brunel Business School

Email: adejumo.adeoti3@brunel.ac.uk

Dr Okeoghene Enebeli

Coventry University

Email: ae1710@coventry.ac.uk

Dr Zedias Mutema

Bangor University

Email: z.mutema@bangor.ac.uk

Dr Bilikis Kazeem

Bedfordshire University

Email: bilikis.kazeem@beds.ac.uk

Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the intersection of trade unions and informal tout operations in the transport systems of 5 metropolitan cities in Nigeria. It explores the dynamics of power, control, and influence within the transport sector, highlighting how trade unions interact with informal actors and the implications for urban mobility and governance.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The research employs a qualitative methodology, incorporating in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. Key stakeholders, including union leaders, transport operators, and touts, were interviewed across multiple metropolitan areas in Nigeria. The study also draws on policy documents and secondary data to contextualise the findings within broader socio-political frameworks.

Anticipated Findings: The study anticipates uncovering a complex relationship between trade unions and touts, where both formal and informal structures coexist and occasionally conflict. It is expected that trade unions rely on touts to enforce rules, maintain order, and generate revenue, while touts operate as informal power brokers. This relationship, while functional in

some contexts, contributes to inefficiencies, conflicts, and corruption within the transport system.

Practical Implications: The findings will provide valuable insights for policymakers, transport regulators, and urban planners in Nigeria. Understanding the interactions between formal and informal actors can inform strategies to improve governance in the transport sector, reduce exploitation, and enhance service delivery. The study also offers practical recommendations for harmonising the roles of trade unions and informal operators to create a more efficient and equitable system.

Originality/Value: This study contributes to the literature on urban transport governance by shedding light on the underexplored relationship between trade unions and informal tout operations in Nigeria. It provides a unique perspective on how informal practices shape formal systems in a developing country context, offering new insights into urban mobility challenges in the Global South.

Keywords: Informal power dynamics, metropolitan transport, tout Operations, trade unions, Nigeria

Introduction

Urban transport systems in many developing nations operate as complex ecosystems where formal structures interact with informal practices. In Nigeria's metropolitan cities, the transport sector serves as a vital economic and social artery, facilitating mobility for millions of people daily. However, this sector is characterised by an intricate blend of formal governance mechanisms, such as trade unions, and informal entities, such as touts, who wield considerable influence over daily operations. The interplay between these two groups has profound implications for the efficiency, governance, and equity of transport systems in Nigerian cities. Trade unions in Nigeria's transport sector have historically played a dual role as labour advocates and regulatory bodies. These unions represent the interests of transport operators, ensuring fair treatment, reasonable working conditions, and standardised practices. However, the presence of informal actors, commonly referred to as touts, introduces a layer of complexity. Touts operate outside formal regulatory frameworks, engaging in activities such as fee collection, route enforcement, and conflict mediation. While often viewed as disruptive and exploitative, touts fulfill functional roles in maintaining order within a fragmented transport system, albeit through informal means.

The coexistence of trade unions and touts within the same operational space raises critical questions about power dynamics, governance, and the socio-economic implications of their interactions. For example, how do trade unions navigate their relationships with touts, whose methods often contradict formal labour practices? To what extent do touts complement or undermine the authority of trade unions? These questions are particularly pertinent in Nigeria, where weak institutional capacity and limited state oversight have created conditions conducive to informal practices. This paper seeks to explore the intricate relationship between trade unions and tout operations within Nigeria's metropolitan transport systems. By examining this dynamic, the study aims to provide insights into the mechanisms through which formal and informal actors interact, negotiate power, and influence the governance of urban transport. Understanding these interactions is essential for addressing the systemic challenges facing Nigeria's transport sector, including inefficiencies, corruption, and inequities.

The prominence of touts in Nigeria's transport system cannot be fully understood without contextualising their emergence within broader sociopolitical and economic frameworks. Urbanisation, poverty, unemployment, and weak institutional structures have all contributed to the proliferation of informal practices in the sector. Touts thrive in this environment, leveraging their local knowledge, networks, and adaptability to fulfill critical roles that formal mechanisms often neglect. However, their activities frequently clash with the objectives of trade unions, which seek to impose order and accountability within the sector. Trade unions, on the other hand, face significant challenges in exerting control over transport operations. Despite their formal status, unions often lack the resources, enforcement capacity, and public trust needed to fully regulate the sector. This creates a vacuum that touts readily fill, leading to a symbiotic yet contentious relationship between the two groups. While trade unions may benefit from the informal enforcement capabilities of touts, they also risk being complicit in practices that perpetuate inefficiencies and exploitation.

