

# **Informalities in urban transport: mobilities at the heart of contestations over (in)formalisation processes**

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### **Abstract**

This editorial introduces and contextualises the Special Issue on informalities in urban transport and mobility in cities across the Global South, East and North. It identifies a mutual misrecognition between the urban studies literature on informality and research on transport and mobilities, and proposes that urban mobility be understood as a critical site of contestations over (in)formalisation processes. The editorial suggests that the articles gathered in the Special Issue diversify and extend understandings of informality in both the transport and urban studies literatures. It outlines three specific contributions that the articles make. Drawing on conceptualisations of informality from across the social sciences and by offering empirical studies of informalities in urban mobility in the Global East and North, the articles confront the habit of dualistic thinking in relation to informalities in urban mobility. They do this by moving beyond the formal/informal binary and challenging the North/South division which associates informality predominantly with the South. The papers in the Special Issue also highlight how 'informal transport' is a highly dynamic sector at the vanguard of innovation, digitalisation and platform urbanism. Finally, the articles demonstrate that informalities in urban mobility offer a useful analytical lens onto questions of labour struggles and subject formation within ongoing urban transformations.

*Keywords:* informality, mobility, transport, digitalisation, labour, platformisation

## 1. Introduction

This Special Issue (SI) examines informalities in urban transport and mobility across cities of the Global South, East and North. It attempts to overcome the mutual misrecognition between the urban studies literature on informality and research on transport and mobilities, and makes a twofold general contribution. First, the articles in the SI draw on critical conceptions of informality offered by post-colonial and post-structuralist scholarship to further eclipse reductionist, Manichean, and economic understandings of informality that have dominated certain strands of literature on so-called informal transport. Second, the contributions theorise informality by learning from transformations in urban mobility practices, and so advance a broader understanding of urban informalities. In effect, the Special Issue contends that transformations in urban mobility cannot be examined without taking account of urban informalities more generally and that studies of the latter can benefit significantly from engagement with emerging work on informalities and informalisation in urban mobility.

The fragmented nature of the existing academic literature makes cross-fertilisation of thinking and empirical research on mobilities and informality necessary. On the side of urban mobilities, as explained below, informalities have been researched primarily in (quantitative) transport geography, planning and engineering. In these fields, binary conceptions of formality and informality prevail, economic readings of transport remain influential, and engagement with recent social science thinking on informalities has occurred only to a limited extent. In the mobilities turn (Cresswell, 2006; Jensen et al., 2020; Sheller & Urry, 2006, 2016) and critical urban transport research (Cidell et al., 2021; Kębłowski et al., 2019; Kębłowski & Bassens, 2018) the focus has predominantly been on Northern cities. As a result, both bodies of scholarship have paid much less attention to informality in, and of, the Global East or South.

The opposite has happened in the urban studies literature on informality (Marx & Kelling, 2019; McFarlane, 2012; Roy & AlSayyad, 2004). Here research has predominantly concentrated on cities outside the North, and for good reasons, but urban transport and mobility have been largely disregarded as either an empirical entry point or a site for conceptual innovation. Building on the work of economic anthropologists on urban informality since the 1950s, post-colonial urban scholars declared informality to be a new way of life in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and predicted that the concept would alter the way cities across the globe would be theorised (AlSayyad, 2004). Some researchers have pointed out more recently that acceptance “of the pervasive, global character of informality [...] has not yet reshaped the way scholars think about urban development” (Harris, 2018, page 268). Yet, informality can be seen as one of rare concepts that was largely theorised from the experiences of the cities of the Global South, and has become a “site for critical analysis” (Banks et al., 2019, p. 223) of urban processes in the Global East (Polese et al., 2018) and North alike (Devlin, 2017; Hilbrandt et al., 2017). Nonetheless, debates over informality in the urban studies literature have predominantly focused on urban planning, land ownership and housing issues (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2019; Kamete, 2017), overlooking mobility as a frontier of (in)formalisation processes.

