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THE ROLE OF THE ROAD MOTOR SERVICES IN THE RURAL ROAD TRANSPORT SECTOR IN ZIMBABWE

by

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INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe and its fellow members of SADCC have still to resolve many problems within the transport sector of their economies, and plans to meet these deficiencies have been prepared at national, regional and local levels. Within the rural areas of Zimbabwe the need for the improvement of roads and road transport is just one component of a wider planning programme which also embraces agriculture, housing, education and social welfare, and the specific difficulties associated with local transport services and levels of accessibility are inter-related with these broader development issues. In particular the Zimbabwean government has the related objectives of (a) securing a more equitable distribution of land, with the allocation of land now within the large-scale commercial farming sector to African cultivators and (b) encouraging and facilitating a much greater level of participation by these small-scale communal farmers in the commercial agricultural sector (Zinyama, 1986). The eventual achievement of these aims will involve some changes in the existing distribution of the rural population and an increasing demand for improved transport facilities for the marketing of produce from these communal areas.

A recent survey of southern Africa identifies wide variations between individual countries in respect of road density and the proportion of national networks that are sealed or tarred, and reviews the case for road improvements as an essential preliminary to the promotion of economic activity and in particular to the gradual transformation of subsistence economies to ones actively concerned with commercial agriculture (Addus, 1989). Such road upgrading plans in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in southern Africa are however only one component of the comprehensive programmes which are necessary to secure these changes within rural economies. The road transport sector also requires substantial investment and re-organisation and this paper examines the characteristics of one specific rural transport service in Zimbabwe in an attempt to identify its potential role as an agent of change in agricultural areas.

During the period between 1900 and 1930 railway transport played a leading role in promoting mining and agricultural growth in Zimbabwe, but

areas beyond the range of rail depots and terminals had to rely on animal cartage and often encountered difficulties in marketing crops and securing supplies for farms and mining camps (Croxtton, 1982). In South Africa the railways had introduced a service of motor trucks in order to extend its influence in the more remote areas (Pirie, 1985) and in June 1927 the Rhodesian Railways experimented with a similar venture in Mashonaland between Chinhoyi, on the Harare-Lions Den branch railway, and the Mwami mica mine, a distance of 114 kms. The mine had previously been supplied by ox-wagon but the substitution of the railway's two-tonne motor truck operated to a timetable was a success in meeting the requirements of the mine and of local commercial farmers. Other regular services were introduced in the same year in the Umboe valley and between Mutare and Chipinge in Manicaland, with provision for vehicles to carry a limited number of passengers (Beira and Mashonaland and Rhodesia Railways, 1928).

Although revenue from what became known as the Road Motor Services (RMS) fluctuated in this early period, and several routes were modified or abandoned through lack of sufficient traffic, the innovation survived and a steady expansion of the RMS network took place, with routes radiating out from the more important railway depots (Rhodesia Railways Historical Committee, 1977). The RMS have continued to operate during the period of independence as part of the National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ) and have assumed a new significance, being identified in several government-commissioned reports as a possible agency for rural transport improvement in areas other than those commercial farming districts where services are currently concentrated. Between 1927 and the early 1930s information in the annual reports of the Rhodesian Railways and of the chief engineer for roads (Southern Rhodesia, 1928-1933) related to the traffic and the financial situation of individual RMS routes but current data at this level are not available for public inspection and the NRZ annual reports and the Road Motor Services Official Timetables and Tariffs Books only provide information on route closures and amendments (Road Motor Services, 1989).

RMS IN THE PERIOD 1980-90

The RMS occupy an anomalous position within Zimbabwe's transport sector, being controlled and operated by the NRZ but being in practice a part of the road haulage industry. There is also an important distinction between the status of the RMS, like its parent body the NRZ, as a state-subsidised undertaking, and that of all other road freight companies which are within the private sector although often drawing much of their revenue from government

haulage contracts. Furthermore the RMS only carries about 5% of all road freight traffic in Zimbabwe, the majority being handled by (i) regular inter-urban trunk services operated by major companies such as Swift and (ii) over 200 small and localised trucking undertakings (Swedish International Development Authority, 1985).

