Three-wheeled non-motorized bikes ferrying cargo in the border cities of Rubavu and Goma are hard to miss, manned by people living with disabilities (PwDs) they are the main transportation of informal trade between the two cities of Rwanda and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The transport system frequents and is mainly used at Petite Barrière, literally for ‘little border’ crossing between Rwanda and DRC, one of the busiest land borders worldwide handling traffic at one time for over an estimated 50,000 people every day, according to records by Rwanda’s immigration office.

Trade between the two cities has existed for generations but cross-border movements many times face difficulties especially for informal or lower income traders engaged in small businesses that cannot afford to hire trucks, thus this innovation by PwDs was enthusiastically welcomed.

Notably, the mode of transport had existed for many years in this area. But, it was used by an insignificant number of PwDs only to facilitate their movements and seldom carry commodities on request within short distances in their immediate surroundings.

The blending of friendly three-wheeled non-motorized bikes into transport solutions marked an innovative yet affordable means for trade and an end to a life characterized by grinding poverty, uncertainties and over dependence for people living with disabilities.

The PwDs said that they contemplated how they could deliver themselves from a life defined by begging and humiliation to start earning a living by working in spite of limitations caused by disabilities.

They disclosed that the non-motorized three-wheeled bikes in the area exclusively facilitated movement of the PwDs, and confessed that the innovation never delivered them from their sorry-state economically until they used it to solve typical problems of cross-border trade at the Rwanda-DRC border.

“Just a few members of our community used bikes but not for commercial reasons like today,” reminisced Alex Gakuba who transports commodities on a Rubavu-Goma bound non-motorized three-wheeled bike.

“In spite of the presence of this mode of transport, our social and economic

situation continued worsening because the bikes were not utilized for commercial benefits. Those that owned them lived in a similar situation others characterized by begging from strangers and passers-by.”



Alex Gakuba after loading and heading to Goma in the DRC

“Before our innovation, most of us were homeless and destitute who would spend cold nights on verandas of commercial buildings battling mosquitoes, prowling dogs and goons marauding Rubavu city streets overnight in anticipation of loot. While a few lucky ones would be sheltered by good samaritans and go to the streets every morning to beg so as to make ends meet,” recalled Vincent Sebageni a transporter of goods between Petite Barrière border and Congolese border city of Goma in DRC’s Eastern region.

A few saw an opportunity when they realized that Petite Barrière border was a very busy crossing of informal traders but with few transport options for their goods, yet the bikes could take big loads.

After conceiving the idea of coming together as PwDs and venturing into the transportation of goods to and from DRC on the bikes, 20 PwDs most of whom were liberation war casualties started a cooperative dubbed *Coopérative de transport transfrontalier de Rubavu* (COTTRARU) in 2011 that was officially registered in the national gazette the following year.

With the meager funds received on retirement benefits they designed bigger non-motorized three-wheeled bikes in various sizes, and ventured into the transportation of commodities across the Rubavu-Goma border post.

“Living as paupers ended when we started this business, and most of us have today built houses and even those without, no single person from our community fails to pay rent because we earn a daily income and are entitled to many services from our cooperative including financial assistance to solve day-to-day needs,” added Gakuba.

“I was one of the 20 pioneers, mostly liberation war casualties. We started the cooperative with a membership fee of Rwf.18,000 (approx. $18) that we’d received as a package on retirement from the demobilization commission (RDRC) after receiving orientation on living in society,” says Evariste Habarurema commonly known as Ruhengeri, the Vice President of COTTRARU.

“Currently, we’ve 91 legitimate members, 35 of them are women plus 45 others mostly civilians that have not yet met membership requirements whom we help to work because they’re also living with disabilities,” observes Habarurema.

However, Habarurema says that they get grants and sometimes contribute money to help the most vulnerable members of the cooperative acquire a bike after expressing their desire to work. The bikes are customized to different sizes depending on someone’s need and financial availability.



Bahati Magera is a committee member of COTTRARU cooperative

The cooperative always has pending names of members without bikes and when an opportunity surfaces they grant the bike to a member, which becomes a full property of the beneficiary because they are normally grants from partners.

The cooperative has established partners that support their efforts like the Rubavu District, the National Council of Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) and other different platforms in Rwanda that do advocacy and lobbying for PwDs which includes mobilizing support locally and abroad. Hence, when they receive grants they give them to beneficiaries.

The bikes which are made locally in workshops in Rubavu have recently seen a rise in cost. When the cooperative was starting, a bike would cost Rwf100,000 (approx. $100) but today they range from Rwf.150,000 – 700,000.

The smallest bike can carry 300Kgs-cargo while the biggest bike’s capacity is

900Kgs and the cost is largely determined by size and nature of merchandise. As the cost of transport ranges according to size, a smaller bike charges at least Rwf.10,000 while a bigger one goes for three times or more per route.

The cooperative encourages members to make savings and to fulfill their commitment each pays Rwf1,000 (approx. $1) or Rwf.500 for each loaded bike with commodities every time they get work (a client).

Some PwDs have frequent customers that call them in case they need their services. They have a spacious open space at the premises of the cross border market as well as a hangar at Petite Barrière where clients and porters find them.

“A few PwDs have permanent porters mostly unemployed youths that push their bikes to and from Goma while the majority employs them on a part time basis. The wage they receive is negotiable and determined by other factors including the size and value of cargo,” noted Nsanzabandi Ndagijimana.

Ndagijimana added that the client handles all aspects related to customs clearance of commodities and some have clearing agents at the border.

The PwDs to cross need not to have a passport and VISA just like all the border communities on either side. The immigration office gives them a free daily permit (a stamped small piece of paper locally known as *jeton*).

Bahati Magera, a 50-year father of six children notes that the transport system has employed many PwDs and kept them working together.

“We support each other in good or bad times from our savings and the cooperative saves Rwf.180,000 for each member annually under the EJO HEZA (a long term saving scheme).

By and large the transportation innovation, they say has greatly improved their livelihoods.

Members say that the daily income varies, depending on the volume of trade on a particular day. But, many agree that on a bad day one takes home at least Rwf4,000 ($4).

Vincent Sebageni, after loading his bike to maximum capacity with cabbages heading to the DRC border direction revealed that the job pays them well where on

average one can earn at least Rwf4,000 a day after removing all the expenses including porters' wages and for loading.



Vincent Sebageni at the market in Rubavu loading his bike to maximum capacity with cabbages destined for DRC market

"Most of us regard our venture in transport as a remedy to health problems linked to living in solitude when we battled with physical and psychological problems. Today, we earn a living and not only socialize with the business community but also tourists that are common in this region, and we're much happier than before," explained Magera.

However, some impediments to this transport business grow by the day as competition with established (big) traders with ample capital bite into their niche.

Recently, the government of DRC cut border working hours from 24 to 7 which is disturbing to PwDs and blamed it for dwindling incomes since most members are

not working as they used to.

Transporters using three-wheeled motorcycles that are apparently more efficient than the non-motorized three-wheeled recently started using the same route, which PwDs view as encroachment on their business.

“Our business is subject to harsh weather conditions. Rain and scorching sun make our lives difficult because the bikes are not roofed. And, sometimes we get problems with our clients in case rain damages the merchandise,” says Gakuba.

While the bikes are manually pushed by strong able-bodied youths, failure to get them means no work.

For Ndagijimana, operating the bikes manually sometimes cause delays for delivery of goods which can spoil client relationship. The risk of accidents to the manually operated bikes with the loads is inevitable, especially on steep slopes whereby any breakdown of brakes and/or other parts can lead to accidents.