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It's high time we discussed how our children get to and from school safely?

The dust has not quite settled but I think it might be a good time to explore in more detail the proposal—if one can call it that—made by the minister of Education on safe transportation of school children.

Ms Museveni noted the use of boda bodas puts the children in grave danger. She proposed that families, which cannot afford to shuttle their children, to walk their children to and from school instead.

There has been a barrage of criticism, pointing out that families are aware of the danger, but have no option. I will stay away from that discussion for now.

Let me say, for the record, that I agree with Ms Museveni, that boda bodas are a dangerous mode of transport. In fact I think most Ugandans agree, including those that ride them every day. Now, let us look at the proposed solution.

The Police has consistently reported that most Ugandans killed on roads are not those on motorcycles, but pedestrians. In 2010, 42 per cent of all road deaths recorded by the Police were pedestrians, compared to 17 per cent on motorcycles. In 2013, the pedestrian deaths were 40 per cent, compared to 30 per cent on motorcycles. In other words, by getting our children from boda bodas to walking

along and across roads, might be even more dangerous.

Over the last several years, injuries have been the fourth or fifth leading cause of hospital deaths in Uganda—the bulk of those deaths amongst the so-called vulnerable road users; pedestrians and those on two wheels. Police data quoted above do not provide the ages of the victims, so we do not know whether the pedestrians are more likely to be younger, or older. It is still possible—even likely—that indeed, although there are more are killed as pedestrians than passengers on motorcycles, those pedestrians are older. But this gets us to the all-important discussion of demographics.

Fifty five per cent (55%) are 18 years and below – we are largely a nation of children. Uganda has about 12.8 million school-age children, between six and 18 years. Even assuming that half of them are either in boarding schools, or not in school, we have more than six million child commuters on our roads every day. If one quarter of those are living in an urban area (Census 2014), then 1.5 million children—equal to the total population of Kampala City—are dealing with motorised traffic at least twice a day!

Despite the interminable traffic jams that characterise Kampala, Uganda is one of the

We even debated for a while how and if we should feed them at school (that was before the flasks proposal), we talk endlessly about how to include the right content in the curriculum ... everything but how to get the children safely to and from school!

least motorised countries in the world. Only a minority of children travel by car on a regular basis.

The point of this number splitting is to show that we have large numbers of child commuters, and we have no plan on how to get them safely to and from school every day.

With a fertility rate of six children per woman, it is a common scenario that a household will have three or more school going children. They might not attend the same school, or return home at the same time. For the parents to walk them all to school and back, the parents need to have very flexible jobs, or be unemployed. But even more to the point, increasing the number of people walking in this manner is not necessarily going to result in more safety. On the contrary, it will likely result in more conflict on the roads, and higher rates of pe-

destrian injuries and deaths.

Ms Museveni might not be aware that walking in some parts of Uganda is a dangerous activity – maybe even more dangerous than riding on a boda boda. This is a truly frightening fact. Pedestrians are walking along some of the most dangerous roads on the continent, and this continent has the highest road traffic death rate (Global Status Report on Road Safety 2015).

Ms. Museveni's proposal that families walk their children to school is at best an attempt to avoid responsibility, and at worst, it is as unworkable as it is ill conceived. I am not sure if she was aware of the gravity of the matter. If she had been, one might have expected that she would bring it out in a government policy paper, maybe as a step in a wider stakeholder consultation.

Not just the children that are on boda bodas, not just those in cities, not just the poor ones. We need a plan for all children. The discussion needs to address the numbers, the distances, the frequency, and the cost.

Obviously, the responsibility of transporting school children is not just for the Ministry of Education. Ms Museveni needs to work in partnership with other sectors, key of those being Transport, Finance, Policing, Local Government, and Social Development.

So I credit the minister of Education for broaching—or stumbling upon—a critical issue. Right in our neighbourhood, a bill on safe transportation for school children is before the Kenyan parliament. Many countries already have laws that govern how their young citizens get to and from school. I encourage the minister to follow through and get the work started. Blaming the parents is not a best practice.

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