



THE STORY OF BLUE DOT

Cape Town, South Africa



Photo source: Local South

Introduction

In 2022, a [taxi strike](#) brought Cape Town and parts of the Western Cape province to a stop. This was partly a reaction to the closure of the Blue Dot Pilot Programme due to a lack of funding.

Run by the Western Cape Provincial Government, it was the first of its kind in South Africa, providing incentives to the taxi industry for improved safety and service quality. Given its successes in improving driving behaviour, including speed reduction, the government is exploring how to build on this foundation.

Minibus taxis

Public transport in South Africa is a major challenge, with limited options for commuters, high costs, and long distances given the spatial development of the country's cities.

According to the [Western Cape Government](#), the minibus taxi industry moves 1 million people a day. With the [collapse](#) of passenger rail over the past decade, minibus taxis are one of the only forms of transport available.

The taxi industry is not run or funded by the state, but rather through private operators on individualized routes and schedules. For years, road safety has been a major concern, as has conflict between operators and associations, with such rivalries being a [leading cause](#) of assassinations in the country.

From red dot to blue

Deidre Ribbonaar is the Chief Director of Transport Operations in the Western Cape Government's Mobility Department. During the stringent Covid lockdown in South Africa, Deidre was tasked with setting up a transport system for essential healthcare workers.

Inspired by the red cross, she came up with the name 'red dot' and worked with taxis to transport nurses and other support staff to key hospitals across the region.

Deidre built her career in a heavily male dominated environment for the last 20 years. She says it helps that she is the daughter of a taxi driver and understands both the operational and financial pressures, as well as the culture in which the sector operates.

Despite [moving 75%](#) of public transport passengers in the province, taxis operate in a precarious environment and users end up receiving a service that's neither dignified nor safe. Taxis compete for fares and so the incentives are to drive as fast as possible and fight for routes.

Deidre wanted to create a different set of incentives for the industry. With the support of her team, as well as the relationships, evidence, and legal arrangements being in place, she became the brain and heart behind a programme to pilot this new approach. They called it Blue Dot.

Incentives that work

To participate, taxi owners needed to comply with eligibility requirements, including a valid operating licence, tax compliance, completion of a training programme and passing a vehicle inspection.

While some argued that they were 'paying drivers to follow the law', the eligibility requirements had to be met to enter the programme.



Deidre Ribbonaar at the ACRoS Cape Town exchange
Photo source: Ashraf Hendricks

With a tracker and branding installed on each vehicle, the driver would start the day with a 5-star rating. Depending on driving behaviour, feedback from users, and reaching a minimum distance on their licensed routes, they could either maintain or reduce the number of stars.

A higher star rating meant larger cash incentives to the taxi owner and driver. A bespoke application allowed owners to see the progress and locations of drivers in real time, providing an unprecedented ability to manage their fleets.

The evidence showed that the programme was a success, reducing instances of speeding by 50%, and that passengers felt safer using Blue Dot Taxis. Moreover, it was a way to build trust with government, a scarce commodity in this context.

A new path

Unfortunately, the national transport department did not provide the required funding to continue with the programme once the pilot ended.

Yet Deidre is determined to continue to build on the programme given how promising and innovative it is.

Though she is aware that much is dependent on political will and decision makers at a higher level, she is working closely with her counterpart at the City-level to start another programme called Shayela Smart.

Deidre wants to see the technology and lessons from Blue Dot utilized to improve services and the industry more broadly. After all, it is about the transport system as a whole and services must be complementary to other transport modes, she says.

