

## CHAPTER 10

# Finding People Where They Live: The View From A Tricycle In Busia

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### SUMMARY

*This chapter describes the situation of wheelchair users in Busia and their efforts to make a living on the Uganda-Kenya border. Using ethnographic methods of participant observation, the authors try to appreciate people on their own terms rather than from the point of view of a pre-defined programme. This contrasts with participation that is imposed on local communities by outside agencies. The story told here is one of local initiative and resourcefulness, in exploiting economic and political opportunities. The Busia tricyclists have created a community and are in a position to ‘participate’ equitably with NGOs, government and donor agencies, because they have developed an ability to pursue projects themselves and enter into dialogue with others.*

### INTRODUCTION

‘Community participation’ emphasises the active involvement of people in a matter of common concern. But, in practice, it often implies that

‘THEY’ should participate in ‘OUR’ projects. The original initiative usually comes from some outside agency, which enters into dialogue with a ‘target group’. The relationship was tellingly captured by villagers who told one of our colleagues: “*Yesterday Save [the Children] Denmark came and participated us*”. They saw themselves as the objects of an NGO’s participatory exercise. In this chapter, we want to examine a different kind of community participation: local initiatives to create a community of people with disabilities organised around common interests. In this process, those concerned took the lead; although they too, interacted with representatives of government and NGOs, their own efforts were the foundation of development.

We are using ethnographic methods to document the situation of tricycle users at the Kenya-Uganda border. The basic approach of ethnography is participant observation. This means involving oneself with members of the community, observing, listening and trying to understand the world from their point of view. We want to appreciate their projects and their creative survival strategies in the face of difficulties (*‘okuyiyayiya’* is the Uganda term for such enterprising efforts, as Dr. Alice Nganwa reminded us in Chapter 5). So far, we have had long discussions with key people individually, in twos and threes, and in one large meeting. Individuals have been asked to recount their life histories, in order to grasp the trajectories that have brought them where they are today. Visiting people in their homes, and seeing how they move around the town and pursue their work gives us an impression of their everyday lives. In order to put this local world into a broader perspective, we are trying to reconstruct parts of recent history, especially the political and economic developments that shaped opportunities for people in this area. Our work is on-going and we hope that it will be useful for the members of the Busia Disabled Association, in their attempts to mobilise support for their self-help initiative.

## **TRICYCLES AND CROSS-BORDER TRADE**

The town of Busia, which straddles the Kenya-Uganda border, has long been the focus of a lively trade. At the border crossing, people stream

across in both directions, with everyone carrying something. On the Uganda side, the 'boda boda' bicycle taxi men, in their electric pink shirts, compete to ferry passengers and goods. (The very term boda boda - the business of transporting on the back of a bicycle - originated in Busia, where cyclists shouted 'border! border!' to attract customers). Prominent in all these activities are the big hand-crank tricycles loaded with goods, expertly manoeuvred by disabled people. Some speed back and forth; others wait chatting to one another, or to friends and acquaintances. The thirty or so, owners of these three-wheelers are clearly an integral part of Busia's busy scene.

The story of the Busia tricycle transporters goes back to 1990. The cross-border trade was flourishing at that time, mainly with agricultural produce going to Kenya, and manufactured goods coming into Uganda. A few business people on the Uganda side helped individual polio survivors to purchase the relatively expensive hand-crank wheelchairs, made of bicycle parts and fitted underneath with sturdy baggage carriers. Shopkeepers entrusted the tricyclists with cash, to make purchases across the border and transport the commodities to retail outlets in Busia, Uganda.

These pioneers discovered a niche in the local economy. Others soon came, as word spread that there were opportunities in Busia. Friends and relatives told people in villages: "*Your fellow disabled are making money at the border. You better join them instead of sitting redundant in the countryside.*" People came from many parts of Uganda to try their luck. The necessary capital for participation was a tricycle, but most did not own one when they arrived in town. Some got loans, some negotiated help from relatives; many worked and saved to purchase their own three wheelers. Wandera Fred recounted how he came to Busia to work for his brother. At first, he paid a man to push him in a wheelbarrow back and forth across the border. In time, he was able to buy a tricycle. No organisations supplied these people with the means to make a living. They procured their mobility through their own resourcefulness.

