

Implementation of the PUV modernization program in General Santos City: As seen from the lenses of transport cooperatives

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of the Public Utility Vehicle (PUV) Modernization Program on transportation modes in General Santos City. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews among twelve key participants, using the qualitative multiple case study. The results of the interview were transcribed, translated to produce themes. Analysis of the transcriptions generated 14 emergent themes. Based on the results of the study, four emergent themes from the participants' narratives concerning the enabling factors that led LGU – General Santos City to implement the PUV Modernization Program: compliance with PUV modernization, safety and comfort for the riding public, income security, and clean and green environment. In the current status of the PUV Modernization Program three emergent themes emerged: unrealistic LGU's claim of full implementation, underserved/unserved routes and insufficient number of modernized units. Four emergent themes emerged from participant's views on the issues and concerns in the implementation of the program: government subsidy through net service contracting, self-initiative and resilience, collaborative unity and organization strength and LGU to fix problems on tricycles not following designated routes. Lastly, four emergent themes revealed the LGU responses to the issues and concerns on the implementation of the PUV Modernization Program: holding consultations, capacity building and zero-interest loans and recognition awards with cash incentives. The results imply the importance of responsive support mechanisms, and inclusive governance to achieve the long-term goals of a modern, sustainable, and equitable public transportation system in General Santos City.

Keywords: Reading Challenges, Coping Strategies, Struggling Readers, Individualized Learning Plan, Multiple Case Study

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INTRODUCTION

The Public Utility Vehicle (PUV) Modernization Program in the Philippines represents a transformative shift in the nation's transportation system, seeking to replace traditional public vehicles, like jeepneys, with modern, eco-friendly, and safer alternatives (Gonzales, Villanueva, & Santos, 2020). Implemented by the Department of Transportation (DOTr), this initiative aims to address key issues such as pollution, passenger safety, and public transportation efficiency. In General Santos City, a rapidly growing urban area in South Cotabato, the adoption of this program has introduced various new transportation modes to replace older systems, reflecting local government efforts to align with national goals. However, these shifts in transportation

have sparked debate among stakeholders about the advantages and challenges posed by modernization (De Guzman, Santos, & Manalang, 2022).

Before the introduction of the PUV Modernization Program, General Santos City relied heavily on traditional jeepneys, tricycles, and multicabs, especially in areas underserved by larger vehicles. These modes provided an affordable and convenient means of transport for commuters, though they often lacked modern safety features and contributed to traffic congestion and pollution (Bautista & Garcia, 2021). In adopting the modernization program, city officials sought to reduce these issues while also improving the quality of the public transportation system. The transition, however, brings into focus important questions regarding the program's effectiveness in enhancing the commuting experience and meeting both environmental and socio-economic goals.

The PUV Modernization Program introduces new transportation modes that promise a more sustainable and comfortable commuting experience, yet it has also presented financial and logistical challenges. While the introduction of safer, more environmentally friendly vehicles aligns with legislative frameworks like the Clean Air Act (Republic Act No. 8749) and DOTr modernization standards, the higher operating costs of these units have impacted PUV operators and commuters (Rivas & Reyes, 2020). As De Leon and Cruz (2021) point out, operators face financial strain, which often translates to higher fares for commuters, potentially limiting accessibility for lower-income residents. Consequently, while the program aims to advance urban mobility, it has yet to fully accommodate the financial realities and diverse needs of General Santos City's population (Cruz & Villanueva, 2022).

Another ongoing challenge is the continued reliance on tricycles and other informal modes of transportation in areas where modernized PUVs are limited. This partial implementation indicates that while some progress has been made, the program has not entirely replaced the traditional options (Santiago, 2021). This situation underscores the complexity of achieving comprehensive modernization in diverse urban settings and highlights the need to balance policy goals with practical commuting requirements. Identifying specific areas for improvement in terms of passenger comfort, safety, and convenience remains essential in maximizing the program's benefits.

