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Operational Efficiency and Service Delivery of State-Owned Enterprises in Nigeria: A Study of Edo City Transport Service, Benin City, Nigeria

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Abstract. State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are government-owned organisations created to provide services that are important for economic growth and social welfare. In Nigeria, SOEs are active in different sectors such as transport, energy, and communication, but many of them face serious problems of poor management and weak funding. The aim of this paper is to examine the operational efficiency and service delivery of state-owned enterprises in Nigeria with a focus on Edo City Transport Service (ECTS), Benin. The study which is anchored on public interest theory, adopts a qualitative research approach. Data were gathered primarily from secondary sources, including published academic journal articles, government policy documents, transport sector reports and relevant books on public administration and transportation management. Findings showed that although ECTS has provided some benefits, such as employment for drivers and easier movement for workers and students, its overall performance is below expectation. Problems such as irregular schedules, high operating costs, old buses, and political interference continue to affect the service. The paper also noted that ECTS's challenges reflect wider problems faced by many SOEs in Nigeria, including poor maintenance culture, corruption, and lack of innovation. The study concludes that ECTS and other SOEs can become more sustainable if they embrace financial transparency, adopt modern management practices, and reduce political influence. It was recommended that ECTS should adopt a more sustainable and transparent financial framework that combines government support with internally generated revenue.

Keywords: Benin, Edo City Transport service, Operational efficiency, Service delivery, state-owned enterprises,

1. Introduction

State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are organisations owned and controlled by the government to provide essential goods and services that are necessary for economic and social development. They exist in many countries around the world and operate in key sectors such as energy, transportation, communication, and finance. SOEs are often created to fill gaps where private businesses may not be willing or able to operate because of high risks or low profits. According to Megginson and Netter (2001), SOEs serve as tools of government intervention to drive development, reduce inequality, and promote access to important services. In Nigeria, SOEs have historically been central to economic planning, with the government using them to build industries, generate employment, and provide social services that the private sector could not adequately deliver (Obadan, 2008).

In the transport sector, SOEs are especially important because mobility is central to both economic productivity and social welfare. Efficient transportation reduces travel time, connects people to opportunities, and boosts trade and development (Olakunle, 2023). In Nigeria, rapid urbanisation has created serious transport challenges such as traffic congestion, rising fuel costs, and limited availability of safe and reliable transport systems. Public transport systems managed by government agencies have been introduced to reduce the dependence on informal and unregulated transport operators such as minibuses and motorcycles. Scholars like Okpala (2021) argue that mass transit systems should be prioritised in Nigerian cities because they provide safer, cheaper, and more organised mobility for citizens.

The Edo City Transport Service (ECTS) was established by the Edo State Government in the year

2000 as part of efforts to provide affordable, safe, and reliable transport services to residents of Benin City and surrounding areas. The agency was also expected to reduce urban congestion, provide employment opportunities, and enhance social welfare by ensuring that even low-income earners could access affordable transport. Like similar initiatives in Lagos and Abuja, ECTS was designed to promote an organised mass transit system where buses follow structured routes and operate at fixed fares, making commuting more predictable and affordable (Okoye, 2023).

However, the performance of many SOEs in Nigeria, including transport services, has been criticised over the years for inefficiency, mismanagement, and corruption. Adewale (2021)/ notes that while SOEs are meant to provide services for the common good, they are often burdened with weak management practices, political interference, and lack of innovation. In the case of ECTS, challenges such as irregular government funding, poor maintenance of buses, and low revenue generation have limited its capacity to function effectively. These issues are not unique to Edo State but reflect wider problems with the management of SOEs in Nigeria's transport sector. For example, studies have shown that public transport systems sometimes suffer from insecurity and vandalism, which further discourage efficiency (Newton, 2022).