This oversight is particularly unfortunate in light of recent debates over informalisation and digitalisation. Urban transport is possibly the domain where platform urbanism (Barns, 2020; Leszczynski, 2020; Rose et al., 2021) has evolved and matured the most. The platformisation of transport has been accompanied by multiple labour and social struggles, which have been examined

in multiple social science literatures (Gramano, 2018) but garnered limited attention in urban, transport and mobilities research to date. Transport researchers and mobilities scholars alike have hailed the digitalisation of urban mobility (Canzler & Knie, 2016; Velaga et al., 2012) as a signifier of innovation and modernisation (Leviäkangas, 2016), and a means to achieve environmental sustainability (Sperling, 2018; Sprei, 2018). Among the more critical accounts, the work of Stehlin and colleagues (2020) stands out. They see the ways in which venture capitalism and ‘big tech’ companies are subjecting urban life in general, and transport in particular, to digital mediation as a new but fragile ‘spatial fix’ (Harvey, 2001). However, whilst recognising local variations in the effects that mobility platforms help to generate, they remain committed to rather general and dualistic conclusions, arguing that platformisation induces “both the increasing informalisation of infrastructure, particularly but not exclusively in Global North cities, and the increasing formalisation of more ad hoc mobility infrastructures in the Global South, often through the same platforms” (Stehlin et al., 2020, p. 1256). There is, we suggest, a need for nuanced conceptualisations of informalities and (in)formalisation in urban mobility across the planet that can speak to urban, transport, mobilities and other social science literatures.

In response to the identified research gaps, we believe that the articles in the SI make three more specific contributions to the literature on informalities in urban mobility. First, they confront the habit of dualistic thinking in relation to informalities in urban mobilities by moving beyond the formal/informal binary and by challenging the persistent North/South division that locates informality predominantly in the latter. They do so by drawing on conceptualisations of informality and informalisation from across the social sciences and by offering additional case studies of informalities in urban mobility in the Global East and North. Second, the articles show that what is often labelled ‘informal transport’ is a highly dynamic sector where innovation and digitalisation abound. Third, they demonstrate how informalities in urban mobility offer a useful analytical lens for examining labour struggles, infrastructure and subject (re)formation, and urban transformation more generally. Below we will elaborate each of these contributions and introduce the individual articles, but first we contextualise them by providing a brief, yet necessarily partial overview of the existing literature on informalities in urban transport.

## **2. From informal transport to informalities in urban mobility**

The literature on informalities in urban transport and mobility is dispersed, disintegrated and variegated. It is dispersed across many disciplines, from civil engineering via the new data sciences or transport geography to anthropology. It is disintegrated in the sense that different strands of research rarely communicate with each other and are sometimes blissfully unaware of each other’s existence. It is variegated insofar that past work is characterised by different philosophical, theoretical and methodological orientations, and pursues different purposes. The latter include *inter alia* describing and rendering visible a largely understudied set of transport-related practices and arrangements, contributing to formalisation of those practices and arrangements, and using them as a point of entry for studying certain processes such as marginalisation and exclusion in the contemporary city or entrepreneurial responses to unmet need for intra- or interurban mobility.

Studies on so-called informal transport have a long history, especially when it is realised that the term has often been conflated with ‘paratransit’ (Rimmer, 1984; Shimazaki & Rahman, 1996). This term

was first used in the 1960s in the USA to denote demand-responsive, door-to-door services for particular groups, such as the elderly and disabled (Orski, 1975). In Southern contexts the category is often used to denote services that are more flexible than openly state-sanctioned public transport and operate in the borderlands of legality as defined by rules and regulations in particular locales (see e.g., Behrens et al., 2016; Phun & Yai, 2016). This is where the distinction with informal transport is blurred (see below). However, paratransit is not the only term in use alongside informal transport. 'Indigenous transport' has been proposed to highlight the "vernacular and local qualities" of the services in question "whose development is influenced by local needs, appropriate for local conditions and based on local cultures" (Mateo-Babiano, 2016, page 133). The term 'artisanal transport' is used in the Francophone literature from Sub-Saharan Africa (Behrens et al., 2016; Zouhoula Bi, 2018) and the term 'popular transport' has also been introduced. For Doherty et al. (2021), the latter term captures how certain transport services are collectively produced by city residents as workers and passengers in ways that lack clear leadership or ideology but reflect a shared interest in making the city work for themselves and their community.

