

RURAL TRANSPORT AND DEVELOPMENT: A CASE OF THE ALBERTINE REGION IN UGANDA

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ABSTRACT

Road transport is the prominent mode of transportation in Uganda carrying about ninety-five (95%) of the country's goods and ninety-nine (99%) of traffic. The road network gives overall connectivity both along the national and international highways and access to towns and villages. The Ugandan government has heavily invested in developing the rural road network and the Albertine region located in southwestern Uganda has heavily benefited from these projects largely due to the oil development activities. The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which road improvements contribute to rural development, to drive advocacy for increased investment in rural transport infrastructure and services in Uganda.

Keywords: Road Transport, Rural transport, Development, Albertine region.

1. INTRODUCTION AND STUDY BACKGROUND

The transport sector in Uganda is divided into Air, Road, Water and Rail. Road transport is the most popular mode of transportation carrying about 95% of the country's goods and 99% of human traffic. The road network gives overall connectivity both along the national and international highways and access to towns and villages. The paper will focus on road transport.

Road Transport services in Uganda include Passenger Service Vehicles, privately owned cars, cargo vehicles, motorcycles (locally known as Boda-Boda) and bicycles. Road transport plays a strategic role in trade and commerce and in vital sectors such as Tourism, Agriculture, Mining, Oil and Gas development. The government has developed National roads through the Uganda National Roads Authority¹ (UNRA), the agency mandated to manage and develop the national road network. UNRA constructs and maintains roads to ensure safe transportation of road users, goods, and services along the national road network.

In 2008, the Uganda Road Fund (URF) was established by an act of parliament with the objective of financing routine and periodic maintenance of public roads in Uganda from mainly reserved road user charges. By aspiring to ensure a stable, adequate, and timely flow of funds to agencies, the URF provides the opportunity for the implementing agencies to plan for maintenance on their respective roads to improve condition of roads; reduce road maintenance costs; encourage a vibrant local construction industry; reduce road

¹ The Uganda National Roads Authority (UNRA) was established by the National Authority Act, No. 15 of 2006 and became operational in July 2008.

maintenance backlog and reduce total transport costs, with the consequent gains to the national economy.

The road sector plays a vital and supportive role in the development of a dynamic and robust private sector, efficient delivery of social services, Poverty Reduction and Economic Development. A robust transport system and mobility of goods and people provide the incentive for increased production and markets access and therefore has a positive effect on the improvement of the welfare of households.

1.1 Study Motivation

Over the past few years, Uganda has increased investment in rural road development. There are numerous infrastructure development projects that have been commissioned but the paper will focus on the Albertine Region Sustainable Development Project (ARSDP) and how it has impacted communities in the region. Consequently, in 2015, the Government of Uganda commenced implementation of the ARSDP, a multi-sectoral project aimed at improving regional and local access to infrastructure, markets, and skills development in the Albertine region. The project was financed by the World Bank under the International Development Association (IDA) credit and Government of Uganda to a tune of roughly USD55million. The project aimed at improving regional connectivity to national and international social and economic opportunities and to ultimately spur socio-economic transformation of livelihoods of over 1.5 million people living within the reach of the upgraded roads.

In this set-up, the Government of Uganda has since tasked UNRA and the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development (MLHUD) with the implementation of the ARSDP. On 25th January 2022, President Museveni commissioned the 111 km Hoima-Butiaba-Wanseko road as well as the 235 km Kigumba - Bulima- Kabwoya- Kyenjonjo roads that were upgraded from gravel to bitumen standard under the project. At the same time, before oil and gas exploration activities commenced in the Albertine region, most of the districts in the region were categorized as hard to reach areas. Hard to reach areas refers to parts of the country that are not easily accessible because of the difficult terrain. Communities in hard-to-reach areas experience delays in accessing social services due to lack of transportation, lack of funds to pay for transport, poor road infrastructure and poor communication networks.

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which road improvements contribute to rural development to drive advocacy for increased investment in rural transport infrastructure and services in Uganda.

Right from the onset there was great optimism that the roads will boost the local businesses and help farmers access markets for their products, which will result into increased household incomes and improved livelihoods. The Buliisa Woman Member of Parliament Ms. Norah Bigirwa noted that if people adopt a serious development agenda and put the roads to good use it will boost trade and attract investments. Uganda's Prime Minister Ms. Robinah Nabbanja, who hails from the Albertine Region noted that the Region had achieved an 80 percent share of rural population with access to an all-season road and 55 percent of the women would directly benefit from the roads.