Notwithstanding, SOEs like ECTS remain important to the development of Nigeria's cities because they provide a structured alternative to informal transport services. Public transport also has wider social benefits. Research has shown that accessible and affordable transport reduces inequality, improves mobility for vulnerable groups such as students and the elderly, and contributes to public safety when properly managed (Newton, 2022; Jack, 2023). This study therefore seeks to evaluate the performance of ECTS as a state-owned enterprise, examining its role in service delivery, financial sustainability, social contributions, and the challenges it faces.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In an ideal situation, the Edo City Transport Service (ECTS) should serve as a model state-owned enterprise providing affordable, reliable, and efficient public transport to the people of Benin City, with adequate funding, professional management, and accountability ensuring quality service delivery. However, the reality is that despite substantial government investment through state subventions, subsidies, and fleet procurement, ECTS has consistently underperformed. Commuters continue to experience irregular bus schedules, frequent breakdowns, overcrowded vehicles, and long waiting times, while the service has remained a marginal player in the city's mobility system, leaving most residents dependent on informal and unsafe transport operators (Okojie, 2020). Mismanagement lies at the heart of this poor performance; financial resources for maintenance, fuel, and fleet expansion are often misappropriated, weak internal controls and lack of transparent financial reporting have allowed corruption to thrive, and the organisation relies almost exclusively on irregular government bailouts (Akinwale, 2018). Political interference has further undermined professionalism, with leadership positions awarded based on loyalty rather than competence in transport management, resulting in poor strategic decisions and demoralised staff. Unless these deep-rooted problems of mismanagement, political interference, and poor accountability are addressed, ECTS will remain a burden rather than a solution to urban transport challenges in Edo State.

1.2 Research Objectives

The aim of this paper it so examined the operational efficiency and service delivery of state-owned enterprises in Nigeria using Edo City Transport service, Benin as a focal point. Specifically, this study seeks to:

- examine the effects of operational efficiency on service delivery in ECTS and
- To identify the challenges facing the management and operations of ECTS

2. Conceptual Review

2.1 Concept of State-Owned Enterprises

State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are organisations established, owned, and managed fully or partially by the government to provide essential goods and services to the public, particularly in areas where private investors are unwilling to operate due to high costs or strategic national importance (Musacchio & Lazzarini, 2022). According to Obadan (2008), SOEs in Nigeria are designed to drive development, industrialisation, and employment, functioning with a corporate structure to enable efficient service delivery while balancing government responsibility for public welfare and economic growth.

Public Transport Services

Public transport services are organised systems for moving large numbers of people at affordable costs within and between urban and rural areas, including buses, trains, and ferries operating on structured routes with regulated fares (Gwilliam, 2021). In Nigeria, public transport is dominated by informal private operators such as minibuses, tricycles, and motorcycles, which are accessible but poorly regulated and often unsafe. State-owned services like Lagos BRT and Edo City Transport Service were introduced to provide safer, cheaper, and more reliable alternatives, serving as key instruments for managing rapid urbanisation and reducing congestion (Dimitrious, 2023).

Operational Efficiency

Operational efficiency refers to an organisation's ability to use resources finances, personnel, vehicles, and infrastructure in the most cost-effective and productive manner to achieve its goals (Agbi & Adekunle, 2018). In public transport, efficiency is measured by how well the service minimises waste while maximising outputs such as trips and passenger capacity. Efficient operations reduce delays, lower costs, and improve service consistency, while inefficiency appears as idle time, fuel wastage, breakdowns, and poor route planning (Yarimoglu, 2022). Thus, operational efficiency determines whether a state-owned enterprise like ECTS can remain sustainable without endless dependence on public funds.

Service Delivery

Service delivery refers to the process by which an organisation provides its core services in a manner that is accessible, reliable, affordable, and satisfactory to users (Obadan, 2008). In public transport, effective service delivery requires buses to run on time, fares to remain affordable, routes to cover areas where people live and work, and vehicles to be safe and comfortable (Gwilliam, 2021). Poor service delivery, characterised by delays, breakdowns, overcrowding, and high costs, drives passengers away and undermines the purpose of the state-owned enterprise. Therefore, service delivery in this study is defined as the totality of activities through which ECTS meets its mandate of providing safe, affordable, and reliable public transportation, measured by passenger satisfaction, operational efficiency, and social impact.