It is difficult to summarise the informal transport literature without creating a caricature. Nonetheless, at least three tendencies can be observed. First, there is a tendency to understand informality through the prism of illegality even if the heterogeneity of informal transport is widely appreciated. Cervero and Golub (2007) equate informal transport services to illicitly plying one's trade, and Kumar et al. (2016) understand informality in terms of limited or no compliance with regulation on vehicle manufacturing and operations, taxation and/or social security. At the same time, there is an inclination to foreground that paratransit comes in many shapes and sizes (Cervero, 2001; Phun & Yai, 2016; Rimmer, 1984). Attempts to categorise the observed heterogeneity often focus on physical characteristics such as the propulsion system (motorised/non-motorised), number of wheels (2/3/4) and seat capacity (from 1 to a locally specific upper limit). They sometimes also consider institutional and organisational characteristics such as route and schedule (fixed/flexible), service (point to point vs first/last mile, shared with other passengers vs hire for exclusive use) and ownership (owner hiring out one or more vehicles to individual drivers or driver collectives; individual owner-operator; cooperative/association). A common analytical response to the observed heterogeneity in empirical research on informal transport has been to concentrate on a particular type of informal transport service, such as motor-cycle taxis (Diaz Olvera et al., 2012, 2020; Ehebrecht et al., 2018).

Second, much of the literature analyses informal transport through logics of rational markets and cost/benefit trade-offs, often with a Euro-American understanding of what constitutes a properly functioning transport system as the "the silent referent" (Chakrabarty, 2009, page 28). Thus, informal transport systems are reduced to "consummate gap fillers" (Cervero & Golub, 2007, page 456). In new-institutionalist fashion à la De Soto (De Soto, 1989, 2000), they respond to a 'transport crisis', where, in a context of lax and inadequate market regulation, demand for mobility by far exceeds the supply of 'official' public transport in the form of public bus, Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) or urban rail systems (Chalermpong et al., 2016; Diaz Olvera et al., 2012; Ehebrecht et al., 2018; Oteng-Ababio & Agyemang, 2015). 'Official' public transport is represented as being unable to adapt to the changing demand patterns, which allows "petite entrepreneurs" [to] captur[e] niche business opportunities" (Chalermpong et al., 2016, page 89). Binary oppositions underpin this mode of representation: where 'conventional', openly state-sanctioned public transport is rigid and slow to respond, informal

transport is demand-oriented, agile, adaptable, entrepreneurial – and thus in keeping with neoliberal understandings of desirable practice.

And yet, the logic of cost/benefit trade-offs ties the “heroic entrepreneurship” framing (Roy, 2005, page 148) to understandings of crisis and poor governance. Such an approach naturalises deficiencies in ‘official’ public transport systems and overwrites the complex history of how publicly provided transport services decayed during the neoliberal ‘roll back’ (Peck, 2002) across cities in the global South and East in the 1980-90s (Rizzo, 2017; Sgibnev & Vozyanov, 2016). Despite providing potential benefits, informal transport is also seen “to impose significant costs”, to the extent that “the general perception of officialdom is that informal transport’s costs exceed benefits” (Cervero & Golub, 2007, page 448). Although Cervero and Golub are quick to point out that this perception does not exist everywhere, the narrative of significant costs is reproduced throughout the literature. The most commonly recognised costs include increased road congestion (because of ad hoc stopping to pick up/drop off passengers); poor safety records and frequent traffic accidents; inefficient business, investment and insurance practices; exploitative labour relations; disproportionate contributions to air and noise pollution; and incompatibility with modernisation and world city ambitions. For Kumar and colleagues (2016, p. 103), the “poorly understood cost-benefit nature of informal transport is the key factor behind why policymaking and plan-making processes generally ignore this sector” or try to ban them, at least from those parts of the city that are believed to be most integrated into global city networks, or most aligned with modernisation narratives.

