

Claudine Mujawayezu was diagnosed with polio when she was four years old. Since then, she became confined to a wheelchair, a condition which makes it very difficult to move around Rwanda's Capital Kigali.

"When growing up, I realized that I would be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of my life and life was not easy without appropriate mobility around town," says Mujawayezu.

Amidst all gloom, rays of hope emerged for people with muscle weakness and paralysis after Kigali municipal authorities decided to deploy the first ever disability-friendly public buses with special facilities to support the movement of persons with disabilities (PWDs) using public transport.

The decision to deploy new buses to transport wheelchair bound passengers gave Mujawayezu the courage and hope to live normally.

Latest assessment carried out by Kigali authorities indicated complaints about difficulty in public travel by PWDs. According to the study, some PWDs were even charged extra for their wheelchairs.

"Improving the design of seats while installing more supports, has significantly improved passenger experience," said Pudence Rubingisa, Mayor of Kigali City referring to the current transport situation of transport in urban area.



Previously, official estimates found that between 229 to 300 buses operate in Kigali city. With the increasing number of passengers including PWDs reaching up to 17,000 per day, officials decided to introduce 41 new large buses equipped with facilities that aid PWDs to board and disembark easily. With the acquisition of new buses, authorities plan to introduce similar transport service on upcountry major roads linking Kigali and other important cities in a move to provide faster and more convenient transport service to make transport accessible to persons with disabilities.

Emmanuel Katabarwa, the Kigali City Engineer said that since the launch of the new user-friendly buses, more and more people have switched from using private vehicles to public bus services.

According to the bus driver, Sultan Nshimiye, 35, people with disabilities have

begun to use city bus services because it saves money and is now easy to travel. “These types of buses are easing traffic congestion while providing comfort to all passengers including persons with disabilities,” Nshimiye said.

Similarly, wheelchair-bound Safari Bizimana has always been struggling when using public transport. He notes that most passengers are seemingly reluctant to move and make room for him when he boards public buses.

But with the help of his son, Bizimana manages to navigate across several kilometers from his home located in Nyamirambo suburb to Kigali city center, where he runs a clothing and shoes store.

Addressing mobility constraints

For PWDs, accessing public transport has always been a challenging task. “I am extremely happy because Kigali started providing more options to use public transport,” Bizimana said as he joyfully boards a bus at Nyamirambo bus station.



Since 2021, Rwanda has introduced numerous fiscal and non-fiscal incentives to fast-track the public transport adapted to people with diverse abilities and attract additional investments in the growing industry. Other interventions focused on infrastructure development with the aim to ensure public transport connects different areas of the country, thus contributing to sustainable economic growth.

Currently, with a fleet of about 41 buses that were deployed since 2019 it is now easier for Bizimana and dozens of other Kigali residents with disabilities to move and use their wheelchairs in public transport unlike before. Besides environmental benefits, an important feature of these vehicles, is the state-of-the-art automated doors which can lift the wheelchair from ground level to the entrance point of the vehicle.

The majority of these large buses are designed with slots to carry at least ten people with disabilities who are using wheelchairs while the rest of the passengers have to squeeze while standing in the bus which has few seats and more options to stand.

Approximately 4 percent of Rwanda’s population, or an estimated total of 446,453 are PWDs, according to the 2022 Population and Housing Census. The number of

PWDs is higher in rural areas, official estimates indicate that mobility constraints are a serious impediment to disability-inclusive development, as they exacerbate the personal, economic, and social isolation.

“PWDs must have a place in all matters that affect the course of their lives,” says Emmanuel Ndayisaba, Executive Secretary of the National Council of Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) referring to the deployment of new buses that have been operational since 2019.

Ndayisaba noted that a key factor preventing the inclusion of disabled people is the ongoing discrimination and segregation into various services and economic activities. Yet such exclusion also extends to the labour market as the employment-to-population ratio of PWDs aged more than 15 years is almost half that of persons without disabilities.

Inclusive public transport

In a recent move, Rwanda Federation of Transport Cooperatives (RFTC), one of the operators of Kigali’s public transport, purchased more buses from China that are designed to enable PWDs move. In the first implementation phase of the ambitious project, the company invested one billion Rwandan Francs (\$1 million) to pilot this project for which the ultimate goal is to allocate more resources and serve the whole country.



Louis Dodo Twahirwa, Chairman of Jali Holdings that owns RFTC and promoter of the initiative

“We want PWDs to start enjoy friendly and accessible public transport in the entire public transport system,” said Louis Dodo Twahirwa, Chairman of Jali Holdings that partly owns RFTC and promoter of the initiative.

In addition, Twahirwa stresses that increasing and improving such initiatives for PWDs may turn the experiences of economic growth into a more equitable and inclusive one.

Currently, there is a common form of public transportation available in the city of Kigali which involves the use of big capacity buses with dedicated bus lanes to make them more attractive to city commuters. These buses, according to the municipality authorities are a form of shared transportation where drivers usually

pick up passengers at the roadside if there is room in the vehicle.

With the growing number of PWDs who now rely on public transportation as their only option, some associations advocating for the right of PWDs complain that the limited number of such kind of buses means these services will only be limited to urban areas.

“Accessing bus stations with a wheelchair is another challenge which means very few wheelchair users will be able to consider public bus transport as an option,” said Susanna Kayigirwa, a handicap mother of three from Gikondo, a suburb of Kigali city.

In addition, Kayigirwa regrets that despite government’s effort not all staff employed by these public transport companies are well trained to assist people with disabilities.

“This is because, there are fears that some PWDs passengers without any other assistance will be abandoned on the bus once it reaches its destination,” she said.

Lack of proper infrastructure

However, the Mayor Rubingisa explained that the public transport policy and strategy was designed to ensure universal public transport services for all urban residents irrespective of age, sex, caste, creed, and ability to perform in the society.



“These efforts should also ensure access to all modes of transport for infirm, disabled and elderly people,” the Mayor said.

To achieve these goals, the document proposes stepping up efforts to ensure access to all modes of transport for infirm, disabled and elderly people and continuing to build a disabled-friendly environment to secure their equal rights.

“The awareness of disability inclusion requires Rwanda to respond in a more positive and robust way,” Rubingisa said.

Although these new buses which are wheelchair accessible are also equipped with special seats reserved for PWDs, some passengers with disabilities complain of the lack of proper infrastructure within the bus stations to make them accessible.

“Most of the bus drivers are not trained enough to give time for people with disability to get on and off whereas others can even deny them a ride,” said Olivier Karegeya, a 45 years old wheelchair user from Kigali who lost both legs to diabetes.
(END)