

THE SOCIAL-ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON LIVELIHOODS OF COMMERCIAL BODA-BODA MOTORISTS IN UGANDA

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Abstract

The social-economic effects of Covid-19 pandemic on livelihoods of commercial boda-boda motorists in the Kira Town Council, Uganda. Were investigated by the author cross-sectional research design was adapted. Four focus group discussions and 4 in-dept interviews were conducted. Covid-19 movement restrictions paused challenges to boda-boda motorists including loss of employment, their families grappled with food insecurity and they suffered violence from spouses and brutality from security agencies. Awareness creation and interventions on violence against boda-boda motorists and social protection systems and services for men who suffer violence from the public and private spheres are required.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, social-economic, livelihoods, boda-boda motorists, Uganda

Introduction

On March 18th, 2020, the Government of Uganda like majority of the countries worldwide began to implement measures to mitigate Covid-19 pandemic. These included total shutdown of schools and institutions of higher learning where all learners had to return to their homes. This was followed by the closure of religious centers and open markets as well as closure of tourism and entertainment centers. National borders, public and private transport agencies were also shutdown except for cargo and essential goods and services. In addition, the government also ordered a night curfew to safeguard public safety and security and enforced the suspension of public gatherings, among other measures. Due to restricted mobility, majority of travelers were stranded. Some had to walk on foot to their destinations while others sought refugee

from their relatives and friends. In Uganda, these actions affected all sectors of the economy.

In the transport sector, boda-boda also known as motorcycle taxi (Doherty, 2017) were hit hard due to the fact that popular youthful males are engaged in and derive their livelihood in boda-boda business (Nyanzi et. al, 2004; Galukande et. al, 2009). Boda-boda means of transport was preferred by some travelers due to their flexibility to navigate through traffic jam and narrow roads impassable by commuter taxis (Raynor, 2014). Boda-bodas transport passengers, goods and services with a high physical interface between the motorists and their clients. This interaction has been indicated to pause a thriving environment for the spread of Covid-19 pandemic in the transport industry (Li et. al, 2020; Badr et. al, 2020; Linka et. al, 2020).

In the context of this study, areas with high boda-boda usage as means of transport may record higher Covid-19 pandemic numbers than where boda-boda is less used. To date, research on the link between mobility and Covid-19 worldwide has focused on public transport such as air, railway, road transport with use of private and public cars (Arellana et. al, 2020; Qu et. al, 2020). Most studies on boda-boda as a means of transport are epidemiological (Nyanzi et al 2004) with few narratives on risk and vulnerability dimensions (Graham et. al, 2020; Nižetić, 2020). In addition, studies on Covid-19 pandemic are inclined on cross-boundary routes (Radil, 2020; Sarkodie, 2020; Zimmermann et al, 2020) with limited studies on within country travels. My choice of my investigation on commercial boda-boda motorists, commonly known as boda-boda men, was that boda-boda motorists are highly mobile and have received limited studies in the frame of Covid-19 pandemic. This article discusses effects of Covid-19 pandemic on livelihoods of commercial boda-boda motorists with focus on food crisis, economic losses and domestic violence in Kira town council, Wakiso district, Uganda.

The Research Context

Uganda enjoys different means of transport e.g. air transport, commuter taxis and buses, special hire, bicycles and boda-boda taxis, water, cargo trucks among others. Despite the various forms of transport, the goal of conducting this study preferred to investigate effects of Covid-19 pandemic on the livelihood of commercial boda-boda motorists in Kira town council, Uganda. Kira was chosen first due to high concentration of boda-boda business by young adults. Secondly, Kira is the second largest town in Uganda after Kampala and is also known as a bedroom community for Kampala. Given its large residential population it requires transport on a daily basis. Third, Kira is

nearest to the capital city, Kampala and the Kampala Industrial and Business Park where majority of the population is employed in the informal sector. Forth, Kira is endowed with several sites of interest including the Basilica of the Uganda Martyrs at Namugongo that celebrates the Saints annually where boda-boda motorists take advantage of accumulating more income through the transportation of pilgrimages, cargo and many other things to facilitate the celebration at the Basilica.

Among the boda-boda motorists under this study, some own fully paid up motorcycles, others bought them on credit while others hire boda-boda and pay commission to the owner of the boda-boda on a daily basis. Since this mode of transport was a source of daily earning venture for boda-boda motorists, it was not clear to me on how lockdown as a measure against the spread of Covid-19 affected the livelihoods of boda-boda motorists. During this period, all sectors were locked down with the exception of essential services (hospitals, pharmacies, supermarkets, a few open markets). Private cars were also later suspended and boda-bodas were allowed to only transport cargo within limited time and destinations.

Communities were not accustomed to trust boda-boda motorists with money to buy or transport goods to their client's destinations. Boda-boda motorists were perceived to be an untrusted group of people. Others labelled them thieves while others called them promiscuous (adulterous) group of people (Nyanzi et al 2004). In addition, people stocked enough supplies when they got wind of the lockdown. The fear, anxiety and government restrictions known as Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that Covid-19 pandemic had infiltrated the country confined people in their homes led to minimal business for boda-boda motorists.

