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For feedback, please contact:

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Facebook: [Facebook.com/inklusibo](https://www.facebook.com/inklusibo)
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Steering towards a Progressive, Nationalistic, People-Centric Public Transportation System: Report on Focus Group Findings from Jeepney Drivers and Commuters in Metro Manila

Introduction

As of 2022, it was found that more than 70% of the Metro Manila population are commuters, and more than 8 million depend on jeepneys for their daily commute (Dela Peña, 2022). Public utility vehicles (PUVs), such as jeepneys, tricycles, and pedicabs, are a part of the Philippine culture and are equated to efficient, affordable, and accessible transportation modes in the country. However, when the global pandemic COVID-19 reached the country in March 2020, the Duterte administration ordered months of nationwide lockdown, and the landscape of PUVs has significantly changed since.

Not quite recovering from the loss of livelihood at the height of the global pandemic, jeepney drivers have to navigate another challenge to their livelihood: the Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Program (PUVMP). The Duterte administration signed PUVMP, which was launched by the Department of Transportation (DoTr) under Department Order (DO) No. 2017-011, also known as the Omnibus Franchising Guidelines (DoTr, 2017). The DoTr, Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB), and the Land Transportation Office (LTO) spearheaded the replacement of present conventional jeepneys with modernized units powered by Euro-4-compliant or higher engines under the PUVMP. Traditional jeepneys will be replaced by air conditioned, wi-fi ready, surveillance camera-equipped, foreign automobiles costing from 2.5 to 2.8 million PHP each (DoTr & GIZ, 2016). Aside from the handing over of the management of the jeepney units to corporations or cooperatives, LTFRB stated that the PUVMP is “more than just the modernization” of PUVs (LTFRB, n.d.). Traditional jeepneys will be phased out because they are “outdated, unsafe to operate, and have detrimental effects on the environment,” and will be replaced with modern jeepneys acquired by major enterprises. Jeepney drivers can join these cooperatives or corporations by surrendering their

individual franchises, effectively becoming an employee of the fleet and losing ownership of the vehicle unit (granted that they are also the operator of the traditional unit(s) they are operating) (LTFRB, 2018). Commuters will be sharing the cost of modernization, with 15 PHP as the base fare of every ride in a modernized unit for the first four kilometers as compared to the 13-Peso base fare in traditional units (Relativo, 2024). Further, the financial difficulty for traditional jeepney drivers and operators to comply with PUVMP equate to low transport supply, worsening the commute experience for Filipino students and workers that rely on the routes being connected by PUVs.

The deadline for franchise consolidation, after a series of nationwide transport strikes that started last March 2023, was moved to April 30, 2024 from the original deadline of December 31, 2023, wherein Marcos Jr. stated there will be no more granting of deadline extensions (Esguerra, n.d.). However, several jeepney operators and drivers’ associations (JODAs) continue the fight for a “progresibo, makabayan, makamasa [progressive, nationalistic, people-centric]” mass public transportation system beyond the April 30 mark (PISTON, n.d.). They are joined by several other transport workers’ groups, student organizations, and commuters’ advocate groups among many others.

Materials and Methods

The researchers conducted a qualitative study in the form of focus group discussions (FGD). Regardless of their JODAs and affiliations, there will be three FGD clusters: 1) unconsolidated jeepney drivers; 2) consolidated jeepney drivers, and; 3) commuters. In a group there should be one facilitator and one documenter, wherein the facilitator will be giving out the guide questions

Table 1. **General guide for FGD with jeepney drivers** (both consolidated and unconsolidated)

Question	Rationale
<i>What prompted you to work in the transport sector?</i>	<i>Initial investigation that aims to shed light on the reasons why transport workers chose such line of work</i>
<i>Bakit mo napagpasyahan na magtrabaho sa sektor ng transportasyon?</i>	<i>Aims to highlight the lack of opportunities due to uneven development in the country</i>
<i>In your experience, what processes and policy practices do you think are fair and unfair in your line of work?</i>	<i>Aims to understand how transport workers are taken advantage of because of processes and policies implemented (i.e., PUVMP)</i>
<i>Sa iyong karanasan, anong mga proseso, polisiya, at mga praktika ang tingin mo ay patas at di-patas sa iyong larangan ng trabaho?</i>	<i>Set to lay the foundation for the third question</i>
<i>What should be changed to make your livelihood more favorable to you?</i>	<i>Understanding what their initial demands are</i>
<i>Ano ang mga kondisyon na dapat baguhin upang maging mas paborable sa iyo ang iyong trabaho?</i>	