The District Commercial Officer in Kagadi, one of the districts in the region was quoted in the Daily Monitor, *"The impact of the new road is visible. New commercial buildings have emerged while the old buildings have been modified. New business-like construction hard-*

ware outlets have opened and the collections from Trading Licenses have shot up from USD30,370 in 2020/21 financial year to USD36,216 in 2021/22 financial year.” Figure 1 and 2 present the general state of roads in the study prior to construction and after construction respectively. Indeed, the project has resulted in better road provision in terms of quality and level of service.



Figure 1: One of the roads under construction
(Photo credit: The observer publication)



Figure 2: The road to Buliisa district after construction
(Photo credit: The Petroleum Authority of Uganda)

In a post-satisfaction survey commissioned by Ministry of Lands Housing and Urban Development (MLHUD), communities reported increased individual and household incomes accruing from employment opportunities provided by the road construction project through provision of local employment, emergence of new businesses and new market opportunities. Communities also noted an increase in retail and wholesale business

expansion which in turn has stimulated demand for business premises in the region thereby leading to growth of construction of commercial buildings to match rising demand for retail and wholesale business premises for both local and incoming external traders.

1.2 Study Aim and Objective

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which road improvements contribute to rural development, with the sole objective as to facilitate the promotion of a drive towards road-based funding advocacy for increased investment in rural transport infrastructure and services in Uganda.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts a descriptive design approach making use of the case study method approach. The descriptive design approach enabled the researcher to describe the relevant aspects of the phenomena under consideration. Under the descriptive design approach, the researcher was then able to establish the relationship between rural transport and development using descriptive language from secondary data, key informants, stakeholders and statistics. Secondary data was retrieved from several sources including press reviews, magazines, reports, and internet sources. The case study target was the Albertine region in Uganda with a specific focus on the districts where road constructions were commissioned under the Albertine Region Sustainable Development Project (ARSDP).

3. DISCUSSION OF STUDY FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The new road infrastructure in the study area has led to several inter-related and positive developments impacts. These are discussed as sub-topics in the sections that follow.

3.1 Diversification of Agricultural Activities

Majority of residents are subsistence farmers with 69% deriving their livelihood from growing crops like bananas, cassava, maize, and legumes and some derive their livelihood from fishing. The region contributes 18.7% of the total national fish catch. The good road network has enabled timely transportation of produce from villages to major markets; farmers can now access quality raw materials at reduced prices boosting the agricultural sector, the backbone of rural communities in the Albertine Region.

Communities have reported increased business and trade growth in farm products including maize, beans, rice, and sugar cane. For example, rice growing which that was being done at a small scale in the region has now become a big cash crop and widely traded within the region and outside the region to areas of Kampala, DR Congo, and South Sudan. The improved road network has also contributed to commercialization of agriculture because farmers are able to access labour and inputs like machinery to increase production of rice and sugarcanes. The diversification of agricultural activities has contributed to an improvement in income and with more income they are able to access credit financing paving way for more livelihood opportunities. One of the farmers when interviewed noted *“We can now freely and easily move to the market without any hindrance. It used to be tough whenever it rained. The road would be flooded.”*

3.2 Improved Revenues for the Tourism Sector in the Region

The Albertine region is one of the most biodiverse regions in the country with several rain forests and is also home to the Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda's oldest and largest national park that spans 4,000 square kilometres. The development of the road infrastructure has eased movement to the park and other tourism sites and thereby boosting tourism prospects and revenues.

Mr Wilson Kagoro, the park's warden in-charge of community conservation, in an interview with the Monitor², said Uganda Wildlife Authority UWA is optimistic that it will reap more revenue following the establishment of the new roads. *"The coming of these roads is a huge boost for us as UWA in terms of rising numbers of visitors who will now prefer to come to the park due to the good accessibility within and around it,"* he said, adding, *"This boost in numbers of visitors is what translates into increased revenue for us through park fees and it all means a big boost to the associated hotel and tourism infrastructure developed operated by the private sector players in and around the park."*