The economic careers of the tricyclists have followed slightly different paths. Many started out working for customers who placed orders for goods and advanced the money to pay for them. This arrangement

requires trust on the part of the customer; the tricyclists built up a clientele of businessmen who could rely on their honesty and dependability. Simply waiting at the border can pick up some business for anyone who needs a load moved. While most continued as transporters, others went into business for themselves. They acquired enough capital to buy goods for resale; a few set up their own shops. Some went into specialised trade in certain commodities (milk, beer, cement, diesel); one set up a restaurant.

### **MOBILITY AND THE EXTENSION OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS**

The disabled tricyclists had all been handicapped by lack of mobility. Hearing their stories, it was easy to understand that physical and social immobility are closely related. The tricycles had mobilised them in more ways than one.

Many of the individuals we have spoken to, told of being ‘stuck’ in their villages. Some had been able to attend school; others either could not physically get there or had not been supported by parents who gave higher priority to children with legs, in situations of scarce resources. In people’s minds, the lack of opportunities in rural areas was associated with discrimination. There were those who blamed their families for underestimating them. But at the same time, many told of how relatives had helped to get them to Busia to start their new lives.

One of the basic dynamics of being a person is the extension of sociality: growing through the creation of new relationships that enrich the lives of individuals and families and enlarge their worlds of social interaction. This can be accomplished by going to school, by visiting relatives and friends in other places, by attending church or mosque, participating in ceremonies and gatherings, and by working with other people. In Uganda, marriage is a fundamental extension of social relations not only through a spouse and children, but also because links are created to a large network of in-laws. Because kinship and family are so central in Ugandan life, the social growth of persons extends the sociality of families as well as individuals.

Those physically handicapped people, who went to Busia to seek their fortunes, were first of all, looking for work. They wanted to earn money so they could be self supporting. Once they were able to move around on three wheels, two things happened. They developed networks of colleagues, business contacts and friends. They also acquired resources to marry and start their own families.

All of the tricyclists we have met so far are men (though we understand there are a couple of women in the community). In Uganda, men must provide a gift or bride wealth payment to a wife's family, and husbands have the primary responsibility of earning money for the home. Without an income and without sufficient economic support from their own parents, these men had been 'stuck' in bachelorhood in their rural villages. With the opportunities that physical mobility opened, they were able to marry after a few years, in town. In our visits to their homes, we met attractive wives and children.

One of the most important extensions of sociality has been the creation of a new community of people with disabilities, who could support one another and work together for common interests. That story is tied to national policy and local politics.

## **ORGANISATIONS AND POLITICS**

In 1992, the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) began to crack down on cross border trade. The campaign to increase state revenue through collection of taxes and duties included tough moves against any activities defined as smuggling. Whereas, customs officials had hitherto allowed the tricyclists to ferry commodities across the border with little hindrance, they now began demanding duty and confiscating goods. No exceptions were to be made for people with disabilities. But, paying duty would have destroyed their comparative advantage in a competitive situation, where others stood ready to transport goods even more efficiently.

Two years later, in 1994, the Busia Disabled Association was established as a voluntary organisation. The subsequent accomplishments of the

BDA had partly to do with the role played by certain programmes, NGOs and the Ugandan government. It is also the story of enterprising individuals, who grasped the possibilities and made something of them. One of these was Wandera Geoffrey, who had been working with a Community Based Rehabilitation project supported by the Norwegian Association of the Disabled. He was a member of the National Union of Disabled People of Uganda, which held workshops in Busia that attracted new members to BDA.

One of the most important tasks of BDA from its early days up to the present, has been to smooth relations between the tricycle transporters and the Uganda Revenue Authority. ‘Sensitisation’ was the term used by Wandera to describe the continuing efforts to persuade URA officials to respect the efforts of the tricyclists to support themselves. When new URA officials arrive, they declare that the transporters are smugglers. They must be invited to sit and talk about the limited opportunities for disabled people and the need to make room for them too. When the Revenue Protection Police arrests tricyclists, BDA requests that they be released with their goods. “*Don’t disable our disabled people,*” is their plea. They point out with satisfaction that there are no disabled people begging on the streets of Busia, not even on Fridays when Muslims give alms.