In addition to the scheduled services which date from the formation of the company the RMS also provide what are termed 'special services' for livestock transport and the collection of maize and other crops, mainly but not exclusively from the commercial farming areas. These special services are now the only profitable part of RMS operations although the length of the routes over which they are provided is less than that of the loss-making timetabled network (Table 1). Freight carried on scheduled services is normally charged on a scale according to distance but with supplementary rates for certain commodities such as agricultural machinery, carts, motor vehicles and some perishable products (Road Motor Services, 1989). The special services are provided by the RMS on a contract basis for livestock and crops and are thus comparable with the private hauliers with whom they compete for traffic.

Out of a total RMS income in 1989 of Z\$14.138 million only Z\$1.567 million was derived from the scheduled services, and operating losses on these routes were largely responsible for the overall annual deficit recorded by the RMS for most years during the 1970s and 1980s (National Railways of Zimbabwe, 1989). This shortfall rose from Z\$549 000 in 1978 to Z\$1.02 million in 1986 but the financial situation improved in the late 1980s and an overall profit of Z\$1.861 million was made in 1989. This was due mainly to the surplus on contract services but the deficit on the scheduled haulage operations has decreased steadily since 1985, due partly to rises in some tariffs and partly to curtailment or suspension of some routes. The scheduled services deficit, expressed in terms of dollars per route kilometre, fluctuated between 1980 and 1985, with a minimum level of Z\$76/km in 1981 but since 1985 it has fallen steadily (Table 1).

Maize is the principal RMS traffic, carried mainly on contract to the Grain Marketing Board, but the second-ranked category of 'miscellaneous goods' underlines the continuing importance of the scheduled services for carrying an assortment of goods in small loads which are required on a regular or occasional basis by commercial farmers and mining enterprises (Table 2). It is not possible from the available data to identify the proportion of each commodity carried by the scheduled and contract services but the mail and parcels traffic is still considered to be an important source of revenue for the timetabled operations (Road Motor Services, 1989).

TABLE 1:
RMS ROUTES, TRAFFIC AND FINANCIAL RESULTS, 1980-90

	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
Length of scheduled routes (kms)	5871	6453	6181	6196	6416	6308	5969	6193	6319	6166	6494
Length of unscheduled routes (kms)	1157	919	834	834	834	834	834	834	834	818	839
Total RMS freight traffic (000s tonnes)	480	516	475	537	496	422	490	623	742	646	617
Deficit on scheduled services (Z\$000s)	801	493	579	614	1015	1352	1348	1237	1035	929	974
Deficit/km of scheduled routes (Z\$)	136	76	94	99	158	214	225	200	164	151	150
Total RMS surplus (+) or deficit (-) (Z\$000s)	-345	+26	+324	-518	-1193	-1647	-1028	+452	+1319	+1861	+1311

Source: NRZ Annual Reports, 1980-1990

Journey frequency on scheduled routes is largely determined by the levels of available traffic and the various alterations made by the traffic department in the numbers of trips per week or in the length of route in response to fluctuations in demand at various places on the network. Each timetabled truck begins from an RMS depot, usually on the railway, and delivers or collects goods from designated halts along its route, customers being responsible for transporting goods to or from these halts in the same way as they would if making use of railway sidings. In most cases the return trip is also operated to a timetable, but where traffic is light or subject to fluctuations in volume adjustments are made to the schedule. In the RMS timetable certain routes, especially in Masvingo and Matabeleland South provinces, are run 'in accordance with traffic justification' and in practice many of these routes are operated so infrequently that they have more of the character of a special contract trip rather than that of a regularly-scheduled journey (Road Motor Services, 1989). Elsewhere, as in the Chipinge district for example, the functions of timetabled and un-scheduled services can be

TABLE 2:
PRINCIPAL COMMODITIES CARRIED BY ALL RMS
SERVICES 1988
 (tonnes)

Maize*	315 530	Mails	
Miscellaneous goods	129 527	(PTC contract)	330 000
Wheat*	76 292	Parcels traffic	337 000
Fertiliser*	44 802		
Raw seed cotton*	31 968		
Soya beans*	21 432		
Lithium ore*	19 330		
Stock feeds*	17 313		
Cement*	15 680		
Graphite*	11 957		
Coffee	9 480		
All other freight	47 820		
TOTAL FREIGHT	741 131		
TOTAL LIVESTOCK	22 423 950		

* Commodities mainly carried on special contract services.