Third, the past decade has witnessed a strong tendency towards diversification in the informal transport literature. Studies have sought to understand what makes city residents use paratransit or popular transport modes (e.g., Das & Mandal, 2021; Guillen et al., 2013; Hossain & Susilo, 2011). They have also examined various modes of self-governance within the paratransit sector (e.g., Agbiboa, 2018; Heinrichs et al., 2017), and the diverse ways in which the (local) state seeks to regulate, professionalise and integrate these services into openly sanctioned public transport systems such as BRT (e.g., Paget-Seekins, 2015; Schalekamp, 2017; Sunio et al., 2021). This general diversification has started to break down easy distinctions between transport studies and other disciplines, including political science, development studies and anthropology, where attempts to ‘formalise’ paratransit have also been studied (e.g., Doherty, 2017; Goodfellow, 2015; Mains & Kinfu, 2017; Rizzo, 2017; Sopranzetti, 2018). These and other studies (e.g., Agbiboa, 2018b; Doherty et al., 2021; Hasan & Dávila, 2018; Turner, 2020) tie the state’s attempts to professionalise, regulate, and sometimes outright ban so-called informal transport provision to the way these services are seen as contravening modernisation narratives and the interests of politically powerful road user groups, such as middle-class private motorists. In the light of the limits of the informal transport concept and the recent critical reappraisal and diversification of approaches to the topic, this Special Issue shifts attention from informal transport to the multiple ways in which informalities and (in)formalisation processes manifest in urban mobility.

### **3. Beyond dualism**

Despite the diversification, much of the literature continues to be framed and underpinned by dualistic thinking. Informalities in transport are mostly studied in – and indeed associated with – the

Global South. However, Cervero and Golub (2007) recognise that cities in the ‘developed’ world have informal services too, and these have been examined empirically in a small number of studies (Best, 2016; Cervero, 1997; Cervero & Golub, 2007; Goldwyn, 2020; Suzuki, 1985). There is also an emerging strand of work on *marshrutkas*, minibus popular transport in post-Soviet countries (Rekhviashvili & Sgibnev, 2018b, 2019; Sgibnev & Vozyanov, 2016), even though the association of informalities in urban mobility with Southern cities is resilient. The same holds for the association of such informalities with illegal – and, at least in certain social milieus, illicit – practices, although there are notable exceptions. Drawing *inter alia* on the urban studies literature (McFarlane, 2012), Heinrichs et al. (2017) develop an institutional bricolage perspective on the regulation, organisation and practices of various public transport systems in Dar es Salaam, including motorcycle taxis, in Dar es Salaam. These authors highlight how formal/codified and informal/social rules are constantly merged and reassembled into a fluid meshwork that defies identifying a given system as either formal or informal. Using a rhythm analysis framework, Xiao (2019, p. 147) also draws attention to the ways in which not only transport practitioners but also passengers improvise a mesh where so-called “formalised systems are always intervened by informal actions, while informal transport is formalised by certain rules”.

While research on informalities in urban mobilities has begun to challenge and rework the dualisms that characterise most of the informal transport literature, multiple articles gathered in this SI advance the agenda of dismantling binary thinking. Thus, in his study of three-wheeled autorickshaws – called *Vikrams* – in Dehradun, northern India, Mittal (2022) exposes the limits of using informality as a descriptive label to characterise and map different urban mobility practices as violating or remaining beyond state regulation. This treatment of the concept, he argues, shifts attention away from the state’s role in producing informalities. Through his Vikram case study that spans over forty years, Mittal shows that the regulatory authorities have taken on multiple roles and repeatedly reframed their definitions of (in)formality to privilege or discriminate against certain actors at different points in time. Their approach has ranged from implicit support to overt repression, and later also included legal accommodation of Vikrams. Mittal’s analysis reveals the state as an incoherent unit, and “an assemblage of different actors in complex entanglements of practices far beyond the state institutions” (page 8). Its variable but always ad hoc handling of informality is grounded in colonial legacies and a perceived need to keep the Vikram operators under control.

Olma’s (2022) account of Tashkent’s informal taxis also emphasises the state’s productive role and shifting approach to informality. Contributing to the literature on informality as pursued ‘in-spite of’ or ‘beyond’ the state in the post-socialist East (Polese, et al., 2018), Olma shows that informality can also thrive ‘under the auspices’ of the state. The state’s conscious choice to ease or freeze enforcement “can serve diverse politico-economic goals, ranging from covering gaps in the state’s provision to giving the chance to unregistered individuals to earn income to avoiding unrest” (Olma, 2022, page 4). This account also challenges the prevailing reduction of informality to unregistered, unlicensed, or unregulated operation of transport providers (Cervero & Golub, 2007). Olma instead defines drivers’ informality in reference to their precarity, self-exploitation, and insecurity. He visibilises a complex lifeworld of informalities - kin-based networks and community-level resource pooling strategies - that allow drivers to access loans, and to cope with road accident-induced costs or other uncertainties.

