

# MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH INFORMALITY – THE TRANSPORT TANGO

By Clementina Asiago Ayon – Urban Designer and Developer

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In Nairobi, the transport sector isn't just a way to get from point A to B—it's a full-blown adventure, complete with unwritten rules, surprise plot twists, and occasional chaos. As an urban designer and developer in Kenya, I see how transport defines the rhythm of the city, weaving formality and informality into a daily spectacle.

My day often begins with the great matatu marathon. The matatu system is the lifeblood of Nairobi's transport and urban mobility. These privately owned minibuses operate with just enough formality to keep them on the roads and just enough informality to keep things interesting.

Need a ride? Don't bother checking Google Maps—routes here are fluid. The fare? That depends on the mood of the conductor and the level of traffic drama that day. Surge pricing doesn't come via an app; it's announced loudly, often when you're already halfway into the trip. It's chaotic, yes, but it's also efficient in its own peculiar way. While formal public transport systems are stuck in red tape, matatus are always on the move, adapting to demand like seasoned entrepreneurs.

When I'm not in the field, I spend my afternoons reflecting on how transport ties into Nairobi's urban planning—or lack thereof. Take boda bodas, for instance. These nimble machines fill gaps the matatus can't reach, ferrying people and goods through congested streets and narrow alleyways. They're the heroes of last-mile connectivity but also the villains of unregulated mayhem. Helmets are optional, traffic rules are suggestions, and road safety often takes a back seat—literally.

Then there are the informal parking lots that spring up like mushrooms after the rain. Public spaces meant for walking or recreation are swallowed by rows of matatus and boda bodas. It's a clear sign of Nairobi's transport demand outpacing its formal supply. And yet, these informal systems keep the city moving when the formal ones falter.

By evening, as I navigate my way home, the contrasts between formality and informality in transport are at their peak. On one side, you might spot a shiny new expressway—a symbol of formal urban development. On the other, you'll find a matatu driver casually creating a third lane where only two exist. It's as if Nairobi is having an ongoing debate with itself: embrace order or let informality reign?

The informal nature of transport isn't all bad, though. It's dynamic, responsive, and rooted in local needs. Matatus and boda bodas thrive because they understand Nairobians better than rigid formal systems ever could. But this informality comes at a cost—road accidents, congestion, and the ever-present unpredictability that can turn a 30-minute trip into a two-hour ordeal.

## Reflection on Transport Formality and Informality

In Nairobi, transport is where formality and informality collide most visibly. The matatu sector, for instance, operates with a fascinating blend of regulation and rebellion. Yes, stricter enforcement of rules could make the system safer and more reliable, but it could also stifle the creativity and flexibility that keep Nairobi moving.

Here's what I think:

What would improve: Stricter enforcement of traffic rules could reduce accidents and chaos. Formalizing routes and fares might bring predictability and fairness. Investment in reliable public transport systems like buses and trains could ease congestion and provide alternatives to informal options.

What would worsen: Overregulation could kill the adaptability that makes informal systems so effective. Imagine a Nairobi without matatus zig-zagging to drop you right at your doorstep or boda bodas cutting commute times in half. Stricter zoning of transport hubs could also displace informal vendors who depend on these spaces for their livelihoods.

Ultimately, Nairobi doesn't need to erase informality in transport; it needs to learn from it. The energy and ingenuity of matatus, boda bodas, and even those impromptu parking lots are proof that the city's residents are problem-solvers. With the right balance of formality and informality, we could create a transport system that's safe, efficient, and uniquely Nairobi. Until then, I'll keep hopping into matatus, dodging boda bodas, and marveling at the madness of it all.

