

Visible Everywhere Yet Invisible to Planning: The Great Gulf Between “Pragyas” (Auto-rickshaws’) Importance and Their Status in Policy in Ghana, Africa

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What local transport and mobility innovations are going on in Ghana?

How do they advance Transport Justice/for all goals?

What can be learnt from them to support equitable access to safe and pleasant transport and mobility systems in other similarly situated Global South contexts?



What I am going to do

Share with you an emerging practice of using autorickshaws/tricycles for commercial passenger transport in Ghana

I will argue that leveraging such local innovations to advance transport justice will require a shift in current punitive approaches to governing mobility solutions, enabled and organised from below.

If they are carefully and thoughtfully supported, they can play critical roles in providing collective mobility in African and other similarly situated cities.

Context

Population: 35 million

Location: West Africa, bordered to the East by Togo; the West by Côte d'Ivoire; the North by Burkina Faso, and South by the Gulf of Guinea (the Atlantic Ocean)

GDP per capita: 2,405.79 USD (2024)

Comparison: Austria's \$56,833.20

Administrative Regions: 16

Official Language: English



Popular Motorised Transport Modes in Ghana

Minibuses & Shared Taxis

Authorickshaw is the new kid
on the block





Origin: The timelines

2005: Zoomlion, a sanitation management company, was using them to collect waste

2007: Motor King, a British company, set up an assembly plant for them

2012/2013: Youth Employment and Entrepreneurial Development Agency began subsidising them for the youth to create employment

NB: Originally meant for carrying goods, they have been creatively adapted for carrying people.



Some local names for the vehicles

Motor King: named after the British company that first set up a plant to assemble them

Mahama Camboo: Named after the current President. He was the President at the time the Government began subsidising them for the youth

Pragya: Named after Pragya Arora, the main character of an Indian telenovela, Kumkum Bagya. The actress rides the vehicle in the telenovela. The telenovela is immensely popular in Ghana.

Some Numbers

- Exact number not known. But in 2018, the World Health Organisation estimated that, together with two-wheelers, autorickshaws constituted 23% of all registered vehicles in Ghana (WHO, 2018)
- In the Northern part of Ghana, where the vehicles are immensely popular, they represent over 90% of all registered vehicles
- In 2023, Ghana was the world's **78th** largest importer of Motorcycles and cycles (out of 221), importing \$73.9M worth of them
- During the same year, motorcycles and cycles were the **47th** most imported product (out of 1,177) in Ghana (Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity)

Diverse Impacts: Mobility/Transport

- In the cities, paralysed by congestion and unmet demand, autorickshaws are becoming a critical mode of choice
- They offer diverse advantages: speed, easy manoeuvrability, and the ability to travel on poor roads.
- They are also sturdy and can, therefore, carry heavy loads. So, the market women patronise them heavily.
- In the rural areas, they are being integrated into local life for various purposes, including providing as ambulances and hearses for carrying people and bodies to and from hospitals
- Thus, they are providing critical mobility and social services that the state does not provide



Diverse Impacts: Transforming human-powered portorage

These bodily labours of movement – fetching water, carrying produce to and from the house, farm, and market – are often done by women and children.

Men, by contrast, dominate the equally strenuous work of pushing handcarts and trucks.

Increasingly, however, communities across the country are innovating in the way they perform these brawn-heavy tasks, leveraging autorickshaws to undertake them with greater speed and efficiency

Diverse Impacts: Becoming a key source employment

- One recent study (Obiri-Yeboah et al., 2022) suggests that some autorickshaw operators earn 14 times Ghana's daily minimum wage of GH¢ 19.97 (\$ 1.28)
- In some communities, tricycle operators reportedly earn as much as entry-level civil servants with university degrees (Ntewusu & Nanbigne, 2015)
- Autorickshaw work originated in the Northern part of Ghana. But in the South, where they are increasingly becoming popular, it is dominated by migrants from the North
- Northern people were incorporated into Ghana's globalising economy through systemic exploitation, first as enslaved labourers, then as indentured and low-wage workers post-abolition, trapping them in vicious circular and cumulative cycles of socio-economic and spatial marginalisation
- Since autorickshaws/tricycles create opportunities for them, it can be argued that they are helping to address inherited historical injustices.

Diverse Impacts: As an emerging social mobility resource

- It is redefining the social place of Human-powered portering workers: They carry heavy loads on their heads or push them on manual carts or trucks, often under the scorching sun.
- This means that they always sweat profusely and get their clothes dirty. These expose them to ridicule, insults, stigma, and altercations on the highly congested streets, markets, and other public places where they operate
- Those who have shifted to motorised three-wheelers report to researchers that they are now treated with greater respect, able to participate more fully in community life, such as attending weddings, naming ceremonies, funerals, and other social events, as people with *dignified work*.

Diverse Impacts: As an emerging social mobility resource

- Motorised three-wheelers also aid access to romantic and other social relations. They are becoming so well-received that they have become a part of complementary prestation in the marriage systems of some communities and families in the country
- In some communities, they serve as markers of coming of age for young men, thereby enhancing their appeal to young women. These social accesses were traditionally associated with owning four-wheeled vehicles.
- All these suggest that motorised tricycles are being integrated into local economies, cultures and symbols of value, respect, honour, prestige, recognition, belonging and worth.

Invaluable but criminalised

- So, the innovative adaptation of tricycles for commercial passenger transport services is yielding enormous mobility, economic and cultural benefits in Ghana.
- But guess what: It's been criminalised: Regulation 128 of Ghana's Road Traffic Regulations, 2012 (L.I. 2180) state, inter alia, that:
- ***“The Licensing Authority shall not register a motorcycle or tricycle to carry a fare-paying passenger. A person shall not use or permit a motorcycle or tricycle over which that person exercises control to be used for commercial purposes; A person shall not ride on a motorcycle or tricycle as a fare-paying passenger”***
- The punishments: Risk of fine, imprisonment or both



Concerns for criminalisation

Safety: The National Road Safety Authority estimates that a person is ten times more likely to die in a motorcycle crash than in a car crash.

Pollution: Most of them are fossil-fuel-based, but there is a growing interest in electric ones

Congestion: There are concerns that they contribute to gridlock on the roads

The story of tricycles is the story of the bigger informal or popular transport sector in Ghana and other African countries

- The authorities are often hostile towards them: They don't invest in making them safe and pleasant to use
- The result of this is that the millions of people who rely on them to get by and as sources of jobs are exposed to congestion/air pollution/emissions/noise/crashes
- This creates a vicious loop where the authorities turn around to use the problems as an excuse to subject the transport systems to punitive policies, including outlawing or displacing/replacing some or substantial parts of them

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A look into the future

- Informal bottom-up mobility innovations, as occurring with tricycles in Ghana, will continue to be a large part of the solution for providing collective mobility in African and other Global South cities
- The authorities, therefore, need to plan ***with*** and ***for*** them, instead of ***against*** them
- I am sure that during the panel discussion, we will get to deep dive how to centre such an agenda within international development cooperation.

References

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