Edo City Transport Service (ECTS)

Edo City Transport Service (ECTS) is a state-owned public transportation agency established in 2000 by the Edo State Government to provide reliable, affordable, safe, and accessible bus services in Benin City and other parts of Edo State. Its mission is to help residents reach work, school, markets, and other social services while creating employment opportunities and reducing traffic congestion. The agency has undergone several transformations over the years; historically, the "Edo Line" operated efficiently in the 1980s and 1990s but declined from the early 2000s due to neglect and policy inconsistencies, leading to its formal shutdown by 2022. Although the Edo State Transport Authority (ESTA) was established in 2018 to create a modern transport network, it could not fully address the legacy issues of public mass transit (Edo State Government, 2022). A significant turn occurred in September 2023 under Governor Godwin Obaseki's administration with the introduction of a free transport scheme to mitigate fuel subsidy removal hardships, but logistical challenges hindered its sustainability. The current administration of Governor Monday Okpebholo marked a decisive shift in June 2025 with the rebirth of the service as the "New Edo Line," introducing over 100 new air-conditioned buses under a renewed, strategic management team (New Edo Line, 2025). The rebranded ECTS has since expanded its operations to Ekpoma in August 2025, offering convenient and affordable trips to Edo North and Benin City as part of broader efforts to ease transportation burdens following fuel subsidy removal.

Figure 1: *New Edo Line*

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the Stewardship Theory, developed by Davis, Schoorman, and Donaldson (1997) as an alternative to Agency Theory. While Agency Theory assumes managers are self-interested, Stewardship Theory argues that managers are inherently trustworthy and motivated to act in the best interest of the organisation and the public they serve. The theory emphasises collaboration, trust, and collective goals, suggesting that when managers are given autonomy, they will perform as effective stewards of the resources entrusted to them. Applied to the Nigerian context, Stewardship Theory provides a standard for evaluating state-owned transport enterprises like the Edo City Transport Service (ECTS), where the government should appoint competent managers and give them freedom to run the enterprise efficiently. However, the reality in many Nigerian SOEs is that stewardship has often failed due to mismanagement, corruption, and political interference, which have replaced professional stewardship with loyalty-based appointments. This makes Stewardship Theory highly relevant as it provides both a normative framework for evaluating ECTS performance and a roadmap for reform, suggesting that improvement requires appointing competent professionals, giving them operational autonomy, providing consistent funding, and holding them accountable through transparent performance indicators.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research method to explore governance and service delivery in state-owned enterprises, allowing for an in-depth understanding of patterns and challenges. Data were gathered from secondary sources, including academic journals, government policy documents, transport sector reports, and relevant books. The research employed a desk review technique where existing literature and documentary evidence were critically analysed and interpreted. Reports from the Edo State Government, National Bureau of Statistics, and international development organisations were reviewed to establish context and performance indicators, enabling the study to identify themes and draw conclusions on the strengths, weaknesses, and contributions of the Edo City Transport Service to employment, mobility, and social development in Benin City.

Operational Efficiency of ECTS

Operational efficiency, defined as the optimal utilisation of buses, fuel, drivers, and finances to deliver cost-effective transport services, is critical to ECTS's performance (Agbi & Adekunle, 2018; Yarimoglu, 2022). However, analysis reveals that ECTS operates significantly below recommended efficiency benchmarks. Despite the introduction of over 100 new buses in mid-2025, Benin City's population of approximately 1.8 million yields a ratio of one bus per 18,000 residents, substantially below the recommended benchmark of one bus per 10,000 residents for efficient urban coverage (Ali, 2020; Macrotrends, 2025; New Edo Line, 2025). This gap reflects broader challenges in Nigerian state-owned enterprises, where weak maintenance culture, political interference, and lack of accountability consistently undermine operational performance (Adewale, 2021). The low fleet-to-population ratio leads to overcapacity utilisation, accelerated vehicle wear, and reduced maintenance effectiveness, all of which lower operational efficiency (World Bank, 2021).