This study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the PUV Modernization Program in General Santos City, focusing on the new transportation modes introduced, the motivations behind the program's adoption by local government officials, and the impact of these changes on the commuting experience. By examining both the strengths and limitations of the new modes of transport, this research will contribute valuable insights into how the program can better address the city's unique transportation needs while promoting an eco-efficient and user-friendly system (Reyes & Santos, 2021). The findings are intended to inform future policy improvements and offer recommendations for optimizing the program's implementation to achieve a balanced approach to modernized urban transportation.

Statement of the problem

This study aimed to explore the current state of implementation, the issues and concerns, and the LGU's response regarding the implementation of the PUV Modernization Program in General Santos City, as seen from the lenses of the PUV Transport cooperatives.

Specifically, it sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the enabling factors that led to the implementation of the PUV Modernization Program based on the views of the PUV Transport cooperatives?

2. What is the current status of the PUV Modernization program?
3. How do the PUV Transport cooperatives view the issues and concerns on the implementation of the PUV Modernization program?
4. How do the LGU – General Santos City respond to these issues and concerns, as viewed by the PUV Transport cooperatives?

Theoretical framework

This study was grounded in several theoretical perspectives that provided a foundation for understanding the socio-economic impacts, stakeholder perceptions, and implementation challenges associated with the Public Utility Vehicle (PUV) Modernization Program. These theoretical lenses guided the exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of the program, particularly in identifying the key factors that influenced its implementation and the varying responses of stakeholders, including drivers, operators, local government officials, and commuters. The integration of these theories allowed for a more comprehensive analysis of how modernization efforts intersect with economic realities, institutional support mechanisms, and community acceptance in the context of public transportation reform.

The Modernization Theory serves as a primary framework for this study. Modernization theory, which emerged in the mid-20th century, suggests that societies progress through various stages of development, typically characterized by industrialization, technological advancement, and institutional reform (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010). In the context of public transportation, this theory implies that transitioning from traditional jeepney systems to more efficient, eco-friendly public utility vehicles is a necessary step toward societal and economic progress. This framework is particularly relevant to understanding the socio-economic impacts of PUV modernization on drivers and commuters in SOCSARGEN, as it allows the study to assess how these advancements contribute to economic growth, environmental sustainability, and improved public services (Smith & Jones, 2021).

On the other hand, the Stakeholder Theory also plays a critical role in shaping the study's examination of the perceptions of various stakeholders, including drivers, operators, and commuters. Originally developed by Freeman (1984), stakeholder theory posits that organizations and programs must consider the interests and influences of all stakeholders to succeed. This perspective is essential in analyzing how different groups perceive the PUV modernization program, as it recognizes that these stakeholders have diverse concerns, ranging from economic survival and job security for drivers and operators to safety, affordability, and convenience for commuters (Freeman, 2010). Stakeholder theory helps to contextualize the differing reactions and responses to the program, which can impact its successful implementation.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative narrative research design to explore the implementation of the Public Utility Vehicle (PUV) Modernization program in General Santos City, as viewed from the perspectives of the PUV Transport cooperatives. Using In-Depth Interview (IDI), the research aimed to understand how the modernization program has been implemented, taking into

consideration the enabling factors, the current status of implementation, the issues and concerns, and the response of the Local Government Unit (LGU).

The meaning that people or groups attribute to a social or human situation may be explored and understood through qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). Narrative research is about storytelling, both for the researcher and the participants. Instead of assuming objectivity, the method gives preference to positionality and subjectivity. The narrative itself serves as the subject of narrative analysis (Reissman, 2000).

The qualitative narrative approach is particularly suited to this study, as it provided an in-depth examination of participants' perspectives regarding the new transportation modes introduced through the PUV Modernization Program.

Research locale

The study was conducted in selected public transportation terminals within General Santos City, specifically focusing on the Gensan Public Utility Vehicle Terminal and other key PUV stops within the city.

Participants of the study

The participants of the study were the PUV Transport Cooperative's General Manager, Board of Directors, and Driver of the three (3) major Transport Cooperatives in General Santos City. The three (3) Transport Cooperatives are the following: Metro Gensan Transport Cooperative (MGTC); Fatima Airport Transport Cooperative (FATRANSCO); and Rajah Buayan Transport Cooperative (RBTC).

