

The use of bicycles is widespread in Uganda's rural areas and said to be one of the key factors in the recovery of its rural economy. They are used extensively by producers, suppliers and marketers of the country's staple food (green bananas) but also to export other commodities and cash crops in rural areas. Traffic counts on rural Ugandan roads of both pedestrians and vehicles found that 22 % of the traffic comprised bicycles. Most of these bicycles are operated on bad roads and tracks. (WB-TP161, 1991)

However, the cost of owning and operating a bicycle is very high for Africa's rural population in comparison with their compatriots in other parts of the world. For example, Zambians would spend 40 % of their annual income to buy a bicycle, Malawians would need to spend their earnings from over 650 days of work at the rural minimum wage to do so. In comparison, Bangladesh's require only 80 days of rural minimum wages to own a bicycle. China has 270 bicycles per thousand people, but the estimate for Africa stands at only 35 per thousand. In Malawi, the price of bicycles rose sharply after the number of import licenses was restricted and competition was stifled until the restriction on licenses lifted in the early 1990s and sales of bicycles rose again. (SSATP20,1996)

Cultural restrictions on the use of bicycles by rural women exist but women may work around them by pushing loads packed on bicycles, or by dismounting in places where they may be seen riding them. The lack of women's models also limit bicycle use by women, and often men's models are bought by households so the men of the household will use them.

A study on rural mobility in KwaZulu-Natal (V3, 1997) found that providing bicycles to scholars to assist them in travelling to school was the most appropriate intervention – unless the topography was unsuitable for bicycle use - and considerably cheaper than subsidising scholar transportation. It found that the same number of pupils could be provided bicycles at a quarter of the cost of subsidising their travel by public transport. Repair costs would be approximately 10 % of the initial cost of the bicycle, and only 6 % of the cost of travel by public transport. It would be easier to support those scholars living furthest from schools as no population concentration would need to be reached, as is the case when providing public transport, and bicycles could be distributed through schools. Also, the study reasoned that building and maintaining bicycle tracks was cheaper than doing the same for roads. Opportunities for small businesses to repair and maintain the bicycles would be created either at schools themselves or in central places.

There are several initiatives taking place in South Africa which depend on bicycles being provided by foreign donors. These second hand bicycles which were discarded in their countries of origin are then repaired if necessary, sometimes being fitted out with frames allowing them to carry loads (as in the case of the Afri-Bike project) and handed over to South African communities. Courses in mechanics and low-cost maintenance are offered and satellite workshops may be set up in rural areas. In some areas, service providers (such as health care workers) are using bicycles to provide home care services.

Possible Intervention Actions	
Provision of bicycles to isolated rural communities or special groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As discussed above, the provision of bicycles may be far cheaper than providing subsidies for use on public transport services; • Isolated dispersed rural communities may never reach population level thresholds high enough to support public transport services, but this is not required in bicycle use.
Training in repair & maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training in repair and maintenance of bicycles is required • Support to SMMEs would be required both in training and equipping of workshops.
Introduction of cycle-trailers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For higher load capacity over longer distances; • Possible uses – commercial mobile shops, transporting goods to and from markets, reduction of workload for household activities such as carrying fuel and water, carrying people to facilities or the nearest main road where there are public transport services available; • Would require user familiarization, gearing up of repair and maintenance workshops, and credit services.