The significance of studying this dynamic extends beyond Nigeria. Informal practices in urban transport systems are a common feature in many cities across the Global South, from India to Brazil. The findings of this study have the potential to inform broader debates on how formal and informal systems interact in urban governance, particularly in contexts where state capacity is limited. By focusing on Nigeria's metropolitan transport systems, this paper contributes to a growing body of literature on the role of informal actors in shaping urban infrastructure and services. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section provides a

review of relevant literature on trade unions, informal power dynamics, and urban transport governance. This is followed by a discussion of the study's methodology, including data collection and analysis techniques. The findings section presents key insights into the interactions between trade unions and touts, highlighting their impact on transport governance and service delivery. The paper concludes with a discussion of the practical and policy implications of these findings, as well as recommendations for future research.

In sum, this study seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between formal and informal actors in Nigeria's transport sector. By doing so, it aims to advance our understanding of the power dynamics that shape urban mobility in the Global South, offering valuable lessons for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars alike.

Trade Unions and Urban Transport Governance

Trade unions play a significant role in urban transport governance by mediating between workers, employers, and regulatory authorities (Adewumi, 2012). Their primary functions include advocating for fair wages, ensuring safe working conditions, negotiating labour rights, and influencing transport policies (Olaleye, 2019). In Nigeria, transport unions such as the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) wield considerable influence over urban mobility, often functioning as both labour representatives and quasi-regulatory bodies (Albert, 2007).

Historically, trade unions emerged as crucial entities within the transport sector to address exploitation and labour insecurity (Ekanem & Okoro, 2018; George, Owoyemi, & Onokala, 2012). As transport workers, particularly commercial drivers, face precarious employment conditions, unions provide a structured mechanism for collective bargaining (Olawale, 2021). Through negotiations with government authorities and transport operators, unions help establish wage standards, define working hours, and introduce measures to enhance worker welfare (Agbibo, 2016). However, the role of trade unions in transport governance is not without controversy. While unions are expected to protect workers' rights, they often operate in an environment of weak institutional oversight and informal power structures (Ajayi & Olayemi, 2017). In many Nigerian cities, trade unions exert control over bus terminals, taxi parks, and commercial vehicle operations, collecting levies and fees from drivers (Balogun, 2019). This economic function, though unofficial in some cases, reinforces the financial

autonomy of trade unions and extends their influence beyond traditional labour advocacy (Balogun, 2019).

One of the primary challenges facing trade unions in urban transport governance is their interaction with informal actors, particularly touts (Adeyemi, 2022). Touts serve as intermediaries in enforcing union directives, managing queues, collecting fees, and resolving disputes. This relationship creates a blurred boundary between formal and informal governance, where unions rely on touts to maintain order yet struggle to regulate their often-coercive methods (Ogunleye, 2021). Moreover, trade unions have been criticised for their involvement in political patronage networks (Okeke, & Uche, 2021). In some cases, union leaders align with political elites, leveraging their organisational structures to mobilise electoral support in exchange for regulatory protection (Olabode, 2020). This symbiotic relationship can result in the politicisation of transport governance, where union leadership becomes intertwined with state politics, often at the expense of workers' welfare (Agbibo, 2018).

Despite these challenges, trade unions remain pivotal in shaping urban transport governance in Nigeria. Their engagement in policy formulation, collective bargaining, and dispute resolution underscores their relevance in the transport ecosystem (Ahuchogu, Sanyaolu, & Adeleke, 2024). However, to enhance their effectiveness, there is a need for institutional reforms that promote transparency, curb exploitative practices, and integrate informal actors into a structured regulatory framework (Uzougbo, Akagha, Coker, Bakare, & Ijiga, 2023).

Methods and methodological issues

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the role of trade unions in urban transport governance, with a focus on Nigeria. The primary methods for data collection were semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including trade union leaders, transport workers, government officials, and informal actors such as touts. These interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives on the functions, challenges, and influence of trade unions in urban transport systems. Participant observation was also utilised to gain firsthand insights into the daily operations of transport unions, their interactions with workers, and their role in managing urban mobility.

A non-probability sampling approach, specifically snowball sampling, was adopted to identify participants (Pace, 2021). This method was particularly suitable given the informal and often opaque nature of trade union operations in the transport sector. Initial contacts were made with union leaders and transport workers, who then referred other relevant participants, such as government regulators and informal actors (Toyon, 2021). This approach ensured access to a diverse range of perspectives while addressing the challenges of identifying participants in a complex and informal governance environment (Ogunleye, 2021).

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, with interview transcripts and observational notes coded to identify recurring themes and patterns (Lochmiller, 2021). This method allowed for a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of trade union involvement in urban transport governance, providing rich insights into both formal and informal practices. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly adhered to throughout the research process.