Source: calculated by author from data supplied by RMS Headquarters, Bulawayo.

combined, with the same vehicle travelling outwards from its depot to a timetable but returning with a contract load from a commercial farm or tea and coffee from marketing board sub-depots. In Mashonaland, where the RMS were pioneered, many services still operate on a daily basis but elsewhere the frequency is lower (Figure 1). Since 1980 the total length of the scheduled routes has fluctuated between a minimum of 5 871 km in 1980 and a maximum of 6 453 km in 1981, but there has been a consistent fall in the length of the unscheduled network, although this is the profitable section of the enterprise (Table 1). The number of vehicles employed on scheduled services had also been reduced to 86 by 1989, partly in response to falling traffic but also as a result of the shortage of spare parts and tyres which limited the percentage availability of the fleet (Financial Gazette, 1989; National Railways of Zimbabwe, 1989). This problem also affects the private sector of the road haulage industry and seriously curtails its ability to cope with traffic during the peak harvesting season (Cruttenden, 1989a, 1989b).

THE DISTRIBUTION OF RMS SERVICES

The initial establishment of the RMS as an extension of railway carrying facilities in commercial farming areas has led to a concentration

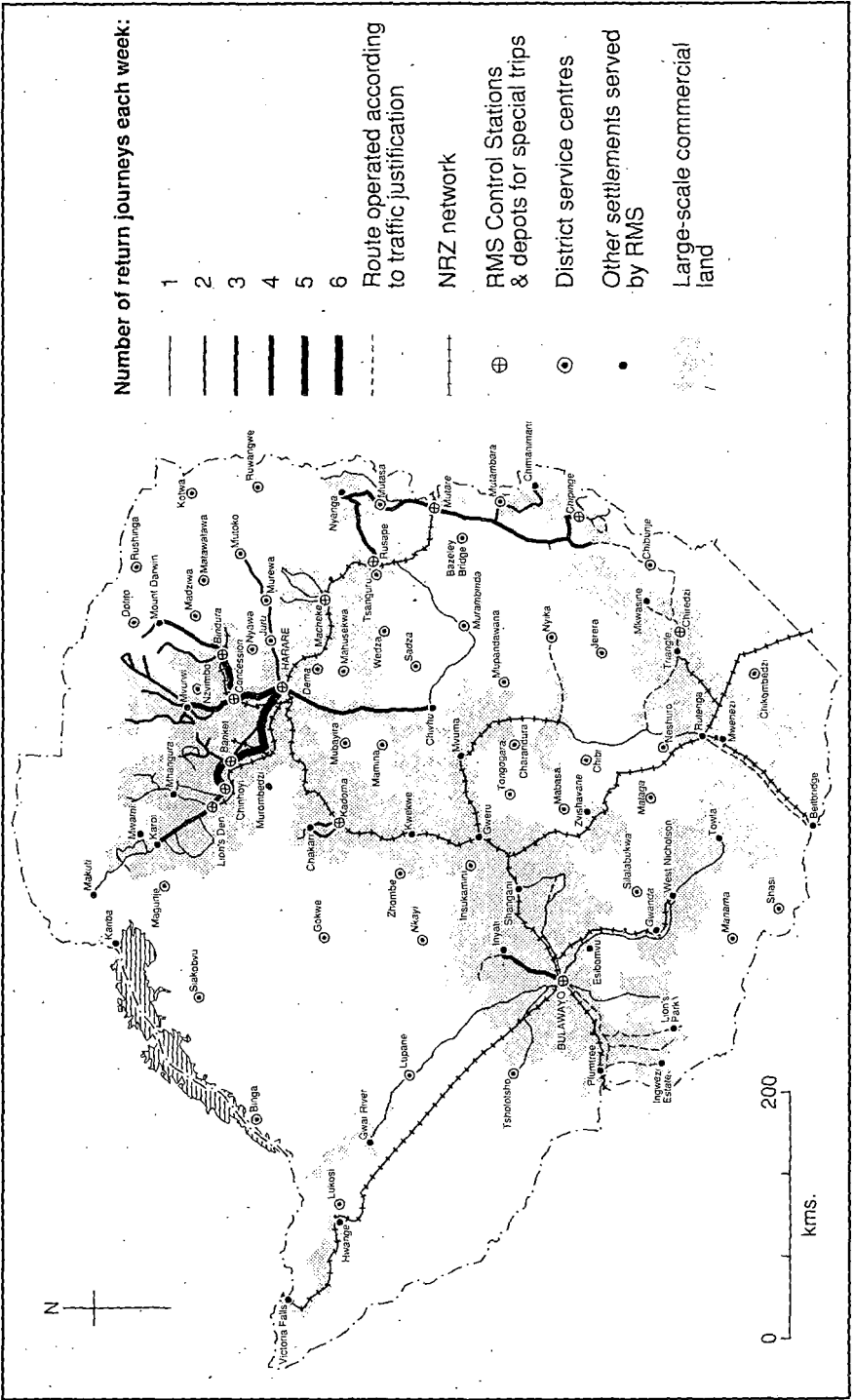


Figure 1: Routes operated and centres served by the RMS

of its activities in Mashonaland, in the Eastern Highlands and Save valley and in districts of Matabeleland around Bulawayo (Figure 1). Scheduled routes radiate out from the railway depots at Harare, Bindura, Banket, Chinhoyi, Macheke and Bulawayo, with a series of longer distance routes between Harare, Chivhu and Rusape; Nyanga, Mutare and the Save valley; Masvingo, Rutenga and Beitbridge; and Bulawayo, West Nicholson and Beitbridge. Several of these longer routes only carry intermittent services and are dependent upon traffic which can often be of a sporadic nature.

The RMS are able to provide contract haulage for livestock and other freight from their main depots at agreed rates but, like the scheduled services, these special trips are mainly confined to areas of commercial agriculture. Much of the haulage is associated with the seasonal demand for transport of maize, seed cotton, soya beans and wheat to marketing board depots.