Weicker's (2022) study of the public transport reform in two Russian cities suggests that political elites strategically utilise binary conceptions of informality vs formality and associations of informality with backwardness and underdevelopment to suppress *marshrutka* paratransit. This results in further deterioration of labour conditions and deepening of socio-spatial inequalities. He defines discursive strategies of demonizing informality as "a mighty but improper misuse of power, concealing very complex operation practices in a formal/informal continuum of the established transport assemblages" (p. 3). In the given cases of Volgograd and Rostov on Don, simplified and binary notions of informality have been "consciously used as a power instrument of exclusion as a strategic use of a state of exception" (p. 3).

Finally, Sopranzetti (2022) offers a *longue durée* anthropological study of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok. He confirms that attempts to deconstruct the formal/informal binary in transport and mobilities research have expanded the understanding of informality as a complex planning tool, practice or a heuristic device. Yet, he also observes the continued discursive power of the binary construct of informality, illustrating how not just authorities but also drivers and mobility operators engage with informality as a binary label in their struggle over dignity, legitimacy, right to employment and survival. Sopranzetti therefore offers a dual conceptualisation of informality that recognises the continuous interaction between codification and actual praxis as well as the ways in which the formal/informal binary is deployed tactically by a variety of actors trying to act in their life-worlds. He thus illustrates how the label 'informal transport' can be re-appropriated as a badge of honour by mobility providers on the margin.

#### **4. Innovation and digitalisation**

So-called informal transport systems have long been hailed for their adaptability and creativity, across multiple literatures. To emphasise how vehicles in their original form are modified to meet local mobility needs, Phun and Yai (2016) define paratransit as LAMAT: Locally Adapted, Modified and Advanced Transport. Paratransit is thus seen as a site of frugal innovation under financial, technological, spatial, and other constraints. Doherty et al.'s (2021) study of 'saloni' motorised tricycle taxis in Abidjan, Ivory Coast aptly illustrates this form of innovation. Originally imported from India and slightly adapted for local use, saloni taxis started operating in 2019 in Abidjan's periphery where dirt roads are unsuitable to most other forms of popular transport in the city.

The digitalisation and platformisation of urban mobility have induced innovation processes in paratransit that are of a different order of magnitude. Digital technologies have to some extent facilitated the elaboration of non-capitalist, collaborative and socially oriented urban mobility services (Stehlin et al., 2020). However, those technologies have particularly enabled the platformisation of urban mobility by profit-seeking capital that has "render[ed] mobility a potent entry point through which to more broadly reorganize urban services and extract new sources of value from their intermediation" (Ibid, page 5). To create the conditions for expanding digital mediation of urban mobility, ride-hailing companies have mobilized vast resources for pursuing legal cases and unsettling local urban and national regulations. This has resulted in dual regulatory regimes, benefiting digitalized mobility providers over pre-existing, usually dispersed actors involved in flexible mobility service provision or taxi sector (Collier et al., 2018).



Several papers gathered in the SI explore these issues. Lanamäki and Tuvikene (2022) analyse the debate in the Estonia's national parliament about the so-called 'Uber law'. The approval of the 'Uber law' led to the establishment of a two-tier regulation scheme, legalising previously informally operating digital ride-hailing services yet exempting them from existing taxi sector regulations. The authors show how the narratives of the alleged innovativeness and superiority of digitalised mobility justify privileging digital ride-hailing over regular taxi services in the process of law-making. They understand the case of digital ride-hailing as exemplifying the selective formalisation of informality, or 'elite informality' (Moatasim, 2019; Roy, 2005). They show that focus on digitalisation can enrich debates about the elite informality by "noting the ways in which informality in the name of the digital future can be justified and eventually legalized" (Lanamäki and Tuvikene, 2022, p. 9).