Table 2. **General guide for FGD with commuters** (both students and workers)

<i>What commuting challenges affect your daily routine and well-being?</i>	<i>Initial investigation that aims to shed light on the current flaws of the transport system from the commuters' point of view</i>
<i>Aling mga karanasan sa pagk-komyut ang nakaapekto sa iyong araw-araw na gawain at kapakanan?</i>	
<i>Are current transport options sufficient for you to resolve your commuting challenges? Why?</i>	<i>Aims to understand the accessibility of transport options, its performance, etc.</i>
<i>Sapat ba ang mga moda ng transportasyon para resolbahin ang kahirapan mo sa pagk-komyut? Bakit?</i>	
<i>What should be changed to make the transport sector more favorable for commuters?</i>	<i>Understanding what their initial demands are</i>
<i>Ano ang mga kondisyon na dapat baguhin upang maging mas paborable sa iyo ang pampublikong transportasyon?</i>	

and manage the flow of discourse, and the documenter will be recording the responses of each participant.

Results

In the FGD, there were a total of: 1) four (4) groups of commuters, wherein every group is a mix of students and workers; 2) four (4) groups of unconsolidated jeepney drivers, and; 3) one group

of consolidated jeepney drivers. During the FGD, there were a total of 29 commuters, most of which are studying and/or working at Quezon City or Manila City (Table 3), and 27 unconsolidated drivers coming from 10 different JODAs (Table 4). Lastly, the only group of consolidated drivers consists of six (6) members driving in Alabang, Muntinlupa route. The number of participants is limited to an average of six (6) individuals per group for a more manageable flow of discourse for

Table 3. **Distribution of Commuter Respondents based on Geographical Location**

Category	Quezon City	Manila City	Outside MM*
Workers	2	1	1
Students	8	17	1
Total	9	18	2

*two participants are only visiting Metro Manila, both are from outside the country

the moderators, and for the participants to uninhibitedly share their experiences and perspective to the group.

Commuters' Perspective and Experiences

The experience of a typical Filipino commuter, especially in a highly urbanized and densely populated place such as Metro Manila, is generally unpleasant, according to the narratives extracted from the FGD with the four (4) commuter groups. They cited the following experiences that signify an overall unsatisfactory commuter experience:

Reduced time for rest and recuperation. This refers to the influence of traffic congestion on people's capacity to relax and recover properly. Prolonged exposure to traffic congestion causes weariness, stress, and poor sleep quality.

Increased financial burden. Increased expenditures were among the key reasons brought up as a result of traffic congestion and/or lack of transport options. These expenses include longer travel times, and, as some participants have raised, usage of ride-hailing apps/transportation network vehicle services (TNVS) such as Grab, Angkas, Move It, and Joyride. The financial impact can be especially severe for persons with low incomes or restricted mobility alternatives.

Unpredictable transportation timetables. Commuter groups also agreed that they collectively experience inconsistent and unreliable schedules of various modes of transportation (e.g., delays in light or metro railway systems due to repairs, maintenance, or construction). Unpredictable timetables make it difficult for people to plan their commutes, resulting in delays.

Table 4. **Distribution of unconsolidated drivers in the FGD based on JODA and/or route**

Category	No. of respondent
MABODA - LRT Monumento Station (Caloocan City) to Welcome Rotonda (Quezon City)	3
BSJODA - Bagong Silangan (Quezon City)	4
Alabang (Muntinlupa City) to Sucat (Parañaque City)	6
Alabang (Muntinlupa City) to Biñan, Laguna	1
PALMJODA - Alabang (Muntinlupa City) to GMA Sucat	2
NOBLUDA - Novaliches (Quezon City) to LRT Blumentritt Station (Manila City)	4
Montalban (Rizal) to Cubao (Quezon City)	1
Sucats to Baclaran (Parañaque City)	2
CDJODA - Cubao (Quezon City) to Divisoria (Manila City)	1
CQJODA - Cubao (Quezon City) to Quiapo (Manila City)	1
Pasig City to Taytay, Angono, and Binangonan (Rizal)	1
Pasig Crossing (Pasig City) to Pateros City	2
Total	28

Commuting in the city is also not intuitive. Not all destinations are accessible solely by trains and buses. Informal transportation networks, such as jeeps, tricycles, and pedicabs, are still required to connect various neighborhoods and carry students and workers to their destinations.