The BDA represented its members’ interests in other ways as well. It negotiated with the Town Council, to provide an office free of charge. It targeted the police and the central government representative in the district. Through its efforts, Busia District was ranked second in the country in terms of local initiatives for disabled people; the chairman of the district council is to be sent to South Africa by the Rotary Club to visit disability projects there. In Uganda, local councils at every level must include representatives of people with disabilities. Strong representation by BDA members on the District Council and the Municipal Council has been essential. They have obtained seats in strategic committees including Finance, Planning, Works and Health and Social Services.

The organisation has facilitated advocacy for rights and promotion of common interests. In a general meeting with BDA members, they told us that the attitude of Busia town residents towards disabled people was fairly positive. Their activities in trade and municipal life had brought them trust and recognition. At the same time, the organisation had enhanced solidarity among disabled people. This was evident in the multi-ethnic composition of the group, the way they defended one another against harassment by officials, went collectively to mourn at the funerals of each other's family members, and welcomed disabled people who were new in town. In fact, one of the organisation's plans is to establish guest accommodation for newcomers.

### **DIFFICULTIES AND DELICATE PROBLEMS**

The story told so far, has been a rosy one, but life is seldom all roses. Without going into a long catalogue of problems, we would like to mention two areas of concern: the economic activities and the balance between local initiative and outside help.

Cranking a heavily loaded tricycle on potholed roads is strenuous work. People without enough strength in their shoulders and arms, need a child to help push them. Even the muscular marathon cyclists who live outside town and commute an hour each way to get to work, know they will not be able to continue as they grow older and weaker. Moreover, competition is tough. Lots of other people in Busia are looking for ways to make money. Children carry head loads across the border and the boda boda bicycles are ubiquitous. Some avoid the customs officials by taking the back paths, the 'rat' (panya) routes to Kenya, but as one tricyclist remarked, those paths are not wheelchair accessible. Nobody gets rich doing transport alone. At best, one can hope to get enough capital to do something else.

The border work is a delicate matter that must be handled as carefully as a baby. On the one hand, there are many arguments for exempting the tricyclists from paying taxes on the goods they bring across. After all, they are importing on a very small scale in a situation where local residents do their shopping in Kenya anyhow, without paying taxes on

the household needs they carry across. The shops in Busia Uganda have difficulty competing with the lower prices of their competitors in Busia Kenya. Some of the goods brought over are not otherwise available in Busia Uganda; there is no petrol station there, for example. There are few alternative occupations for people without good legs and good capital. On the other hand, they must not abuse the sympathy and cooperation of the public by blatantly breaking the law. Disability must not be an excuse for illegal activities.

For all these reasons, diversification and new possibilities are needed. Many would rather not do border transport but lack capital and training, for an alternative source of income. In Uganda, the popular solution to problems is 'A Project'. The tricyclists of Busia have so far, not attracted donor funding for their plans for a vocational school. They have tried to establish their own projects with a little help from the Town Council, but the money is small for so many people. A modest credit scheme is far from sufficient to provide loans to those who need them to get out of the border trade. People had heard of funds provided for rehabilitation by government or donors, but they had not seen it and wondered if someone had 'eaten' it.

Community based projects tend to be imposed by outsiders on people defined by them as a community. Sometimes, the 'target group' does in fact become a community through participating in the project. In contrast, the tricyclists of Busia have created themselves as a community because they had a common interest. As a kind of 'natural community', they are not representative of people with disabilities in Busia. They are predominantly male and all have an impairment of their legs. They have a common history of enterprise and resourcefulness.

As we hope to have conveyed here, we admire the initiatives and accomplishments of these men. We think they are a superb example of the way communities can take action without 'being participated' by an outside force. Yet, it is important to bear in mind that communities exist in interaction with global and national forces. The Busia Disabled Association took advantage of the structure of political representation and they would welcome support from an NGO or donor. They are



appealing for more government assistance. It seems to us that this is exactly the sort of community that could enter into an equitable relationship with CBR programmes and organisations. The trick is for the professionals and programme administrators to, 'find people where they live' and respect what they are trying to do. And, for the people to learn and grow from new opportunities, without letting them undermine their solidarity and initiative.

