



Global road safety in focus

## Uganda motorbike deaths: concerns grow over silent killers

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**Amy Fallon in Kampala**

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**T**hey have been dubbed Uganda's silent killers. *Boda-bodas*, the country's ubiquitous motorbike taxis, snake through gridlocked traffic, navigate potholed roads and provide much-needed employment for young people. They are also maiming and killing thousands every year, monopolising hospital budgets and wiping out livelihoods.

Since they appeared on the streets of Uganda in the 1960s, the number of *boda-bodas* has swelled. One recent news report estimated there were more than 300,000 bikes operating in the capital, Kampala.

The number of motorbike accidents has increased exponentially. According to the Injury Control Centre, there are up to 20 *boda*-related cases at Mulago National Referral

hospital in Kampala every day.

The strain on the country's limited health budget is growing. According to a report by Makerere University College of Health Sciences and the department of orthopedics at Mulago, [about 40% of trauma cases at the hospital are from boda-boda accidents](#) (pdf). The treatment of injured passengers and pedestrians accounts for almost two-thirds of the hospital's annual surgery budget.

Dr Michael Edgar Muhumuza, head of Mulago's neurosurgery unit, believes the *boda-bodas* are deathtraps. "These are young people, the youth of tomorrow," he says as he examines x-rays. "It's a big problem [for] this nation. The last two, three years the number of these accidents has become much greater. It's now very bad."

As well as those who are injured or die in accidents, Muhumuza is seeing an increasing number of riders who have been beaten and left for dead after being robbed of their vehicles.

▲ Politicians have expressed concern over the growing number of fatalities on Uganda's roads. Photograph: Reuters

While *boda-bodas* are helping to reduce youth unemployment – one recent study estimated that **62% of young people in Uganda are jobless** – the impact of a serious injury can prove catastrophic for riders and their families.

Ali Niwamanya, 25, a *boda-boda* driver, spent three months in Mulago hospital and another five at home recovering after a collision with a car in the capital in September. "I had a broken leg. It was too painful," he recalls. "It was hard for me to get money because I could not work, and so my family had to suffer during that time." Niwamanya is now in debt after taking out a 3m Ugandan shilling loan (£765) for a new bike.

While the human impact of the *boda-boda* craze is evident in the packed hospital wards, the strain that spiralling road fatalities could have on the economy is worrying politicians.

The death toll on Uganda's roads is twice the average across Africa. The Ugandan annual crime and traffic/road safety report showed **3,343 road deaths were registered in 2011** (pdf) although the World Health Organisation has estimated the figure to be **more than double that**. **Some are warning that**, if action is not taken, the death toll from Uganda's roads could top that from diseases such as malaria – and be second only to HIV and Aids as the leading cause of death in the country.

"This translates into a monetary loss to the country," says Winstone Katushabe, secretary of the transport licensing board at the transport ministry. "It's about 1 trillion shillings [£255m] in terms of loss to the economy, [with] investigations of accidents, post-trauma care, families you have to look after."

Kampala's metropolitan traffic police director, Lawrence Nuwabiine, agrees. He says Uganda must "fight this road carnage" with the same commitment it used to tackle HIV and Aids a decade ago.

"When we started [with] the issue of Aids, the president ... said: 'We are dying, every person must talk about Aids'," Nuwabiine says. "And people started talking about Aids in churches, in schools. We managed to reach somewhere. But [with] this one, people are not talking about death as a result of these *boda-bodas*."

Some measures are being taken to try to stem the problem. Last month, the government announced that the works and transport sector would be allocated one of the biggest chunks – about 15% – of the 2013-14 budget to improve and maintain roads.

Even though road safety measures were not specifically included within the budget, the government is establishing a national agency to run advocacy campaigns and

the government is establishing a national agency to run advocacy campaigns and manage roads.

In Kampala, the [Capital City Authority](#) is attempting [to introduce regulations](#), including mandatory registration of drivers, first-aid training, reflector jackets and helmets, and a monthly fee of 20,000 Ugandan shillings paid by the city's 250,000 motorbike taxis.

Other initiatives are also springing up. The [Global Helmet Vaccine Initiative](#) is holding a one-day workshop for 100 riders, part of a national scheme under which it has trained 1,800 *boda-boda* riders in basic road safety. On completion, each participant receives a yellow helmet bearing the slogan: "Your life is your wealth".

It is a message that seems to be getting through. Ronald Katetemera, 27, says he will not be taking his new headgear off. "Every day it's going to be the first thing I put on," Katetemera says. "They say life has no money value. I have my children. I don't want to die."

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