Frequent cases of becoming chance passengers: This emphasizes the common experience of commuters being unable to get a seat on public transit owing to congestion or capacity constraints. This may lead to uncomfortable and inconvenient travels, with some people having to wait for a while before securing a ride.

Road safety: The roads are hostile for active mobility in Metro Manila. Some commuters stated that in rural areas or provinces, it is safer to cycle, to use small electric vehicles, and to walk.

Closure of transportation options: This refers to the discontinuance of certain transportation services, such as the Philippine National Railways (PNR) system. The closure of transportation alternatives can drastically limit mobility for

alternate forms of transportation that may be less convenient or more expensive.

Car-centric urban planning. Design and prioritizing of roads and infrastructure that are primarily intended for private automobiles, rather than public transportation, can make it difficult and inefficient for people to use public transit, while also contributing to traffic congestion.

Commuters' Demands

The commuters raised that there must be a consultation with all stakeholders in urban planning, from national to local levels to ensure the monitoring of quality of all transport modes. National and local governments must also be able to provide affordable and accessible transport options for all.

The discourse for national industrialization was prompted as well. "Let us cease depending on foreign, imperialist countries to develop our transportation infrastructure", expressed by a group of college students in one commuters' group. They added that the government should invest in the industry, citing that the creativity of Filipinos have led them to repurpose the old jeepneys to the ones that we have now. Investing in heavy machineries that will sustain the local production of climate-resilient traditional jeepneys with low carbon emissions will help not only the local manufacturers, but also the jeepney drivers themselves. Further, some students have raised the interconnectedness of PUVMP, foreign investments, and charter change, stating that foreign ownerships, especially over public services, must be eliminated.

Unconsolidated Drivers' Perspective and Experiences

Most of the unconsolidated jeepney drivers originally started out as transport workers (Figure 1): taxi drivers, tricycle drivers, UV Express/FX drivers, and family drivers. However, most of them are products of rural-urban migration as well, albeit not being the first-generation rural-urban migrants in their family (e.g., some drivers stated that they "inherited" driving PUVs to earn income from parents that came from rural regions/provinces). Former Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) spent their savings on buying and operating their own jeepney units, effectively granting them the status of operator-driver within their JODA. Skilled workers, such as mechanics

and welders, saw that they could utilize such skills in the jeepney industry, eventually leading them into operating/driving jeepneys as well. Some drivers who worked at automotive parts' manufacturing earned such skills as well in order to assemble and/or to maintain their jeepneys.

Unconsolidated drivers attribute their current livelihood to "ease of earning income", "control over your own income and the duration of work or *pasada* [trips]", and relatively "low capital needed in order to own and to maintain a traditional jeepney" as well. When asked how much they typically take home to their families minus the quota/boundary, gas expenses, and repair and maintenance expenses, they stated that they earn from 800 PHP up to 1,000 PHP daily. Additionally, the drivers saw the demand of connecting main thoroughfares in Metro Manila that are not accessible through trains or buses.

Even when nearing the deadline of franchise consolidation, the unconsolidated jeepney drivers remained steadfast that they will not comply with the terms under PUVMP. Operator-drivers stated that they will lose ownership of their units, obliging them to sign up for a loan from financial institutions. Aside from the financial burden of consolidation, some drivers cited unannounced route changes that neither they nor the commuters were aware of. Although the number of drivers in each JODA apprehended by Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA) officers is beyond the scope of the FGD questions, a significant number of participants were able to account for other unconsolidated drivers in their JODA that were given a ticket for passing by a wrong route (e.g., changes in the list of roads that PUVs are allowed to traverse in Pasig City), for having "falsified" registration, and for expired registration. Traditional units found with expired registration were impounded, and it cost drivers a fine of 8,000-10,000 PHP per unit.

They also stated that large corporations and cooperatives take advantage of the precarity of the situation, citing instances of corruption and exploitation (e.g., they have witnessed other consolidated drivers within the same routes they take have to reach the 4,000-5,000-Peso daily quota before taking any breaks).

Unconsolidated drivers who have joined mass mobilizations and launched nationwide transport strikes were met with threats from state forces, telling them that they will lose their individual franchise and, eventually, their livelihood.