THE RMS AND PLANS FOR IMPROVED TRANSPORTATION IN RURAL AREAS

Since 1980 the RMS branch of the NRZ, like its parent organisation, has had to contend with severe problems in respect of traffic fluctuations and operational difficulties caused by inadequate funding for vehicles and other equipment, and revenue has not always been sufficient to meet costs. However, the importance of both the NRZ and the RMS within the national and local economies of Zimbabwe has been recognised by the government through its declared policy of keeping many of the rail and RMS road rates charged to customers below economic levels and of making good the consequent shortfall in revenue with annual subsidies. There is a tradition of supporting the unprofitable routes of the RMS, with financial assistance from the Beit Trustees and the colonial government in the 1930s and thereafter subsidies from the Rhodesian Railways and their successors. Directions for the future of the RMS have been proposed by several recent reports on Zimbabwe's transport sector but the development of the undertaking must really be considered in the broader context of the government's policy of securing a greater measure of social equity within the nation, particularly in respect of the communal agricultural areas. District planning programmes, road building and upgrading schemes and proposals for improved local transport services are seen as some of the ways of implementing this policy and it is possible that the existing pattern of RMS services could be modified and extended to contribute to the process of rural development.

The potential of the RMS for aiding growth in the more remote districts of Zimbabwe was first identified in the colonial period, and in 1962 the Advisory Committee on the Development of Economic Resources placed a high priority upon expenditure on transport as a means of extending the

commercial economy into areas isolated from both internal and export markets. In particular the RMS was commended for its role in stimulating and accelerating 'all kinds of social and economic activity in districts relatively remote from the railway' (Phillips, 1962 p.375). This was at a time when the RMS as a whole was carrying only 490 000 tonnes annually, although the scheduled route network was larger than in the late 1980s.

