

IFRTD – COLIN RELF YOUNG VOICES AWARD – ROUND TWO

“Poor rural farmers are central to any solution to today's global food crisis and the long term problems of hunger and poverty”.

Lennart Båge, President of IFAD, April 2008.

Discuss, with examples, the role that rural transport interventions can play in achieving sustainable agricultural development and poverty reduction.

SECOND PLACE WINNING ENTRY – THULANI MUCHIYA – ZAMBIA

Addressing the Paradox of Poverty in the Midst of Potential Plenty: The Case of Zambia

Rural poverty in Zambia is representative of that which occurs in most developing countries. On gaining independence from its colonial masters, Zambia, similarly to many developing countries, invested heavily in urban and regional road networks. This move essentially cut off rural areas from access to necessary inputs such as technology, information and other necessities like fertilisers and seeds; And rural farmers were systematically isolated from the new markets emerging in urban areas, as the economies of these newly independent countries became more driven by money in contrast to system of barter exchange that had prevailed previously.

The failure to address the problem of rural transportation is what has created, what we today refer to as, the rural poor, and ultimately, we have failed to realise the productive potential of rural farmers. Now with the current world food crisis, instead of these rural farmers being rushed to for relief, we instead have to rush to them with food relief. It is easy to see that if the views of people like Colin Relf and Lennart Båge are not taken seriously then we can pronounce ourselves architects of our own fate.

In Zambia, almost every farming season is punctuated with the perennial story of rural farmers getting farming inputs late, or not at all, because of the poor road infrastructure or because it is non-existent. Sometimes, even after farmers have secured a bumper harvest through their own efforts, stories of uncollected maize in rural areas are not uncommon, thus creating post harvest losses and preventing farmers from improving yields in the next farming season. Unfortunately, not even the country's Food Reserve Agency (FRA) will venture into some areas on account of the poor road network and rural farmers are then left with no option but to either sell their maize to unscrupulous briefcase con men at below market value prices or watch it go to waste as it succumbs to poor storage methods. Indeed, these are all symptoms of a seriously dysfunctional rural transportation system which certainly is a major contributing factor to the problem of national poverty and the global food crisis at large.

However, a number of measures can be taken to mitigate the problems of rural poverty, and recently the Zambian government has shown some commitment to addressing this problem. Through the Ministry of Local Government and Housing, the government launched the Rural Accessibility and Mobility Programme (RAMP) in 2006. The main aim of RAMP is to contribute to poverty reduction through facilitation of enhanced mobility and access to socio-economic goods and services for rural communities. A number of initiatives have been implemented under RAMP and these, if coordinated

properly, have the potential to effectively address the challenges of rural transportation and help in the attainment of sustainable agricultural development and poverty reduction.

Among the initiatives that have been adopted within the RAMP project are Community Transport Infrastructure (CTI) and Intermediate Means of Transport (IMTs):

Under the Community Transport Infrastructure initiative the ministry has undertaken to rehabilitate and maintain community transport infrastructure in selected pilot districts, including the construction of footbridges/culverts and the opening up of new foot paths and cycle or ox-cart trails in rural areas. Canals and waterways are also being cleared in order to enhance means of water transportation.

This CTI initiative addresses a paramount concern in the improvement of rural mobility in addressing the absence of a local rural communication network serving to hinder the internal rural circulation of inputs and information, in the event that that these somehow find their way into the rural areas. The need to collect rural farm outputs from a central point further necessitates such an intervention as farmers often face problems when ferrying their produce from their villages to the central point for collection to the markets.

Water transport is also of great significance in mitigating transportation constraints in rural areas. For example, in the Western part of Zambia, most rural farmers engage in rice cultivation in the flood plains of the Zambezi River and the only way of getting to the fields is by using canoes. Once waterways are improved they will be able to facilitate the expansion of rice production, not only in rural areas, but also on a nation-wide scale as more people will have access to rice fields, and also access to inputs and agricultural extension services. Zambia still imports over 80 percent of her rice, but the potential for production at national sustenance levels is evident if water transportation can only be given serious consideration.

Through the IMTs initiatives, the RAMP programme has helped with the provision of transportation means which are applicable to a rural setup, these include: cattle, donkeys, bicycles and trailers, motor cycles, tricycles, barrows and canoes. Providing rural areas with tracks, footpaths and waterways without providing the necessary means of transportation would be futile, therefore the inclusion of the IMTs initiative in the RAMP programme is a good intervention and these IMTs will greatly aid the farmers in getting their produce to collection points. Means like donkeys and wheel barrows seem trivial to some planners but they can considerably increase the amount of produce carried from one point to another, and also reduce the time that such a task takes, compared to when these means are not used. Some villages are remote from roads that can be accessed by automobiles, but with the aid of means of transport such as bicycles and motorcycles, this problem can be easily overcome and enable rural farmers to be able to reach these roads. Agricultural inputs and technical assistance staff can also reach the interior and rural areas more easily when these means of transportation are readily available.

What makes programmes like RAMP really unique and responsive to the needs of the rural farmers is that they address the problem of rural mobility from within the rural communities themselves. This is unlike the earlier approach by many governments in developing countries which embarked on the construction of feeder roads without taking into consideration how rural farmers would actually get to these roads when the track and path network in their villages was almost non-existent. This emphasis on feeder roads without taking care to rectify the ills of the internal rural road network, was

a superficial measure which did not in any sense address the root problem of rural transportation; perhaps the objective of feeder roads was for governments to appear as if they were working towards alleviating poverty without addressing the real problems. It is my firm conviction that programmes like RAMP should be adopted by all developing countries as they seek to address problems of rural transportation and because such programmes have the potential to cure most rural transportation ills.