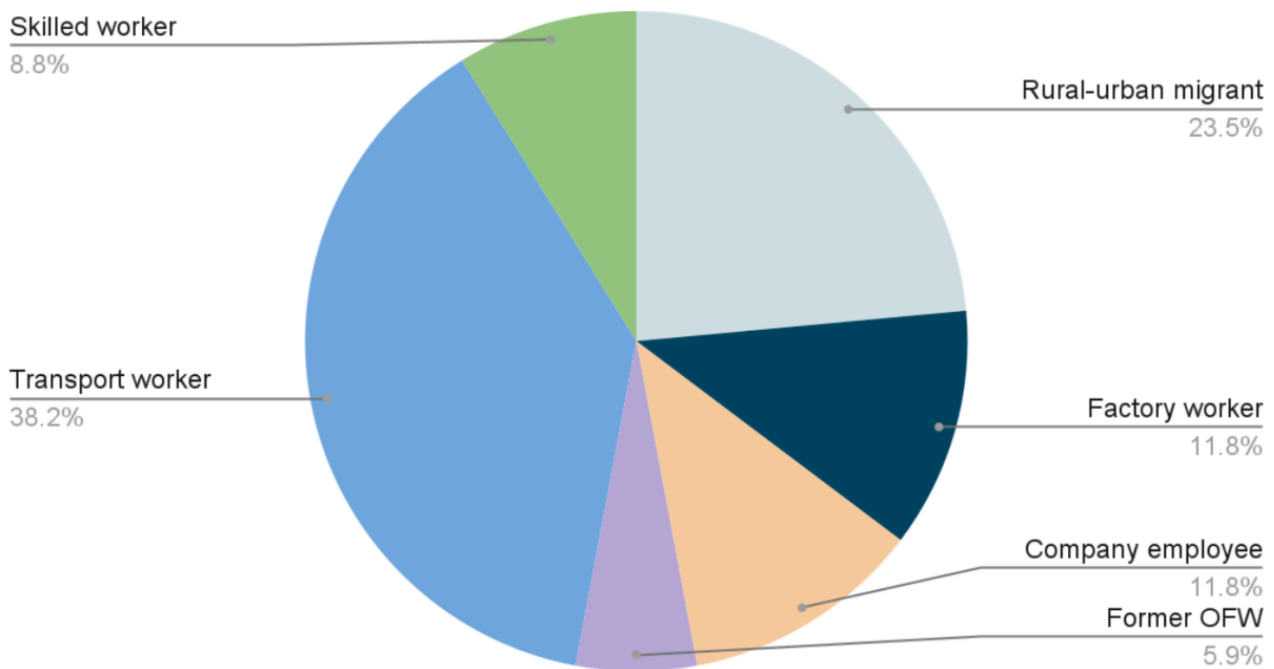


Figure 1. **Distribution of jeepney drivers based on their previous occupations.**

(Jeepney drivers that were/are also skilled workers are mostly mechanics, welders, and other skills involved in building construction. Rural-urban migrants refer to individuals that moved to Metro Manila for a chance to land better livelihood opportunities. Lastly, transport workers refer to individuals that either already started out as jeepney drivers, family drivers, or were previously driving taxis, tricycles, or other PUVs within Metro Manila.)

Unconsolidated Drivers' Demands

Regardless of the threats, intense pressure, and even coercion at some instances, unconsolidated jeepney drivers push for the reinstatement of the five-year individual franchise. They disagree with the notion of not owning the jeepney unit you're paying for and being "demoted" to a cooperative or corporation employee.

They reiterated that their fight for inclusive and affordable transportation is also the fight of commuters. They too disagree with the 15-Peso base fare for the first four kilometers of commute in modernized units.

Similar to the demand of some commuters in the FGD, the unconsolidated jeepney drivers will only support modernization provided that it will not be implemented at their expense. They have shared that local manufacturers, such as Sarao Motors and Francisco Motors, can equip traditional jeepney models to be European emission standard-compliant. Further, they added that compared to the "mini buses", traditional jeepneys are less expensive and are easier to fix because their components are widely accessible locally.

Consolidated Drivers' Perspective and Experiences

Similar to most unconsolidated drivers in the FGD, most consolidated drivers are hoping for higher wages, hence, they ventured to Manila and tried various means to find work, including work in the transportation sector. Most consolidated jeepney drivers stated that their labor situation when they were still owning individual franchises was better overall.

They have to reach a quota/boundary of 3,850 PHP per day, and the excess from their daily trip is their income. Due to a higher quota/boundary, the drivers protested that even when ill, they have to make trips to be able to provide the quota/boundary.

