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## The Role of Commercial Motorcycles in Nigerian Rural Economy: A Study of Guma Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria

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### **Abstract:**

*The central focus of the study was to ascertain the role commercial motorcycle business can play in the Nigerian rural economy with a particular focus on Guma local government area of Benue state. Data for the study were collected through personal interviews and focus group discussion sessions. The study has noted that most of the commercial motorcycle operators were able-bodied young men who had varying levels of education but who had no off-farm gainful employment. The study has revealed that commercial motorcycle business in the study area has helped in the promotion of agriculture, non agricultural activities and in the alleviation of poverty. The study has however shown that the business has some dangers such as motorcycle –related accidents and death, crime and health risks associated with it. The study has also revealed that the commercial motorcycle business is highly unregulated. The study has therefore recommended that government and even private individual should establish traffic training centres for all classes of traffic operators. The commercial (including non-commercial) motorcycle operators themselves should endeavour to drive with care so as to reduce the rate of accidents associated with the business. Both the state and local governments should regulate the activities of commercial motorcycle and their unions with special emphasis on licensing. Special departments should be created to collect revenue in form of taxes to the state and local government coffers. To combat the criminal excesses of the commercial motorcyclists, the police in collaboration with the various community vigilante groups should regularly mobilize their members to carry out patrols on the roads to eliminate the opportunities that allow the motorcyclists to engage in crime.*

**Keywords:** Role, commercial, motorcycle, rural, economy

### **1. Introduction**

Transportation is an important ingredient for the development of any society (Okonkwo, E.C, Emehute, V.C and Nwosu, A.C, 2010). It affords social, economic and political interaction. Personal mobility is one of man's most valued freedoms. Transportation facilitates the movement of people, enhances optimal utilization of human and material resources and makes places accessible (Oladipo, 2012). According to Steve Jones, Moses T, Samuel Z, Elsa T, Seth A.O and Joe Walsh (2016) motorcycles are the most essential and effective means of transport in daily life and over all livelihood in developing countries. Hence, Munby (1968), asserted decades ago that there is no escape from transport.

In rural Nigeria in particular and Africa in general, the major means of travel is on foot or through intermediate means. Three quarters of the population of Nigeria lives in the rural areas and are engaged in agriculture as the major provider of their income (Davies, 2010). The promotion of the farming activities or income-earning activities depends on rural transport infrastructure. Unfortunately, transport routes or roads are in poor conditions as such goods cannot always be transported and even when transported at all, the costs are very high. People in the rural areas therefore experience low levels of connectivity (Ogunsanya and Galtima, 1993). Also, in Nigeria, there is biting economic depression and high rate of unemployment. A combination of these factors has forced many people to resort to creative means to address their daily travel needs. One of such creative means is the use of motorcycles for either personal mobility or public transport.

In Nigeria, commercial motorcycle business variously called Okada or Achaba has become a common form of public transport system both in the urban and rural areas. In the cities, the okadas are valued because of their ability to meander through traffic and the lessening of the door-to-door travel times. In the rural areas where the roads are in deplorable conditions, commercial motorcycles complement the services of buses and taxis. Besides being cheap, commercial motorcycles provide on-demand services and are faster.

In Nigeria, motorcycles have been formally neglected by transit planners. There is no data concerning motorcycles amongst the forms of transport. However, studies by Abdussalam and Wahab (2014), Starkey (2016), Kareema (2015) have established that commercial motorcycle operations have positive significant effect on economic empowerment. It is on the basis of this that this study seeks to examine the role of commercial motorcycles in rural economy in Nigeria with a particular focus on Guma local government area of Benue state.

## 2. Methodology

Guma local government area is comprised of ten council wards namely; Mbadwem, Kaambe, Nzorov, Uvir, and Mbabai. Others include Nyiev, Shaghev, Mbyer Yandev, Mbawa and Abinsi. Six of these council wards- Mbadwem, Nzorov, Mbabai, Nyiev, Mbawa and Abinsi – were randomly selected for study. The rationale for the selection of these council wards was informed by their geographical spread

In each council ward, 20 commercial motorcyclists were randomly selected from their parking points and interviewed. Hence, a total of 120 respondents were interviewed. The personal interview provided the opportunity to collect information on the age, level of education, previous employment and income of the operators. To complement information obtained through personal interviews, focus group discussion sessions were held with the inhabitants of the selected council wards across gender and generation. The information gathered through the focus group discussion sessions provided the opportunity to understand the role commercial motorcycle business has been playing in the promotion of agriculture, non agricultural activities and poverty alleviation.

### Justification for the study

The study was conducted between February, 2017 and June, 2017. Guma local government area is one of the 23 local government areas that make up Benue state. It has a population of 194,164 with a land size of 2938.691 km<sup>2</sup>. The local government area is populated majorly by the Tiv although there are other minority ethnic groups like the Jukuns. The people are predominantly farmers and have an extensive arable land. The people typically engage in the production of yams, cassava, millet, maize, guinea-corn, and sorghum. It is also endowed with solid minerals like by rite, limestone, etc.