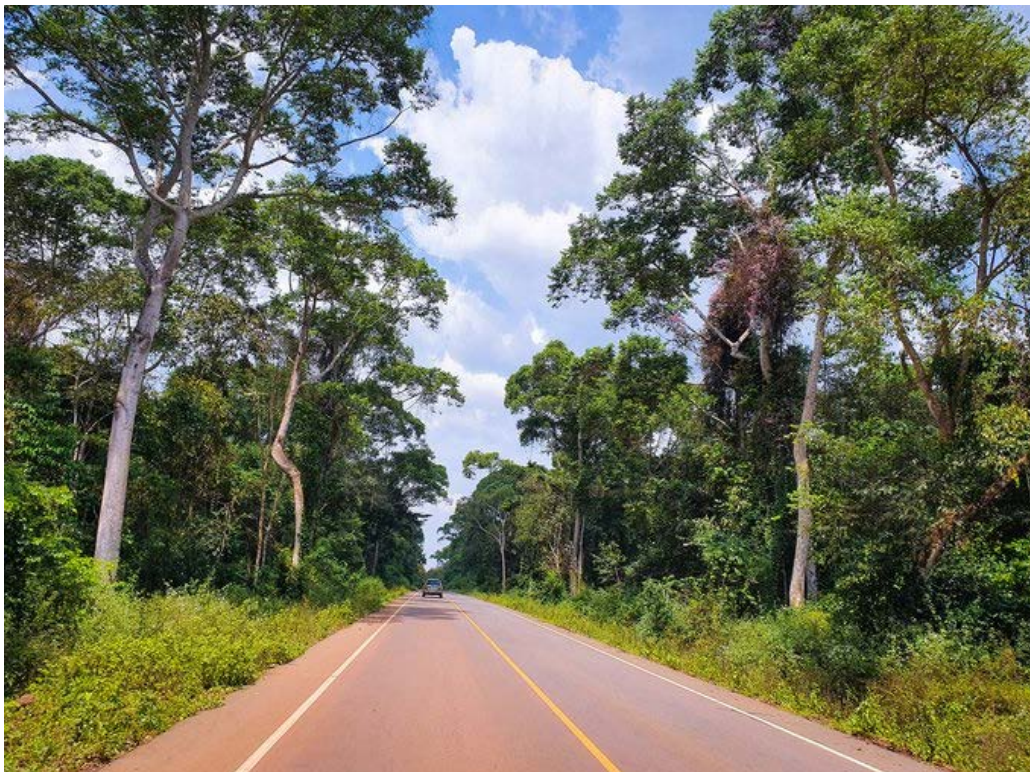


Figure 3: The road through the park
(Photo credit: Gambeta news)

3.3 Increased Competition

With the improved transport sector, the region can now receive a wider range of goods and services from all over the country which comes with reduced costs and improved quality. There is also an influx of traders that are hoping to reap from the new fortunes.

² <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/special-reports/why-roads-in-murchison-could-be-a-game-changer-3906246>

3.4 Socio-Economic Benefits.

Rural road improvement and construction increases the asset value of the rural people and thus facilitates trade and business opportunities. Land that is adjacent to the road has gained greater value. For example, an acre of land in Buliisa district in 2016 was UGX5million but by 2022 it had appreciated to over UGX20million.

3.5 Improved Travel Services

There is a reported increase in mobility patterns for the communities arising from increased transport means and reduced transport fares. This has not only led to increased engagement in vast business opportunities within and outside the region but also increased accessibility and seeking better social services. Initially transport was often infrequent or inadequate, there were a handful of taxis, motorcycles, and small service cars with strict schedules but currently there are several buses offering numerous choices for travellers.

3.6 Access to Better Education Opportunities

Before construction of the roads, parents just had to settle for schools in their locality that did not necessarily offer the best services. With improved and affordable transport means, they can access better schools and are able to benefit from the opportunities provided by the better schools. This means that children have choices and are no longer cut off from better opportunities because of location.

3.7 Access to Better Health Care

In the past, people found it difficult to travel to the hospitals. People who required specialized care from the main hospital in Hoima district had to travel long distances on muddy, rough roads and Some people missed health appointments because of transport difficulties. There are anecdotes that *“by the time someone got to the hospital they were worse than they had been because of traveling on the bumpy roads.”* With the new roads, a journey that usually took an average of 4 hours, takes only 2 hours, enabling the ailing to access fast and better services.

3.8 Improved Quality of Life

The lack of choice in the food within reach of people in communities can result in poor dietary habits and, consequently, poor health. Districts like Buliisa have a small food basket because of the harsh weather and sandy soils. With the improved transport, they can afford to bring in food from neighbouring districts at a relatively low cost.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, it goes without saying that rural roads are a key component of rural development, they promote access to economic and social services, generate increased agricultural incomes and productive employment opportunities and reduce poverty in the country. The government should therefore continue with efforts aimed at increasing funding for improvements of rural roads because they play an important role in enhancing income opportunities for the rural communities.

5. REFERENCES

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