Another boda boda death: A preventable tragedy

Dear Tingasiga:

My neighbour died on Thursday of last week. Killed by a boda boda rider, who hit him from behind, inflicting severe head injuries. The victim was taken to Mparo Health Centre IV, where he died about 22 hours later. Robert Tumwesigye wa Katagirwa ka Kyakuguru kya Byabahwamu bya Buhazi bwa Kasigwa ka Nyakahuka ka Kajenje, a 56-year-old husband and father of eight, was a man of industry, with plans and dreams of a man in middle age, entitled to live in safety in his homeland. We buried him in Kiyogoore, Mparo, Rukiga on Saturday, April 11. Some believe his death was ordained to occur when and how it did. Others declare that accidents are a worldwide phenomenon that we should accept as a fact of life. These false beliefs, anchored in a dark fatalism that does not stand up to rigorous scientific evidence, and experience in many countries that have drastically reduced these preventable deaths and injuries.

Boda bodas, an indispensable part of Uganda's transport system, serve millions of Ugandans every day. Yet behind their convenience lies a sobering reality: Boda bodas are among the deadliest vehicles on Ugandan roads. The statistics paint a stark picture. Uganda's boda boda industry has grown explosively over two decades, with estimates placing the number of motorcycles in the country at well over two million.

The data on road accidents tracks this growth with alarming precision. Between 2009 and 2017, motorcycle involvement in road traffic accidents rose steadily from 24.5 percent to 33.9 percent, overtaking motor cars, which dropped from 37.6 percent to 33.6 percent over the same period. By 2022, boda bodas were involved in approximately 43 percent of all road accidents in Uganda, resulting in over a thousand deaths and hundreds of injuries in that year alone. By 2025, of the 43,204 vehicles involved in road traffic crashes nationally, motorcycles accounted for 15,096 — more than a third of the total and nearly double the number for motorcars. Most damning is the fatality data: motorcycles were involved in 3,224 fatal crashes in 2025, compared to 953 for motorcars, meaning riders are dying at more than three times the rate of car occupants. Uganda records approximately 10 road deaths per day, costing the country an estimated $1.2 billion annually — roughly five percent of GDP.

Several interconnected factors drive the high accident rate among boda boda riders and their passengers. Reckless riding behaviour is the most visible cause. Speeding, overtaking on bends, sudden swerving to avoid potholes and other obstacles, riding against traffic, and weaving aggressively through congested streets and lightly populated rural roads are everyday occurrences. Many riders use mobile phones while in motion, further compounding the risk. Despite legal requirements in place since 2004, helmet use remains inconsistent. Riders cite discomfort, cost, and passenger reluctance as reasons for non-compliance — yet head trauma accounts for a disproportionately high share of crash fatalities.

Alcohol consumption among riders is another well-documented contributor to accidents. I have seen riders consuming drinks from small bottles and sachets that may have contained alcohol. Poor road infrastructure adds further danger: potholes, unpaved surfaces, inadequate lighting, missing road markings, and poorly designed junctions create hazardous conditions even for careful riders. Overloading is widespread. Boda bodas are designed for a rider and one passenger, yet three or four people on a single motorcycle is a common sight. Inadequate training means many riders lack the skills to handle Uganda's demanding road environment. Finally, mechanical defects — faulty brakes, bald tyres, and malfunctioning lights on poorly maintained second-hand imports — create serious hazards that economically squeezed riders often cannot afford to fix. These and other correctable factors affirm the view that boda boda crashes are preventable, reducible, and potentially eliminable.

Reducing boda boda crashes requires coordinated action by central and local governments, industry stakeholders, riders, and communities. Stronger and more consistent enforcement of Uganda's excellent traffic laws is fundamental.

Police must sustain crackdowns on speeding, helmetless riding, drunk riding, and overloading, with penalties that genuinely deter violations. Mandatory rider training and certification — requiring all boda boda operators to complete approved courses covering road safety, defensive riding, and first aid — would address the skills gap that leaves many riders underprepared for the road. Improved road infrastructure, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, would reduce the environmental hazards that cause or worsen crashes. The road along which Tumwesigye was struck is a treacherous, potholed murram path that leads to the Rukiga District headquarters.

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Muniini K. Mulera
Letter to a Kampala Friend

Boda boda rider associations can reinforce safety from within their industry, while public awareness campaigns can empower passengers to insist on helmets and refuse rides from intoxicated riders, and pedestrians to maintain full alertness on what have become dangerous roads, even in rural areas.

Uganda's road safety challenges are not unique, and a well-established international framework exists to guide national responses. The World Health Organisation (WHO) Save LIVES strategy, launched in May 2017, is an evidence-based package of priority interventions built around six pillars — Speed management, Leadership, Infrastructure design and improvement, Vehicle safety standards, Enforcement of traffic laws, and post-crash Survival. Together, these six strategies encompass 22 specific interventions designed to be implemented in an integrated manner.

Each pillar speaks directly to the Ugandan context. Speed management recognises that vehicle velocity is central to both crash risk and injury severity — a lesson borne out by the disproportionate fatality rate among boda boda riders. Leadership calls on central and local governments to establish dedicated road safety agencies, set measurable targets, and coordinate national strategies. Infrastructure design focuses on building and retrofitting roads that are inherently forgiving of human error. Vehicle safety standards push for the adoption of global regulations on crashworthiness and protective equipment, directly applicable to the question of helmet standards in Uganda. Enforcement targets the key risk behaviours — drink-driving, speeding, helmetless riding, and distracted driving — that are well-documented causes of boda boda crashes. Finally, post-crash survival emphasises rapid emergency response, quality trauma care, and rehabilitation systems, areas where Uganda's health infrastructure faces significant strain.

Political leaders should embrace the Save LIVES framework, which aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals — specifically SDG targets 3.6 and 11.2 — which aim to halve road traffic deaths and injuries and provide access to safe, sustainable transport for all by 2030. For district and central government leaders, adopting and adapting this framework in a manner tailored to the realities of the boda boda sector offers a coherent and evidence-based path forward.

Boda bodas have transformed mobility in Uganda and lifted many families out of poverty. However, their potential as a safe and productive mode of transport can only be fully realised if the systemic causes of accidents are honestly confronted and persistently addressed. The statistics demonstrate that the problem is not static. It is growing. Prevention is not a single intervention but a sustained national and regional commitment, one that demands action from political leaders, lawmakers, enforcement agencies, riders, passengers, and communities alike. The WHO Save LIVES strategy provides a proven and adaptable roadmap. The only question remaining is the urgency and sincerity with which Uganda chooses to follow it.

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