While the New Edo Line has introduced real-time fleet tracking and fixed departure schedules to address scheduling inefficiencies, historical data showed irregular timetables and frequent mechanical failures that led to inefficient bus use some buses sat idle while others were overcrowded (New Edo Line, 2025). These innovations have been shown in other developing cities to reduce average service delays by up to 18% and increase passenger throughput by 25% (International Journal of Transport Economics, 2022). A Lagos study found that consistent fleet monitoring and timely maintenance reduced breakdown incidents by 30% and directly improved fleet utilisation (Okonkwo & Eze, 2023). However, operational reliability depends on sustained investment in preventive maintenance, adequate spare parts inventory, and continuous driver training; without these, the new fleet risks accelerated wear and reduced effectiveness.

Financial and coverage efficiency are also critical dimensions of operational performance. ECTS has historically depended heavily on government subventions, which are often irregular and insufficient (Akinwale, 2018). A cost-efficiency study in Lagos found that implementing digital ticketing reduced fare leakages by 18% and improved cost recovery by 22% (Ajani & Aluko, 2022). The New Edo Line has emphasised fare stabilisation through such reforms, but sustained financial efficiency depends on minimising idle time, reducing fuel wastage, and maintaining vehicle uptime (New Edo Line, 2025). Coverage efficiency has improved with the expansion of inter-city routes such as Benin-Lagos and Benin-Ekpoma, as well as the new Obakhavhaye Central Park terminal (Bendel Mirror, 2025). However, route diversification requires proportional investments in maintenance facilities and scheduling management; without such support, expansion can strain resources and lower overall efficiency (World Bank, 2021). Thus, while recent innovations signal progress, ECTS's operational efficiency remains constrained by systemic issues of funding, maintenance, and capacity that mirror broader challenges in Nigeria's state-owned transport enterprises.

Service Delivery of ECTS

Service delivery, defined as the quality, reliability, and accessibility of transport services from the passenger's perspective, is essential to ECTS's public mandate (Gwilliam, 2021). Historically, irregular schedules, insufficient buses, frequent breakdowns, and overcrowding drove passengers back to informal transport operators (Okojie, 2020). The rebranded New Edo Line has introduced real-time fleet tracking, fixed departure schedules, and digital driver rostering to improve service reliability and punctuality, which research identifies as the strongest predictors of commuter loyalty (Rahman et al., 2022). A study in Lagos found that consistent fleet monitoring and timely maintenance reduced breakdown incidents by 30% and improved commuter satisfaction by 20% (Okonkwo & Eze, 2023). However, maintaining punctuality requires ongoing investment in preventive maintenance and driver discipline; without consistent on-time performance, passengers will continue to avoid the service, defeating its public purpose.

Passenger comfort and safety are also central to service delivery. The old ECTS fleet was notorious for overcrowding, poor ventilation, and uncomfortable seating, resulting in low service ratings and declining public confidence. In contrast, the New Edo Line has introduced air-conditioned buses, CCTV surveillance, ergonomic seating, and trained drivers (New Edo Line, 2025). Comparative data from Abuja and Nairobi indicate that improved seating and air-conditioning increased rider satisfaction scores by up to 40% and retention rates by 25% (ScienceDirect, 2023). Customer surveys in Lagos and Port Harcourt revealed that digital ticketing and on-board safety systems raised passenger trust by 33% (Okafor & Ajayi, 2022). Safety also encompasses protection from crime and accidents; Newton (2022) noted that well-managed public transport reduces the perception of insecurity, encouraging more people, especially women and the elderly, to use the service. However, maintaining these standards requires consistent investment and monitoring.

Affordability, accessibility, and passenger trust are fundamental to effective service delivery. Low-income commuters represent over 60% of public bus users, and fare increases disproportionately affect them (NBS, 2021). The New Edo Line has emphasised fare stabilisation through fuel-efficient buses and cashless payment systems, which reduced fare leakages in Lagos (Ajani & Aluko, 2022). Accessibility has improved with inter-city routes such as Benin-Ekpoma serving students and workers in Edo North, though peripheral communities often remain underserved (Ehrlich & Gqola, 2022; New Edo Line, 2025). Passenger satisfaction and trust, the ultimate measures of service delivery, are undermined when complaints about rude staff, ignored grievances, or perceived corruption persist (Ali, 2020; Wantara & Irawati, 2021). The New Edo Line has introduced driver training and digital feedback channels, but consistency is key; repeat ridership increases when passengers feel their concerns are heard (Okafor & Ajayi, 2022). Therefore, ECTS must establish transparent complaint resolution mechanisms, regularly survey passengers, and use results to adjust operations to fulfil its mandate as a state-owned enterprise serving the public interest.