In spite of its natural endowments in terms of population, land and solid minerals, Guma is the only local government area in Benue state that has no tarred road. Generally, travel by most of the people takes place under great difficulty. Particularly during the rainy season, most of the roads and footpaths deteriorate and become impassable. People living in Guma have been experiencing low levels of connectivity. Hence commercial motorcycles are of crucial importance to their well-being. This explains the rationale behind the study.

Reasons for the emergence of commercial motorcycle business in Nigeria.

Commercial motorcycle business in Nigeria, variously called okada and achaba, has become a popular mode of public transportation. The motorcycle business started in the 1980s due to the economic crunch that had begun to affect Nigeria. The economic crunch was occasioned by the introduction and implementation of the structural adjustment programme (SAP). The implementation of SAP led to the closure of many industries and the retrenchment of many people from their places of work. Thus, those who lost their jobs either through closure of industries or retrenchment resorted to earning a living by the use of their motorcycles to convey passengers to and fro their destinations. The use of motorcycles for commercial purposes became fashionable by both passengers and the operators because while the passengers were conveyed to their destinations however remote they were, the operators also found a new lease of life in it having lost their jobs and businesses (Mbalisi and Nzokuru, 2014).

Commercial motorcycle business also became useful because most of the Nigerian roads had become unmotorable; a situation that made it extremely difficult for people to get to their destinations easily. The conditions of the roads therefore made commercial motorcycle business to enjoy high public patronage because of its ability to meander through the pot-holed roads. These factors made commercial motorcycle business to boom and has continued to boom till to date.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents. It should be noted that all the respondents were males. The reason for male exclusiveness is, perhaps of the risky nature of the business.

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-22	9	7.5
23-27	47	39.17
28-32	21	17.5
33-37	13	10.83
38-42	12	10
43-47	10	8.33
48 and above	8	6.67

Table 1: Age distribution of respondents

Source: Field survey 2017

The table shows that the age category of 23-27 had the highest number of commercial motorcyclists with a total of 47 representing an index of 39.17%. the second age category is 28-32 which has a total number of 21 (17.5%) and is followed by age category of 33-37 with a total number of 13 representing 10.83%. a critical look at the table shows that all the commercial motorcycle riders are young and able-bodied people capable of engaging in any other economic activity besides the risky business of okada riding.

In terms of educational attainment, table 2 shows that 67 (55.83) of the motorcyclists had secondary education, 31(25.83%) had tertiary education while 13 (10.83%) had primary school certificates. Only 9 (7.5%) of the motorcyclists had no formal education. Out of the 31 commercial motorcyclists with tertiary education, 14 had OND, 12 had NCE while 5 had HND/BSC.A critical look at the table shows that majority of the commercial motorcyclists were literate enough to be gainfully employed in established

organisation. The absence of employment opportunities outside of agriculture underlines the importance of commercial motorcycle in the provision of employment to these categories of people. (See table 2).

<b>No formal education</b>	9	7.5
<b>Primary</b>	13	10.83
<b>Secondary</b>	67	55.83
<b>Tertiary</b>	31	25.83

Table 2: Educational level of respondents

Source: Field survey 2017

With regards to daily income, 31 (25.83%) said they were earning between N2-100 - N2, 500 daily; 27 (22.5%) said they were earning between N1, 600 – N2, 000. Twenty three of the commercial motorcyclists said they were earning between N1, 100 – NN1, 500 while 7 (5.83) said they were earning N3, 000 and above daily (see table 3). It should be understood that the commercial motorcyclists that said they were earning less than one thousand naira daily are those who come to do the business only after farm work. This means that many of the commercial motorcycle operators combined farming with the business thereby generating additional income.

<b>200-500</b>	11	9.17
<b>600-1000</b>	10	8.33
<b>1100-1500</b>	23	19.17
<b>1600-2000</b>	27	22.5
<b>2100-2500</b>	31	25.83
<b>2600-3000</b>	11	9.17
<b>3100 and above</b>	7	5.83

Table 3: Daily income in naira

Source: Field survey 2017

### 3.1. Role of Commercial Motorcycles in Rural Economy

Focus group discussions with respondents revealed that commercial motorcycle business in the area has contributed greatly to the promotion of agriculture, non agricultural activities and in poverty alleviation.

➤ Promotion of agriculture: Discussants were in a consensus that commercial motorcycles have helped in the transportation of agricultural inputs and outputs. Agricultural inputs include fertilizers, agro-chemicals, and high yielding varieties of seeds. All these are conveyed from the point of purchase by the commercial motorcyclists. For instance, a male discussant in Mbabai council ward who is a father of 14 children had this to say;

The road to my community is bad so every year it is the commercial motorcycles (okada) that convey fertilizers, herbicides and seeds for me.

This was the position of most of the discussants and even emphasized by a 60 year old discussant in Mbadwem council ward thus;

My children, the roads in our community (LGA) are generally very bad. In fact, let me say our local government area has no roads. It is okada that convey us, our fertilizers, agro-chemicals and seeds from anywhere we buy them to our homes. I wonder what we would have being doing without the okadas.