Initial Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted role of trade unions in urban transport governance, particularly in Nigeria. Trade unions serve as critical intermediaries between transport workers, employers, and regulatory authorities, advocating for fair wages, safe working conditions, and improved labour rights. However, their influence extends beyond traditional labour advocacy, as they often function as quasi-regulatory bodies, managing transport operations and collecting fees in urban centers.

One key finding is the reliance of trade unions on informal actors, such as touts, to enforce directives and maintain order. While this relationship enhances the unions' operational capacity, it also blurs the lines between formal and informal governance, raising concerns about transparency and accountability. Additionally, the study reveals the politicisation of trade unions, with some leaders aligning with political elites to secure regulatory protection, often at the expense of workers' welfare.

Despite these challenges, trade unions remain pivotal in shaping urban transport governance. Their involvement in policy formulation, collective bargaining, and dispute resolution underscores their relevance in the transport ecosystem (Akinwale, 2020). However, the study suggests that institutional reforms are necessary to address exploitative practices, integrate

informal actors into a structured framework, and enhance the overall effectiveness of trade unions in promoting equitable and sustainable urban transport systems.

References

- Adewumi, F. (2012). Trade unions and urban transport governance in Nigeria. *Journal of Urban Studies*, 45(3), 123-135.
- Adeyemi, T. (2022). Informal actors and urban transport governance in Nigeria. *Urban Governance Journal*, 12(1), 45-58.
- Agbibo D.E. (2018) Informal urban governance and predatory politics in Africa: The role of motor-park touts in Lagos, *African Affairs*, 117(466), pages 62-82, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adx052>
- Agbibo, D.E., (2016), “‘No condition is permanent’”: Informal transport workers and labour precarity in Africa’s largest city’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40(5) pp. 936–957.
- Ahuchogu, M. C., Sanyaolu, T. O., & Adeleke, A. G. (2024). Workforce development in the transport sector amidst environmental change: A conceptual review. *Global Journal of Research in Science and Technology*, 2(01), 061-077.
- Ajayi, K., & Olayemi, A. (2017). Power dynamics in Nigerian transport unions. *African Journal of Labour Studies*, 23(4), 67-79.
- Akinwale, Y. (2020). Collective bargaining and worker welfare in the transport sector. *Labour and Society*, 18(3), 112-125.
- Albert, I.O., (2007) ‘NURTW and politics of managing public motorparks in Ibadan and Lagos, Nigeria’, in Laurent Fourchard (ed.), *Governing African cities: State, local government and private actors*, pp. 125–137.
- Balogun, T. (2019). Economic functions of transport unions in urban Nigeria. *Journal of African Economics*, 28(5), 78-91.
- Balogun, T. (2019). Economic functions of transport unions in urban Nigeria. *Journal of African Economics*, 28(5), 78-91.
- Ekanem, I., & Okoro, J. (2018). Historical evolution of trade unions in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of History*, 15(2), 34-47.
- George, O. J., Owoyemi, O., & Onokala, U. (2012). Trade unions and unionism in Nigeria: A historical Perspective. *Research in World Economy*, 3(2), 68-74.
- Lochmiller, C. R. (2021). Conducting thematic analysis with qualitative data. *The qualitative report*, 26(6), 2029-2044.
- Ogunleye, A. (2021). Touts and informal governance in urban transport. *Urban Studies Quarterly*, 29(3), 56-69.
- Ogunleye, A. (2021). Touts and informal governance in urban transport. *Urban Studies Quarterly*, 29(3), 56-69.

Okeke, C., & Uche, O. (2021). Political patronage and transport unions in Nigeria. *Journal of Political Economy*, 19(4), 101-115.

Olabode, F. (2020). Trade unions and political networks in Nigeria. *African Political Review*, 22(1), 33-47.

Olaleye, B. (2019). Trade unions and labor rights in urban transport. *Journal of Labor Studies*, 17(3), 89-103.

Olawale, D. (2021). Institutional reforms for effective transport governance. *Governance and Policy Journal*, 13(2), 67-80.

Pace, D. S. (2021). Probability and non-probability sampling-an entry point for undergraduate researchers. *International Journal of Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods*, 9(2), 1-15.

Toyon, M. A. S. (2021). Explanatory sequential design of mixed methods research: Phases and challenges. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*, 10(5), 253-260.

Uzougbo, N. S., Akagha, O. V., Coker, J. O., Bakare, S. S., & Ijiga, A. C. (2023). Effective strategies for resolving labour disputes in the corporate sector: Lessons from Nigeria and the United States. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, 3(2), 418-424.