In 1969 the Transportation Commission reported on its investigations into the overall question of competition between road and rail transport (Graylin, 1969). Its specific terms of reference were to recommend any necessary changes in the then current regulations governing freight haulage in order to secure road-rail coordination, to review the level of protection enjoyed by the Rhodesia Railways against road competition and to determine whether the RMS should continue to occupy a privileged position within the road freight haulage sector in respect of its flexibility of operations. The freedom of movement accorded to the RMS dates from its introduction by the railways into areas where a perceived need for motor transport was not already being met by the few private hauliers then in existence or into districts where these hauliers could not satisfy local requirements. With the expansion of the road haulage industry the private truck operators became subjected to government control through the issue of road service permits which were required for specific routes, for vehicles and for freight charges. In contrast the RMS remained exempt from these controls, being regarded as an extension of railway services rather than as a road transport undertaking. This unrestricted movement enjoyed by the RMS often enabled their vehicles to secure contracts for lucrative traffic in areas where private hauliers were restricted from competing by the rigidity of the permit system. Allegations of unfair competition were often levelled against the contract services of the RMS, although it could be argued that the scope which these had for bidding for contracts was partial compensation for the losses incurred on the scheduled services, which continued to serve areas of low traffic density to which very few private operators would have been attracted. In effect, as noted by the commission in its report, the RMS contract services generated profits which compensated for the losses incurred on many of the scheduled services.

Having considered this situation the Graylin Commission recommended that 'the RMS should continue in their present form, enjoying their present privileges. They have an important role to play in providing scheduled services, perhaps even on an expanded scale in the future. We are thinking here particularly of the African areas which have practically no goods transport services operating at the present time' (Graylin, 1969, p.29). This report from the colonial period is therefore of particular relevance to the

present debate on transport policy, since it not only, like its predecessor the 1962 Advisory Committee, appreciated the importance of the RMS as a carrier in districts where few other hauliers ventured but also forecast its future expansion into other rural areas of transport deficiency.

During the first year of independence the government published its policy statement 'Growth with Equity' which set out its chief objectives as a preliminary to the first national development plan (Republic of Zimbabwe, 1981). Investment in the rural areas was seen as an absolute priority for the national economy and the improvement of transport facilities in these areas was also identified as a vital objective. Subsequent reports from post-independence enquiries have also expressed views similar to those of their colonial predecessors in respect of the significance of RMS services as agents of rural development. The National Transport Study (Swedish International Development Authority, 1985), first published in provisional form in 1985 but subsequently receiving government acceptance, considered the operations of the RMS as part of its examination of the NRZ and concluded that the undertaking was in a strong position to contribute to the expansion of the road transport sector in Zimbabwe. It was recommended that the RMS should remain as a state organisation but removed from NRZ control and established as a separate enterprise.

Many of the provisional proposals of the NTS were incorporated into the First National Development Plan of 1986 (Republic of Zimbabwe, 1986). The section on transport planning considered the problems of Zimbabwe's road haulage industry and stated the case for the formation of a state-owned National Transport Corporation, which would include the RMS as the nucleus. A network of state-operated rural road haulage services, supported where necessary, like the RMS, by subsidy, would undoubtedly make a valuable contribution towards economic growth in the communal areas. However, if the RMS itself were to fulfil this role, its existing structure would need to be substantially altered if the network were to be extended into African farming districts. In particular the existing fleet of trucks and trailers is not suitable for the transport of the many small and assorted loads that would be brought to the RMS roadside halts by communal farmers. Vehicles used on the existing routes have capacities of up to 15 tonnes but the average load carried over many routes is often less than 5 tonnes, making the operation of such trucks uneconomic (Swedish International Development Authority, 1985).

The normal commercial response to this situation would be to substitute smaller vehicles or possibly withdraw the service in its present form. But the first alternative would be difficult for the RMS given the difficulties in obtaining foreign currency for the purchase of more suitable trucks. Where

RMS management considers that low traffic levels no longer justify a regular service, as in parts of Matabeleland and Manicaland, ministerial permission is required for its curtailment or withdrawal. Several applications were made during the 1980s but permission was generally withheld and the RMS was obliged to continue to operate many uneconomic routes. Increases in haulage tariffs were also sought by the RMS in the mid-1980s in an attempt to stem the rising deficit but again ministerial permission was not always forthcoming (Road Motor Services, 1989).