Instrumentation

The primary instrument for this study was a semi-structured Interview Guide designed for In-Depth Interview (IDI). In-depth interviews are often lengthy, one-on-one interviews that are done to reach predetermined objectives. One-on-one interviews, usually referred to as in-depth interviews, are a technique for obtaining in-depth knowledge of a topic or idea (Showkat and Parveen, 2017).

Data gathering procedure

In this study, the data gathering procedure started with pre-data collection activities. This phase also included the pre-entry stage, where the researcher familiarized herself with the selected public transportation terminals in General Santos City. Prior to actual data collection, clearances and permissions were secured from the Management of Gensan Public Utility Vehicle Terminal. Individual terminal managements were approached with formal letters seeking their consent, accompanied by the necessary research documents. Once permissions were granted, recruitment of participants began by announcing the study at each terminal, informing drivers and operators about the research purpose, procedures, and confidentiality measures. Informed consents were obtained individually from each participant, ensuring they fully understood their rights and the study's scope.

The actual data collection involved qualitative method, conducted over several weeks. Thematic analysis was applied, with each interview transcribed and coded systematically. All collected data are organized digitally in a password-protected database. To maintain data security, only the researcher has access to the collected information, and physical copies of data are stored in a locked cabinet. Following completion of the study, data destruction was executed

by deleting digital records and shredding physical documents, while a feedback session was organized to present and validate the findings with participants.

Data analysis

This study used a qualitative narrative approach. The data gathered from In-Depth Interviews (IDI) underwent thematic analysis rather than statistical treatment. Recorded responses were transcribed, coded, and categorized according to recurring themes that aligned with the research questions. Themes were identified to capture insights on factors enabling the adoption of the Public Utility Vehicle (PUV) Modernization Program, the current state of its implementation, the issues and concerns, and response of the LGU.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Enabling factors behind the implementation of the puv modernization program

The in-depth interviews conducted for this study were carefully crafted to explore the underlying factors that led the Local Government Unit (LGU) of General Santos City to support and implement the Public Utility Vehicle (PUV) Modernization Program. Participants were prompted to share their insights on the initial motivations, policy drivers, and contextual conditions that influenced the LGU's decision to align with the national government's modernization agenda.

The inquiry revealed several key enabling factors. First, participants acknowledged that the program's implementation was primarily driven by a national mandate from the Department of Transportation (DOTr), compelling local compliance through regulatory directives. While initially met with apprehension, the LGU recognized that adherence to the modernization initiative was not only inevitable but strategically aligned with the broader goal of achieving organized and efficient urban transport. The LGU saw the potential to address longstanding issues in public transportation, such as route congestion, fragmented operations, and safety risks caused by aging vehicles and unregulated operators.

Participants also emphasized the LGU's vision to professionalize the local transport sector by consolidating individual operators into cooperatives. This structural transformation was perceived as a necessary step toward improving accountability, governance, and service delivery. The desire to offer commuters safe, convenient, and climate-resilient transportation options further strengthened the LGU's resolve to implement the program.

To better understand the complex dynamics of transportation reform, the responses collected were carefully analyzed to uncover common patterns, underlying motivations, and decision-making rationales among stakeholders. This comprehensive analysis enabled the identification of a key cluster theme comprising four interconnected elements: "Compliance with PUV Modernization; Safety and Comfort for the Riding Public; Clean and Green Environment; and Income Security." These themes collectively illustrate how multiple factors interplay to shape the ongoing evolution of public transport systems. Regulatory pressure, as imposed by national directives, often acts as an initial catalyst compelling stakeholders to engage with the modernization program.

However, beyond mere compliance, local stakeholders are motivated by a broader vision for a more modern, efficient, and safer transport network that can better serve the public's needs. In addition, the strategic organization of transport systems through cooperative consolidation

highlights efforts to improve operational efficiency and unity among various operators. Government support and incentives further reinforce these efforts by providing necessary resources and encouragement.