## **CONCLUSION**

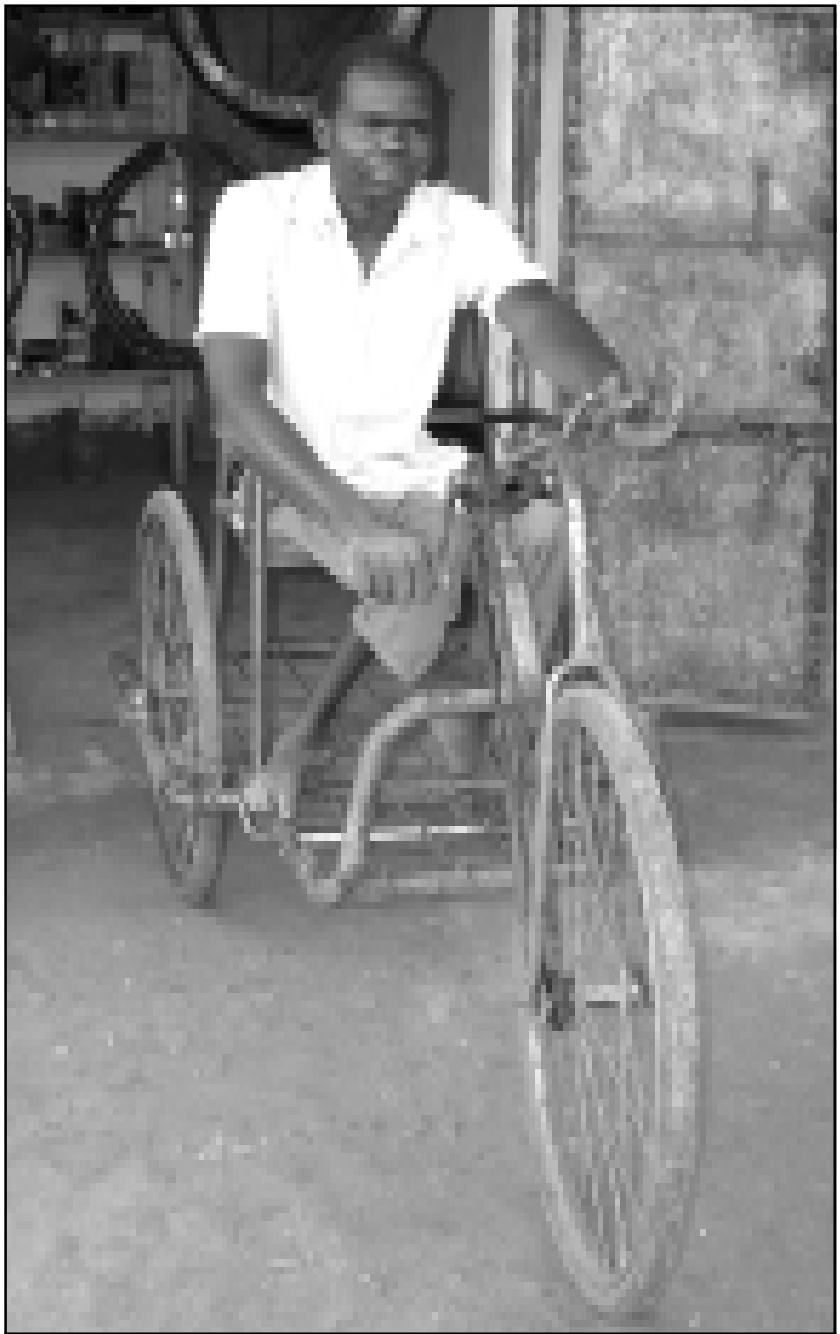
In this chapter, we have presented the first results of an on-going study. There are four general themes guiding our work with the tricyclists, which may be of interest to others engaged with CBR.

- 1) The subjective situation of people as social actors: life stories and frank open conversations, provide an insight into values, hopes and disappointments as well as struggles and accomplishments.
- 2) The immediate social world: different social relationships form a web of possibilities, such as kinsmen and resources, family and fulfilment, business contacts and income, officials and restrictions, councilors and advocacy.
- 3) The larger context that has shaped the present situation: regional history, political economy and the local incarnation of national policies form conditions and local possibilities.
- 4) The relations between communities and outside agencies: examining reciprocal assumptions and expectations is important both for operational studies and for establishing a realistic and equitable partnership.

Our approach is ethnographic and sociological, rather than technical and rehabilitative. It cannot stand alone, but it provides a good basis for communication and cooperation.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

We owe this example to Lotte Meinert, who did long term ethnographic fieldwork in Eastern Uganda.



**Tricycle workshop in Busia**