

Planning/Policy/ Programming

May 2026

Project Title: Which Way Forward?
Learning from Global Informal
Networks to Inform Micro transit
Services in California

Task Number: 4694

Start Date: March 1, 2026

Completion Date: February 28, 2027

Task Manager:

Kevin Spiker
Associate Transportation Planner
Kevin.spiker@dot.ca.gov

DRISI Division Chief:

Prakash Sah, PE
Prakash.Sah@dot.ca.gov



DRISI provides solutions and
knowledge that improves
California's transportation system.

Which Way Forward? Learning from Global Informal Transport Networks to Inform Microtransit Services in California

This study looks at how informal transit systems used around the world—like minibuses, jitneys, and other flexible, on-demand services—can help California improve its own microtransit and shared mobility options. By reviewing examples from other countries and parts of the U.S., and speaking with experts, the project will identify successful practices and common challenges. These insights will help California communities design more affordable, efficient, and sustainable on-demand transportation services that better meet the needs of travelers.

WHAT IS THE NEED?

Demand-responsive services like microtransit, taxis, and transportation network companies (TNCs) are becoming more common in California, but agencies still face big questions about how these services fit into the transportation system. Planners are trying to understand whether microtransit supports or competes with public transit, whether it can operate efficiently and sustainably, how labor and workforce issues should be handled, and what the environmental impacts might be.

While microtransit feels new in the U.S., many countries have used informal, flexible transit—such as minibuses and vans—for decades. These systems often operate without formal schedules or full government oversight but provide valuable lessons about service models, costs, and user needs. This research aims to gather insights from informal and demand-responsive transit in both developing countries and the U.S. to help California design more effective, equitable, and financially sustainable microtransit services.

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

This study builds on earlier work that documented how informal transit—such as minibuses, jitneys, tuk-tuks, and

motorcycle taxis—is widely used across many low- and middle-income countries, as well as in parts of the U.S.. Using that foundation, the research will review international and domestic examples to understand how these informal or semi-formal systems operate and what makes them successful. Through literature reviews, case studies, and expert input, the team will identify lessons that could apply to California, including what it would take to implement similar services here and what opportunities or challenges might arise.

WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

This study aims to understand how informal transit and demand-responsive services operate so California can apply the most useful lessons. It will look at how these services work in practice—the vehicles they use, how riders access them, and the types of trips they serve—and examine how they interact with traditional transit. The research will also explore how these systems are regulated, what protections exist for riders and workers, and what U.S. experiences with jitney-type services can teach California. Ultimately, the study will identify the opportunities and challenges of adapting these models across different California communities.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

This research will help California make better decisions about when and how to use shared, on-demand transit services. By identifying policies and strategies that have worked elsewhere, the study will give the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and local agencies clearer guidance on how demand-responsive options can improve mobility in different types of communities. It will also provide a better understanding of the limitations of these services and where they are most effective, helping the state invest in models that improve access, reduce costs, and support more reliable transportation choices for Californians.

WHAT IS THE PROGRESS TO DATE?

Help a kick of meeting on April 22, 2026. Locations of study were discussed and selected that included 5 locations in Kenya.

IMAGES



Image 1: Photo of Tuk'n transportation