The current status of the PUV modernization program

A series of carefully designed research questions were posed during in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to examine participants' responses to the Public Utility Vehicle (PUV) Modernization Program. These questions explored the strategies transport operators and stakeholders adopted to comply with government directives, address challenges in modernization, and sustain their operations. Specifically, participants were asked how they managed the transition to modernized units, navigated incomplete route coverage, and coped with their financial dependence on government programs for continuity. The inquiry also aimed to identify the mechanisms that allowed transport cooperatives to align with national policy while striving for sustainability in a changing transportation landscape.

The study sought to uncover recurring patterns in participant responses that highlighted both practical obstacles and strategic adaptations. Operators and transport officials detailed their experiences in consolidating transport services, securing financial support, and adjusting their operations to meet modernization requirements. By probing these challenges, the research provided deeper insights into how compliance with national mandates intersected with local transport ambitions, revealing the factors that shaped industry-wide decision-making.

Through these discussions, participants shared valuable perspectives on the overall progress and limitations of the PUV Modernization Program. Their narratives offered a clearer understanding of the disconnect between idealistic success and actual execution. Analyzing the participants' experiences, the study was able to establish thematic insights—Unrealistic LGU's claim of full implementation of PUV modernization, Insufficient number of modernized PUV units and Underserved/Unserved routes—which reflect the realities of transitioning toward a modernized, organized, and sustainable transport system.

The current status of the Public Utility Vehicle (PUV) Modernization Program reflects a mix of theoretical success and practical challenges. While the program has been officially implemented and recognized in policies, actual execution remains incomplete in key areas. Participants emphasize that while modernization frameworks and requirements have been established on paper, their practical realization is still lacking. Many transport cooperatives and operators have expressed concerns over the limited availability of modernized units, which hampers their ability to fully transition. The gap between policy mandates and on-the-ground implementation illustrates how bureaucratic achievements do not always translate into tangible progress for operators and commuters.

A major challenge in the PUV modernization process is incomplete route coverage, which limits the accessibility and efficiency of transport services. Participants note that despite efforts to introduce modern vehicles, certain routes still lack adequate coverage, leaving commuters dependent on older, less efficient modes of transportation. The inconsistency in vehicle availability affects both transport operators and passengers, creating logistical difficulties in daily commutes. This situation underscores the need for more comprehensive planning and execution to ensure that modernization efforts lead to a fully functioning transport network that benefits all stakeholders. Furthermore, transport cooperatives remain heavily dependent on government

programs for continuity, as modernization efforts require substantial financial and logistical support.

Issues and concerns on the implementation of the PUV modernization program

The implementation of the PUV Modernization Program in General Santos City has revealed various challenges, primarily revolving around financial constraints and the ability of transport cooperatives to sustain operations. Resilience and adaptation have been defining characteristics of cooperatives navigating modernization, as participants stressed the difficulties posed by the high cost of acquiring modernized units. With prices reaching up to ₱2.5 million per unit, the lack of upfront capital has made it nearly impossible for some cooperatives to comply fully. The reliance on government subsidies and bank loans has become essential for survival, with many operators stating that without financial assistance, they would not have been able to launch their services.

Collaborative unity and organizational strength also emerged as a crucial factor in helping cooperatives manage the competitive landscape of public transportation. One major concern raised by stakeholders was the presence of unauthorized transport modes, particularly tricycles, which continue to operate along designated modernized jeepney routes. Despite having secured official route allocations from the LTFRB and LGU, operators struggle with unregulated competition, which reduces commuter volume and threatens their financial viability. This challenge has pushed transport groups toward greater alliances and cooperation, as evidenced by the formation of the Public Transport Alliance in Gensan (PTAG) and the Gensan Transport Federation. These organizations provide cooperative members with platforms for advocacy, resource-sharing, and collective negotiations to address ongoing operational issues.