Challenges Facing ECTS

One of the biggest challenges facing ECTS is inadequate and inconsistent funding. As a state-owned enterprise, the service relies heavily on government subventions, which are often irregular and insufficient to cover rising operational costs such as fuel, spare parts, and staff salaries. Without stable funding, the agency struggles to maintain its buses or expand its routes. Bubalo, Rajsman, and Kukec (2020), in their study of Croatian public transport, noted that insufficient financial resources often lead to reduced service quality and declining passenger demand. Political interference is another recurring challenge that undermines ECTS's effectiveness, as leadership positions are often filled based on political loyalty rather than professional competence, weakening accountability and disrupting long-term planning (Yarimoglu, 2022). Corruption and weak financial management practices also pose significant challenges; funds meant for maintenance and operations are sometimes mismanaged, leading to inefficiency and frequent breakdowns. Across many state-owned enterprises in Nigeria, poor financial accountability reduces sustainability, and when institutions lack transparency, customer satisfaction and trust are undermined (Wantara & Irawati, 2021). In ECTS, mismanagement has contributed to low passenger confidence, further reducing revenue generation.

Poor maintenance culture also poses a serious challenge. The maintenance of buses is crucial for safety, reliability, and fleet longevity, yet ECTS has suffered from a weak maintenance culture with many buses frequently grounded due to lack of spare parts and delayed repairs. Bubalo et al. (2020) observed that in public transport systems, poor maintenance not only increases operating costs but also discourages passenger patronage; in Benin City, commuters often complain about delays and service disruptions caused by breakdowns, eroding confidence in the service. Furthermore, ECTS faces the challenge of limited innovation and modernisation. While modern transport systems globally are adopting technology such as e-ticketing, GPS tracking, and environmentally friendly buses, ECTS still operates largely with outdated practices. Yarimoglu (2022) highlighted that service quality models stress innovation as a key factor in improving customer satisfaction and competitiveness, while Wantara and Irawati (2021) linked innovation to stronger customer retention. Without embracing innovation, ECTS risks being left behind, unable to attract younger commuters or adapt to the evolving demands of urban mobility.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the Edo City Transport Service (ECTS) has made only modest contributions to mobility, accessibility, and job creation in Benin City, despite its mandate to provide affordable and reliable transport. While it has reduced commuting stress for students, civil servants, and traders, and provided employment for drivers and maintenance staff, its performance has been constrained by poor funding, inadequate fleet size, weak maintenance culture, political interference, corruption, and lack of innovation. These challenges have reduced service quality, discouraged passenger loyalty, and limited ECTS's expansion capacity. Beyond ECTS, the study reflects broader issues facing Nigeria's State-Owned Enterprises, where political interference, corruption, and weak financial management undermine sustainability. For ECTS to survive, reforms focused on financial accountability, innovation, and professional management free from political influence are essential, underscoring the need for comprehensive SOE reforms to support economic growth and social welfare.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, the following recommendations are made:

To overcome the persistent issue of inadequate funding, ECTS should adopt a more sustainable and transparent financial framework that combines government support with internally generated revenue. Rather than depending solely on irregular state subventions, the agency can introduce public-private partnerships (PPPs) to attract private investment for fleet expansion, maintenance, and technology upgrades.

Reducing political interference is critical for improving managerial consistency and operational effectiveness. ECTS should be restructured to operate with greater institutional autonomy, allowing professional managers to make decisions based on performance indicators rather than political influence.

To address the issues of poor maintenance culture and lack of modernization, ECTS should establish a preventive maintenance policy supported by real-time monitoring tools and modern workshop facilities.

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