In his contribution to the SI, Doherty (2022) investigates how platformisation of urban mobility intersects with pre-existing social infrastructures and moral landscapes of ethical personhood in Kampala. Drivers of *boda-bodas*, the motorcycle taxis of Kampala, predominantly construct their ethical personhood through embeddedness in location-based social institutions. In this way they establish order within drivers' communities and trust with customers. While the state's efforts to register boda-boda drivers have failed, ride-hailing companies succeeded in enlisting drivers as they understood the importance of addressing trust and safety issues. In contrast to socially embedded ethical personhood, ride-hailing apps address the safety issue through rating systems and individualisation techniques. Yet, as Doherty argues, platforms are not simply technologies of disembedding because their success "depends on the extent to which they accommodate, complement, and extend existing practices and institutions" (Doherty, page 8). This means that digital ride-hailing is less disruptive and innovative than is often suggested.

Doherty's observation that platforms succeed in registering, standardising and disciplining pre-existing dominantly informal services when public authorities fail resembles Olma's (2022) findings in Tashkent. In fact, Lanamäki and Tuvikene, Doherty and Olma all illustrate that digital mediation of urban mobility – and urban services more broadly – is intertwined with the issues of governance in various ways. While some public authorities (e.g., in Estonia) may perceive platforms as superior governance tools, others (e.g., in Tashkent) give up their efforts at formalising mobility services and contribute to reproducing informality when supporting ride-sharing companies, as long as the latter provide the authorities with a share of monetary value extracted from informal transport workers. All three cases indicate the need for further research on understanding how digital platforms complement, supplement and/or replace public services and regulations.

## **5. Lens onto labour struggles and subject formation in urban transformation**

As cities across the planet continue to grow rapidly in both population and areal size, informally provided transport services can be expected to expand in a similar vein. This alone justifies calls "to make informal urban transport and the kinds of mobility it enables more visible within debates concerning the future of cities" (Evans et al., 2018, page 674). Another compelling reason for greater visibility is that motorcycle taxis, rickshaws and minibuses offer an analytic entry point into understanding (changes in) urban experiences and struggles as well as broader urban transformations. This point is perhaps best illustrated with reference to questions of labour. Traditionally attracting

limited attention in both transport and labour studies (but see e.g., Etherington & Simon, 1996; Rimmer, 1982), paid work in transport has emerged as a topic of some research interest in recent years. Informal transport occupies a privileged position in this research, for various reasons. These include exploitative labour relationships, precarity, processes of stigmatisation and discrimination, as well as the sector's role in many cities across the planet as absorbing a surplus of labour constituted by typically male and low-educated urbanites or rural-to-urban migrants (e.g., Agbibo, 2018b; Baker, 2021; Doherty, 2017; Ference, 2016; Rekhviashvili & Sgibnev, 2018a; Sopranzetti, 2014). Here too, world-wide platformisation of urban mobility has redefined the terms of the debate (Collier et al., 2018; Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev, 2019).

The new 'spatial fix' (Stehlin et al., 2020) concocted by venture capitalists and tech firms has triggered labour unrest and social discontents in cities across the Global South, East and North alike. Alongside the more traditional protests and strike actions of public transport workers, recent years have witnessed increasing mobilisation of taxi drivers against the competition they face from app-based mobility offers. Drivers working for mobility platforms such as Uber and Deliveroo followed, protesting against precarious working conditions and decreasing returns per time unit of labour (Trappmann et al., 2020). Existing literature has recognised that platformisation of urban mobility produces divergent and heterogeneous labour struggles in different locales but details on localised political processes are largely missing from previous studies (Behrens et al., 2021).

The SI contributes to the existing literature by showing how the processes of digitalisation, labour struggles and informalisation interact and by challenging easy distinctions between innovation (often applied to the global North) and informalisation (understood as emerging in the global South). For instance, Rink's (2022) analysis of the South African *amaphela*, a form of local transport named after cockroaches, directly challenges the distinction between innovation and informalisation. By providing a phenomenology of the everyday uses of *amaphela* – what he calls 'capturing' them-and putting to work the etymology of their name and the relation it marks between human and non-humans – Rink shows that this form of transport can be understood both through utopian and dystopian lenses: as threat to order, formality, safety and reliability or celebrated for the unique and creative demand-driven service. Even if *amaphelas* are stigmatised and criminalised in popular political discourses, the everyday experience of *amaphela* rides are 'punctuated by care, joy, laughter and comradeship' (Rink, 2022, page 6). Drivers challenge stigmatisation through own interpretations of being associated with cockroaches, emphasizing that the drivers hustle for income just like cockroaches search for food. *Amaphela* service flexibly absorbs precarious labour, and provides drivers as well as passengers with socio-economic connectivity and opportunities beyond peripheralised neighbourhoods of South Africa.