Another pressing issue is financial stability and dependence on government support, particularly regarding delays in unit procurement and incomplete route coverage. While the modernization program has been declared 100% implemented on paper, cooperatives face real-world challenges in meeting unit requirements and ensuring full route operations. The reliance on net service contracting and government financial programs has helped some cooperatives maintain operations, but many still struggle to serve all approved routes, such as Route 3 and the Gawan-Sinawal corridor, due to shortages in modernized vehicles. Participants highlighted the need for a more gradual and flexible procurement system that would allow cooperatives to scale up operations without overwhelming financial burdens.

Despite the difficulties, regulatory compliance and ethical operations have been recognized as positive outcomes of the modernization program. Cooperative members noted improvements in commuter safety, riding comfort, and structured work conditions, including on-time salary payments and centralized maintenance systems. These developments represent significant advancements from the traditional boundary system of jeepney operations. Additionally, stakeholders expressed a strong desire for permanent government policies to sustain modernization efforts, such as formalizing service contracting and the Pantawid Pasada Program as a regular law similar to the 4Ps program of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). Moving forward, continued government intervention, stronger enforcement of transport regulations, and cooperative unity will be key to ensuring the long-term success of the PUV Modernization Program and its envisioned impact on public transportation.

LGU – General Santos City’s responses to the issues and concerns on the implementation of the PUV modernization program

The findings of the study reveal that the Local Government Unit (LGU) of General Santos City has actively engaged in several strategic responses to support the implementation of the PUV Modernization Program and address the concerns raised by transport cooperatives. One of the most significant interventions is the provision of financial assistance and loan support. The LGU collaborated with national financing institutions such as the Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP) to facilitate low interest loans, enabling cooperatives to acquire modernized units. This initiative was critical in overcoming the financial barriers that many cooperatives faced, particularly during the initial phase of the program.

Another notable response from the LGU is the implementation of incentive programs aimed at motivating compliance and recognizing cooperative performance. Programs like the Gawad Parangal were introduced, offering monetary rewards to high-performing cooperatives. These incentives not only served as financial relief but also boosted the morale of cooperative members. Alongside this, the LGU facilitated capacity-building efforts and regular consultations, providing seminars, orientation sessions, and monthly meetings through alliances like PTAG and the Gensan Transport Federation. These consistent touch-points fostered collaboration between stakeholders, allowing issues to be addressed in real-time.

Despite these efforts, a recurring concern expressed by participants was the weak enforcement against tricycle competition. Many cooperative members lamented that unauthorized tricycles continued to operate along designated PUV routes, reducing passenger volume and undercutting the earnings of legal operators.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the study identified four key thematic areas shaping the implementation of the PUV Modernization Program in General Santos City. The first set of findings revealed that the program was driven by enabling factors such as compliance with national directives, the goal of ensuring safety and comfort for the riding public, the pursuit of income security for drivers and cooperatives, and the advocacy for a clean and green environment through eco-friendly transport solutions. These motivations reflect both regulatory obligations and aspirational improvements in urban mobility.

Regarding the current status of the program, findings suggest a discrepancy between administrative claims and ground realities. Stakeholders described the LGU’s assertion of full implementation as unrealistic, citing the insufficient number of modernized PUV units and several underserved or unserved routes. These gaps demonstrate that while policy structures are in place, actual accessibility and operational coverage remain incomplete, limiting the program’s effectiveness in meeting commuter needs.

Transport cooperatives raised several issues and concerns in the implementation process. These included reliance on government subsidies such as the net service contracting, the need for

self-initiative and resilience to adapt to change, and calls for the LGU to address tricycles violating route restrictions. Despite challenges, stakeholders demonstrated collaborative unity and organizational strength by forming federations and alliances to support one another and sustain operations under the program.

In response to these issues, the LGU took proactive steps including the holding of consultations, stakeholder forums, and meetings, the provision of capacity-building and skills development activities, and the extension of zero-interest loans and incentive-based recognition programs. However, enforcement against unauthorized transport modes remains weak. These findings underscore the importance of coordinated policy implementation, responsive support mechanisms, and inclusive governance to achieve the long-term goals of a modern, sustainable, and equitable public transportation system in General Santos City.

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