These difficulties experienced by the RMS in maintaining its network of scheduled routes in the face of increasing losses were investigated by the Smith Committee of Enquiry into Parastatals (Smith, 1987). Under the provisions of the National Railways of Zimbabwe Act of 1979 the railways and the RMS must provide an efficient system of public transport of goods and passengers where this is considered necessary or desirable. The Act also requires the government to meet any annual shortfall in NRZ income and, since 1971 when a deficit was first recorded, the state has met the railway's losses with annual subsidies (Turton, 1988). In addition, Section 23 of the Act stipulates that the appropriate minister can direct the NRZ to work 'in the national interest', which in the case of the railways and the RMS implies that earning a profit on their operations need not necessarily be the primary concern. These ministerial powers were invoked in 1986, when the Secretary for Transport asked the NRZ management to provide proposals for organising road passenger and freight services in rural areas not currently covered by RMS timetabled routes, a request which was directly related to the National Development Plan's recommendations on this subject.

The NRZ response recommended that many of the existing RMS routes could be extended and that a framework of entirely new routes linking district service centres and growth points with principal towns should be established, at a total cost of Z\$12.48 million (1986 figures) for vehicles and eight additional depots. The Smith Committee were not impressed with this report, describing it as 'superficial' and lacking the proper level of market research into the amount of traffic that might be produced along any of the projected new routes. In particular the responses of individual district councils to the NRZ enquiries were not supported by proper estimates of traffic volumes. The NRZ was asked to include passenger traffic within its enquiry but no firm estimates of the number of buses required were submitted because of a lack of adequate information on demand. Despite the shortcomings and limitations of this NRZ report it is significant as an illustration of how a state-owned transport undertaking could become involved in the process of rural economic growth, and the Smith Committee envisaged an important future role for the RMS provided that certain

safeguards were observed which would enable it to compete effectively within the road haulage industry as a whole. The principal recommendations were (i) that properly conducted feasibility studies into traffic potential should precede any extension of the present network of scheduled services, (ii) that RMS should have the first option on any haulage contracts offered by government ministries and parastatals, with the private sector being invited to tender only if the RMS was unable to provide an adequate service, (iii) that all new applications for private road haulage permits should be seen by the RMS, and (iv) that the existing pattern of scheduled services should be examined to identify areas where economies in operation could be secured (Smith, 1987).

Many of the proposals made earlier by the National Transport Study and the First Five-Year National Development Plan for the co-ordination of transport facilities were also endorsed by the Smith Committee, which emphasised the need for an integrated transport policy within Zimbabwe. Its final conclusions on the RMS however did not entirely support earlier official views that it should provide a subsidised public service, the Smith report recommending instead that uneconomic routes should be discontinued and that freight rates be increased to secure profits wherever possible.

Since the RMS is still operated as a part of the NRZ system any policy decisions made by the NRZ must be considered in the context of the future of the RMS services. In the late 1980s the NRZ commissioned consultants to (i) review the railways' procedures for identifying investment proposals, (ii) prepare proposals for different types of NRZ projects specifying the type of technical, operating and economic data that would be required and (iii) identify sources of data for use in the evaluation of various projects involving the NRZ (RITES, 1989). The bulk of the report related to projected rail traffic levels, the need for more efficient utilisation of rolling stock and to improve operational procedures in railway yards and workshops, but there was also a recommendation that a study of the RMS be made in order to identify improved methods of operating its various services. This could lead to the attraction of more traffic, of which some could then be transferred to the railway network as part of the attempts made by the NRZ to recapture some of the freight that has been lost to road haulage.

The special contract services of the RMS can also be seen as providing a public transport facility in certain respects. Collection of maize and cotton from local depots on behalf of the marketing boards is carried out on contract but private road hauliers are not always willing to tender for this traffic, particularly when it originates in the communal areas. The amounts of grain to be transported are often insufficient to attract these hauliers unless an empty or part-empty truck returning from a delivery happens to be in the

vicinity of the collection point. Only the small-scale truck owners are usually involved, the larger inter-urban haulage contractors being able to secure sufficient business from their long-distance traffic (Grain Marketing Board, 1989; personal communication, 1991). One significant factor is that the access roads to grain depots in the communal areas are often poorly surfaced and are a deterrent to private truck owners, since the costs of repairing a damaged vehicle can exceed the slender profit margins made on a grain haulage contract. In circumstances where private transport is unavailable the RMS, with its statutory obligations to meet demands for freight carriage, is called in to collect the grain, making an essential contribution to the marketing system of these communal agricultural economies. Similar problems can exist in the disposal of other farm crops but it is in the transport of maize that the RMS can provide the most valuable contribution at harvest time.