Kębłowski and Rekhviashvili (2022) show that working for *navettes*, informally operating taxis in Brussels, hinges on labour precarity and self-exploitation. Although the *navettes* operate within a highly regulated context, the so called 'negative externalities' of informality remain unresolved, and the challenges faced by the drivers closely resemble those experienced by informal transport workers across the cities of Global South and East. In line with the observations by Lanamäki and Tuvikene (2022), the authors illustrate that in a Global Northern city such as Brussels the state relies on selective privileging of informal practices (Moatasim, 2019; Roy, 2005) in a similar fashion as described in relation to municipal authorities in the cities of the global South. They expose how the local authorities

endorse corporate digitalised ride-sharing practices, “while marginalising and criminalising subaltern “low-tech” sharing practices” (Kębłowski and Rekhviashvili, 2022, page 9).

Many of the contributions to the SI thus demonstrate how informalities in urban mobility generate precarious and vulnerable subjectivities for transport workers, a process that – as Doherty suggests in particular – is intensified through digitalisation and platformisation of transport services. However, it is important to avoid merely representing transport workers as victims at constant risk of exclusion. Recall that Sopranzetti’s (2022) article highlights how mototaxi drivers in Bangkok appropriated the ‘informal transport’ label with pride. Further to this discursive strategy, Xiao (2022) shows how drivers and passengers in *danfo* minibuses in Lagos, Nigeria temporarily challenge the structural inequality and exclusion they face. They do so in the midst of traffic relying on skill and knowledge to navigate the city in a way that gives them advantage over private car drivers, allowing them to experience ‘situational inequality,’ a situation in which structural inequalities are temporarily suspended or reversed in favour of lower classes. Although unable to add up to collective action or structural changes, these experiences provide *danfo* drivers and passengers with affective elements that help them to make sense of (im)mobility, urban life and Lagos as a city.

## 6. Conclusions

This SI draws attention to the significance of informalities in urban mobility across the planet in an attempt to bridge the hiatus between research on urban informality and studies of urban mobility. Addressing the disconnect between those fields requires that thinking from transport research and mobilities scholarship is cross-fertilised with evolving understandings of various processes and formations in contemporary cities, including – but not limited to – urban governance, digitalisation, labour dynamics, and subject formation. At the same time, further attention to urban mobility can help urban scholarship to not only advance critical (re)conceptualisations of urban informality but also understand how urban moral economies and the subjectivities of working urban dwellers are transformed by state intervention and ‘an explosion in the digital mediation of everyday urban life’ (Stehlin et al., 2020, page 1250).

The SI articles also hint towards new avenues for future research. The question of how platformisation of mobility intersects with urban governance stands out as one that would benefit from further conceptualisation. This issue could be addressed by integrating urban mobility research with broader discussions on smart cities and technocapitalist urbanism (Strüver et al., 2021). The SI contributions reveal how various urban authorities attempt to regulate and discipline transport workers. When these attempts fail, platformisation becomes a particularly appealing solution to local governance challenges. These observations also signal a need for engagement with recent studies on the trend of re-municipalising essential services (Voorn, 2021). In effect, they open space for exploration into whether, where, for whom, and on what terms urban mobility can be framed as essential infrastructure in need of public reclaiming and commoning.

Finally, although the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are not discussed in the SI because the articles were written before its outbreak, emerging debates on how the pandemic has reshaped perceptions and experiences of urban mobility (Tuvikene et al., 2021; Weicker & Sgibnev, 2020) indicate an increased presence of informality in transport provision (Calnek-Sugin & Heeckt, 2020). For instance,

the pandemic-induced lockdowns have exacerbated the precarious labour conditions, inequalities and injustices experienced by the workers of delivery and transport services (Trappmann et al., 2020). While not addressing these emerging phenomena directly, the SI offers relevant background knowledge about current contestations and transformations in urban mobility by offering a theoretical reappraisal of informalisation processes and practices, changing labour relations and subjectivities, and ongoing platformisation of urban life.

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