Similarly, transportation of agricultural produce such as yams, millet, beniseed, etc. to the markets is done by the commercial motorcyclists. These produce are transported by the okadas before or on the day of the markets. This was the position of all the focus group discussants. For instance, a 36 year old female discussant and a mother of three children had this to say;

My paternal community shares boundary with my husband's. Since I became of age and got married, it is okada that have been conveying our produce to the markets. Vehicles hardly ply our rough roads.

These positions underscore the importance of commercial motorcycles to the promotion of agriculture in the study area.

➤ Non-agricultural activities: During the survey of the selected council wards, it was observed that so many non-agricultural activities go on in the areas. These include sale of motorcycle spare parts, motorcycle mechanics, vulcanizing business and roadside sale of petrol. These activities have greatly contributed to the alleviation of poverty in the area. Several social groups and associations like commercial motorcycle riders association were also understood to have been formed as a result of commercial motorcycle business. These associations have being supporting members emotionally and financially especially during weddings and burials. Although commercial motorcycle business has helped in the promotion of agriculture, non-agricultural activities and poverty alleviation, both the operators and focus group discussants were in a consensus that there are risks associated with the business. The operators and discussants identified motorcycle-related accidents and deaths, crime and health risks as the most disturbing dangers. With respect to accidents, many of the motorcycle operators attributed it to lack of training and traffic education. For instance, a commercial motorcycle operator who is also a chairman of the commercial motorcycle hirers association in one of the parking points had this to say;

Many of these boys that are involved in this business have never had any formal traffic training and education. It is these ones that do get involved in accidents due to lack of regard for traffic rules and regulations.

With respect to crime, the commercial motorcycle operators said they were never involved in any criminal activities. However, focus group discussants were unanimous that some of the operators were of questionable characters. This position by the discussants was confirmed by a 38 year old female staff of the local government council in this way;

I hired the services of a commercial motorcyclist to convey me from Gbajimba to Uikpyam (a distance of about 14 kilometres) at about 7.45 pm. Mid way on our journey, the commercial motorcyclist stopped the bike and demanded for my handbag and cell phone. At first I did believe what was happening but that is how I lost my handbag and cell phone.

Discussants therefore lamented the incessant snatching of handbags and other personal effects by the commercial motorcycle operators in the area. The position by the focus group discussants was collaborated by the district head of Mbabai thus;

The criminal activities of Okada operators are becoming of serious concern to our community especially the unsuspecting travellers.

This position by the village chief confirms that some of the commercial motorcycle operators are of questionable characters.

It was observed during the survey of the study area that most of the commercial motorcycles had no registration plate numbers; a situation that makes the owners of such motorcycles unidentifiable even when they get engaged in one form of criminal activity or the other. The absence of plate numbers clearly indicates that such motorcycles were not duly registered with relevant licensing authorities. The consequence of this is that the local government and other agencies of government are being denied of the revenue that could have accrued from the exercise.

#### 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Nigeria has been experiencing a great deal of social upheavals. People are generally struggling with severe poverty, unemployment and low business sales. These conditions, in addition to others, have forced many people into commercial motorcycle business. The study has shown that in the face of all these debilitating conditions, the commercial motorcycle business has significantly helped in the promotion of agriculture, non-agricultural activities and poverty alleviation in the study area. The study has however noted that there are some dangers and related issues associated with the business. These include motorcycle –related accidents and death due to the lack of training and traffic knowledge concerning traffic rules and regulations, incessant cases of crime and the non registration of the motorcycles by the operators. The study has therefore recommended that the following measures be put in place.

- 1 Government and even private individual should establish traffic training centres for all classes of traffic operators. Graduates of such centres should be awarded certificates and licenses to prove that they are qualified to drive or ride on Nigerian roads. The training should also incorporate health education for the safety of all forms of road users. The operations of these agencies will certainly generate additional revenue for the government.
- 2 The commercial (including non-commercial) motorcycle operators themselves should endeavour to drive with care so as to reduce the rate of accidents associated with the business. They should always try to use protective equipment for their safety. Most importantly, they should avoid the use of hard drugs and smoking while driving.
- 3 No doubt, commercial motorcycle business has the potential to contribute significantly to the economy of all local government areas in Nigeria if properly monitored and harnessed. Therefore, both the state and local governments should regulate the activities of commercial motorcycle and their unions with special emphasis on licensing. Special departments should be created to collect revenue in form of taxes to the state and local government coffers. The Vehicle Inspection Officers should be empowered to enforce adherence to basic traffic codes such as the use of crash helmets and routine vehicle inspection.
- 4 To combat the criminal excesses of the commercial motorcyclists, the police in collaboration with the various community vigilante groups should regularly mobilize their members to carry out patrols on the roads to eliminate the opportunities that allow the motorcyclists to engage in crime.
- 5 To boost their business, members of the commercial motorcycle business should come together to form cooperatives. Since many of them combine farming with the business, the cooperatives would serve as avenues for them to pool their resources together to buy farm inputs, establish motorcycle spare parts business. The cooperatives would also enable them to acquire loans to buy new motorcycles to replace the aging ones. No doubt by extension, the government too will benefit through the registration of the cooperative societies.

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