Compliance with franchise consolidation and/or modernization resulted in deductions for upkeep and monthly contributions to cooperatives, which lowered workers' income significantly. Aside from a higher quota/boundary compared to having an individual franchise, drivers under a cooperative or corporation have to pay for their garage (which costs 200,000 PHP), for a monthly share to the cooperative or corporation, and for maintenance

costs of a single modernized unit. Although there is an advantage in pooling monthly shares that can serve as a seed fund for maintenance and repair costs, the separate income that will be distributed to the members of the cooperative or corporation is variable. For instance, once the cooperative or corporation goes bankrupt, it might be dissolved. Additionally, if the unit you're driving is under repairs, there is no alternative unit you can drive, effectively losing a day's worth of earnings.

Overall, the drivers concluded that they are suffering from job insecurity under a cooperative since a cooperative or corporation does not aim to provide jobs and to alleviate transport crisis for commuters, it aims to earn.

Consolidated Drivers' Demands

Similar to the sentiments of unconsolidated jeepney drivers, they expressed that retro-fitting traditional jeepney units to become compliant to the standards of a climate-resilient, low-carbon economy is a more viable and sustainable option for the jeepney industry and drivers. They affirmed sentiments of both the unconsolidated jeepney drivers and commuters that the government must fund local jeepney manufacturers and small jeepney parts assembly groups. Lastly, they determined that having social benefits will significantly aid aging drivers.

Discussion and Recommendations

Forced consolidation is just the beginning of the government's modernization scheme and corporate ownership of PUV lines. With the price ranges detailed, it is evident that only large enterprises can afford mini-buses for a specified route. A jeepney driver that can't afford the exorbitant charges of modernization will be left with no livelihood or franchise to fall back on because they're already held by cooperatives or companies. To support drivers in purchasing modernized units, the government obliged them to get bank loans which can only sustain 5% of the total cost of a single unit. Jeepney drivers can receive financial help from the Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP) and the Land Bank of the Philippines (LBP), although the subsidy is limited to roughly P160,000 with a 6% annual interest rate (Mendoza, 2021). With an even lower budget of 1.6 billion PHP in 2024 for PUVMP (Senate, 2023), it is apparent that this is not sufficient enough to subsidize the cost of modernizing more than

300,000 traditional jeepneys nationwide (Mendoza, 2021).

In addition to the consolidation scheme, another part of the government's transportation strategy causes concern: the reorganization of PUV routes based on road alignments and passenger demand. This effort, known as the Local Public Transport Route Plan (LPTRP), mandates each city in the Philippines to create its own plan (DILG, 2017). Due to the decentralized aspect of the LPTRP process, which lacks a national transportation framework, LGUs might prioritize routes for their partner companies, thereby giving them authority over key thoroughfares. This might result in a concentration of power in the hands of a few big corporations, thereby undermining independent operators and limiting passenger options.

Public transportation is crucial in society because it allows people to get to school, work, hospitals, neighborhoods, and other areas. However, the Philippines has pressing issues in its public transportation system, with far-reaching implications for education, employment, and commuters' everyday lives. The results of the FGD emphasizes the negative impact of the government's PUVMP on Filipino students and workers, particularly those in low-income households. It contends that the phase-out of old jeepneys, along with increased fees for "modern" jeepneys and the LRT/MRT, exacerbates the current public transit issue and puts further burden on regular commuters' finances. The minimum salary in the National Capital Region (NCR) is 610 PHP (with a 35-Peso wage increase approved at the start of July 2024 (Laqui, 2024), while the lowest daily pay in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) is much lower, at 336 PHP. Workers' wages are insufficient to cover growing transportation costs.

The migration of workers to Manila has a substantial influence on the city's transportation system, driving up demand for different modes of transportation. This demand can cause congestion, put a pressure on infrastructure, and necessitate the development of efficient and affordable modes of transportation. Jeepney drivers are able to supply the demand of millions of Filipino commuters for transportation modes needed to get from one place to another (PISTON, n.d., Cervero, 2000).

Given the challenges they face, the demands of transport workers and commuters in constructing the country's public transportation system as extracted from the FGD can be deduced into the

following points:

Progressive. Underline the importance of transitioning from a fragmented and privatized system to a national public transportation network that puts the public good over corporate profits. The participants contend that genuine modernization entails more than merely replacing outdated jeepneys with new ones. True modernization asks for a comprehensive solution that tackles the fundamental difficulties within the transportation system.

Nationalistic. Support the local manufacturing base for public transportation vehicles, decreasing dependency on imports and creating more jobs for Filipinos.

People-centric. Improvement of public transportation must prioritize the needs and well-being of those it serves. Make public transit accessible to everyone through inexpensive and fair fare systems.

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