The obstacles presented by inadequate transport facilities to the expansion of commercial farming in the communal areas have been discussed in many studies of the Zimbabwean rural economy (Blackie, 1987; Ministry of Finance, 1986; Mongula, 1987; Mumbengegwi, 1986; Smith, 1989). In addition to the needs of the communal farmer, the encouragement of small-scale industrial and business enterprises and the associated expansion of rural growth points can only proceed if an acceptable level of transport to the large urban markets is assured (Wekwete, 1987).

The provincial development plans issued in the 1980s also provide details at the district level of the deficiencies in both road conditions and local passenger and freight services. In Mashonaland West, for example, bus operators were reported as threatening to withdraw services because of poor roads in the Karoi district and in Kariba poor access to grain depots is a serious problem (Provincial Development Committee, 1986b). In Mashonaland Central attention is focused upon the Mount Darwin area, where increasing commercial output from the Kandeya communal lands is hindered by the inadequate roads (Provincial Development Committee, 1986a). An ambitious programme of road upgrading at the district level is being carried out but there is a need for an expansion of local transport services to take advantage of the reduced vehicle operating costs that these improved roads can offer. In particular, any extension of the RMS operations will depend upon the progress made in improving surfaces and bridges to accept the axle weights of the trucks.

To date there has been little progress in evaluating or implementing the proposals made in the various reports relating to the potential contribution of the RMS to rural transport improvements. The importance of the existing services is recognised through the continuation of the state subsidy to meet

operational losses but no significant expansion of scheduled routes beyond the traditional areas of commercial farming has taken place (Figure 1). RMS operations have traditionally been centred upon railway depots but many parts of rural Zimbabwe in urgent need of local transport are remote from the NRZ system. A basic reappraisal of current operating practices would be required if the RMS facilities are to be introduced to these more isolated areas where routes would radiate out from district service centres rather than from railway depots.

The Smith report stressed the inadvisability of establishing new RMS routes without an appraisal of the detailed transport needs of the areas concerned and the costs of operating the necessary services, and such a feasibility study would in itself represent a large investment. It would be unrealistic to place the responsibility for organising comprehensive transport facilities in rural areas upon the small-scale private goods carriers and such operators would probably be unable to supply the passenger facilities that the government considers are required in some remote districts. The RMS however has had extensive experience of running combined goods and passenger-carrying vehicles (up to 1982) and could therefore reintroduce such services if required.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the potential of the RMS as a means of stimulating growth in the communal areas has been recognised, it is important not to overstate the case for this type of freight transport facility. Surveys of rural movement patterns in many parts of Africa indicate that farm-to-market or farm-to-collection depot journeys are a minority activity and that most daily trips are associated with other household needs and involve only small loads and distances which would not normally require motorised transport or sealed roads (Barwell *et al.*, 1985). Thus, the upgrading of roads and the provision of trucks for crop marketing are in themselves only two components of a process of rural development which also requires a supporting financial and administrative structure (Addus, 1989; Mwase, 1989).

In its present form the scheduled services network of the RMS is unsuited to meeting the needs of the communal areas. The rigid nature of its route structure and timetabling, the unnecessarily large capacity of most of its trucks and its railway-oriented organisation would all require substantial modifications before the RMS could be introduced into other parts of Zimbabwe. Fundamental policy issues such as the extent to which the RMS had autonomy within the road transport industry, the role of the RMS in any national transport undertaking which may be established and the level of state subsidy which would be available all need to be resolved. Careful co-

ordination of local road improvement schemes, the evaluation of transport demand within the community and the provision of vehicles more suited to the varying needs of the rural population would also be necessary. Provided that these various requirements can be met, the RMS could make a valuable contribution to Zimbabwe's rural economy, carrying its tradition of public service first established in the colonial period into the era of independence.

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