An improved rural transportation network is the determining factor in the equation linking sustainable agricultural development to poverty reduction. A good rural transportation network will contribute to sustainable agriculture in two ways. Firstly, it will allow farmers to acquire necessary information on sustainable agricultural practices such as organic and conservation farming; Secondly, easy access to a ready market will motivate rural farmers to venture into growing other non traditional crops and compel them to practice some form of crop rotation and ultimately improve and maintain the fertility of their soils. This trend is particularly noticeable in Zambia where one finds that farmers near railway lines, and those rural areas with good roads, are more likely to grow additional crops like soybeans, and vegetables which they sell and provide the basis for some degree of crop rotation. But in places where rural farmers have no easy access to markets, they resist any persuasion to grow anything other than maize and as a result such farmers practice very little or no crop rotation at all, which may degrade the soil.

With over 70% of the Zambian population living below the poverty line, an improved rural transportation network will go a long way to alleviate this situation, and the same can be said of most developing countries. Not only will an improved rural transportation network help mitigate poverty by way of improving farmer's access to agricultural inputs and information, but it will also help governments reach those areas that are isolated due to natural calamities and are unable to engage in any agricultural activities. In this way, rural transportation can act as a disaster management strategy by facilitating the movement of food from places which have excess to those that have been hit by drought or floods.

If provided with a good road network, rural farmers will also begin to view agriculture as a business and this will have a ripple effect of reducing the general poverty of the area by supporting other social sectors in rural areas. For example, in Zambia's Western Province, inspired by emerging markets and good roads in the area, rural farmers growing rice in the Zambezi flood plains have recently grown more rice by getting to their fields more easily with the use of dug out canoes; The proceeds from these rice sales have contributed towards the construction of classes at a community school which is partly sponsored by Concern International. Similarly, in the Central Province, the improvement of trails linking commercial farms to rural settlements has encouraged farmers to go into the production of fingerlings to supply the commercial fish ponds in the area; This project has also been stimulated by the government's provision of wheelbarrows and other necessary inputs to the farmers. The farmers here also use the proceeds from their sales to purchase other farming inputs like seeds and fertilisers, and in addition grow some of the fish to table size for their own consumption. Without any doubt, such poverty reducing activities would be close to impossible in the absence of any meaningful rural transportation interventions.

The absence of a proper road network further exacerbates the phenomena of rural poverty, and unnecessarily so. Small scale dairy farmers in rural settlements just a few kilometres from the outskirts of Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, are forced to forfeit about 20% of the sale price of their milk by dairy produce companies as it is argued that the roads there are so bad that the farmers must bear the cost of the wear and tear on the

dairy company's trucks. As a result most farmers opt to sell their milk within their communities, and due to poor storage facilities most of it perishes causing the farmers to lose out on income. Ironically, it is common to see imported bottled milk flooding the streets of Lusaka because it is easier to bring in imported milk than to collect it from rural areas within the country.

A poor rural road network causes food from rural areas to be excluded from markets, raising food prices at the national level and also causing food price increases at the international level. At same time, rural farmers are deprived of a source of income and this raises their levels of poverty. A farmer who grows only maize, for example, cannot survive on maize alone, he or she will need clothing and other basic food necessities, however this will only be possible if someone can buy his/her maize from her; in turn this will also not be possible unless there is a functional internal rural road network connected to the national grid. Thus, continues the vicious circle which propels the most poor in society further into poverty.

Providing a working rural transportation network is therefore a way of unlocking the sustainable food production potential that is present in almost all developing countries. Such interventions are a sure way of raising the general standard of living of a population, and can also increase countries exports to other countries by reducing the cost of doing business. Clearly, reduced international food prices are a significant part of mitigating the global food crisis, but this has to start from the allowing food in rural areas to reach the world market.

It should be borne in mind, that rural transport interventions should not be carried out in isolation if they are to make any significant contribution to poverty reduction and sustainable agriculture. Even the RAMP programme, like many others like it does not work in close collaboration with other governments departments. There is s need to foster integration amongst entities such as the Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Agriculture , Ministry of Works and Supply and also with other Ministries like the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Health. This will bring about more concerted efforts towards the mitigation of rural transportation problems and poverty reduction and also lessen the chances of duplicating efforts. Such collaboration would also help improve resource allocation such as the provision of equipment for construction or staff involved in sensitisation activities. For example, in most parts of rural Zambia, farmers are confronted with the realities of HIV/AIDS; this means that if access to medical facilities is not provided, little productive activities will take place despite access to a ready market through a good road network. Rural transport interventions should therefore also address accessibility to schools and health centres, without which, these interventions would not have long term benefits in agricultural development and poverty reduction.

It is a fact that most intervention projects in developing countries start out ambitiously but soon disappear; this is mainly because the issue of sustainability is not addressed. The best way to sustain such programmes would be through community involvement in the allocation and maintenance of programmes, such as the IMT initiative. A policy of payment of monthly contributions towards the maintenance and use of facilities by all beneficiaries would be a good way of instilling a sense of ownership in the community. The gender dimension of access to such facilities should also be addressed so as to ensure that such interventions do not further alienate women from the proceeds of their labour and to ensure that means of transportation are not concentrated in the hands of male folk.

The paradox of poverty in the midst of potential plenty is one of our own making and it can be easily corrected by concerted efforts in rural transport interventions. Sustainable agricultural development and mitigation of the global food crisis will result once we realise that developing a functional rural road network is more prudent than insisting on high grade multi million urban residential roads. The issue of rural transportation is not about priority, it is about life or death, the sooner our leaders realise this, the better.