Personally, I had young twin babies, staying in the house seemed next to impossible. I had to go out at least twice a week to buy milk and Irish potatoes for the babies. Inside me, I would feel my identity change from being feminine to masculine (Namatende-Sakwa, 2018), with a 'what come may', I must go out of the house and fend for my family. I would walk up to four kilometers from my home on a lonely road to locate any open supermarket. All roads were deserted and were free from traffic. They were manned by armed men, punctuated with a number of roadblocks. The men were dressed up in Local Defense Units (LDUs), Uganda Peoples Defense Force (UPDF), and Police uniforms while others were dressed in casual wear difficult for lay people to determine whether they were armed or civilians.

The deployment was intended for several reasons among them was to keep law and order, SOPs and security of persons and property. The common boda-boda motorists who before Covid-19 made the roads impassable due to heavy traffic were nowhere to be seen. The few who had cargo could not stop on the road because they had definite destinations. Gunshots on boda-boda motorists would be heard as men in uniforms (army) tried to confiscate their motorcycles. Such gunshots could not stop me from searching for babies' foods although it kept on haunting me even when I had returned home. On several occasions I would get out of home I would see a boda-boda motorist being tortured and crying like children in struggle to restore their motorcycles confiscated by armed men.

This situation left me with so many unanswered questions. For example, I would ask myself where this boda-boda motorist was coming from and what was he going to do, whether he had a family, whether the boda-boda motorcycle he had belonged to him or it was a rented one, whether he had money to pay as fine to recover his motorcycle. People were also not allowed to talk in a group. It was very difficult for me to intervene and figure out what was going on. Besides, I was incapable of helping out in any way because I was also struggling for my family. The episode of seeing a man cry like a child kept haunting me every time, I passed by the boda-boda stages. Sometimes the news on radios and television would show horrific scenes of boda-boda motorists being beaten during curfew time as they struggled to make a living. During television news, you would see boda-boda motorists struggling to explain that they are heads of households and breadwinners and have to fend for their families, but still men in uniform beat them furiously while others were shot dead.

At this point, I started internalizing the differences in power relations amongst men. I would see some boda-boda motorists trying to fight back but they would be shot leaving some dead while others nursing wounds. It was not clear how the boda-boda motorists were providing for their families now that their only source of income had been disrupted by Covid-19. How were they accessing food, health care and finances to keep them going? It is these unanswered questions that motivated me to conduct this study.

Methodology

This section presents the characteristics of participants and Key informants of the study, study design, study sites, sampling methods, data collection instruments and analysis. The section below begins with participants of the study

Participants of the study

Demographic information of participants in focus group discussion (FGDs) and key informant interviews was captured. Eight participants were in the age group of 18-24, thirty-eight were in the age of 25-34 while two were in the age between 45-54 years. 34 men were married, 8 were not married while 6 had separated with their spouses. Majority of participants had low education levels 29 (Primary school) 12 (secondary -ordinary), 4 (secondary -advanced), 2 (certificate in motor mechanics, building construction) while 1 (Masters of Education administration and Human Resource Management). On the experience in years in the boda-boda as a business, most men 19 (6- above 10 years), 11(2-4years) 10 (4-6years), and 8 (1-2 years). On ownership of the motorcycle, most men (25) had got motorcycles on loan and they were still paying, 17, were renting the motorcycle from third parties while 6 men had acquired their personal motorcycles. Majority participants (45) had boda-boda business as their sole source of income, while 3 participants had boda-boda transport as a part-time job in addition to part-timing as motorcycle mechanics, cooks at schools, and attendants at construction sites. A scale of how much net each boda-boda man earned each day ranged from (5000-10,000Ugs or \$ 1.3-2.6), (10,000-20,000 Ugs or \$ 2.6 usd-5.3), (20,000-30,000 Ugs or \$2.6-8) and 30,000 Ugs or \$ 8 and above). However, all boda-boda men earned a net income of less than 5,000 Ugs equivalent to \$ 1.3.

Study Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design and qualitative data method was used. The choice of the design was based on the desire to have a one-time study to estimate the effects of Covid-19 pandemic on the livelihood of boda-boda motorists. The study was limited to four FGDs and four in-depth interviews supported to triangulate the information obtained in FGDs.

Study Site

This study was conducted from Kira Town Council, Wakiso District, Uganda. Shimon, Kira main, Kitikutwe and Semugonde stages were studied for a period of seven days. The four boda-boda stages studied are on feeder roads that feed into the final stage (Kira main) that connects to Kampala road.

Sampling Methods

Four boda-boda stages of Kira Town Council represented the study. The choice of participants was based on accessibility, availability and willingness to participate in the study and proximity to the researcher due Covid-19

movement restrictions. In all, 48 boda-boda motorists, 12 participants selected at each stage participated in FGDs. A total of 4 participants (heads and their deputies of boda-boda stages) were purposively selected to participate in-depth individual interviews because their long-term experience in boda-boda transport provided rich narratives on the effects of Covid-19. This was the best method of sampling in this study due to the following reasons. First, boda-boda motorists did not have records where a complete sample frame would be extracted. Second, boda-boda motorists are a group of people who do not settle in one place, they are always on transit transporting passengers, goods or services. Third, this was a Covid-19 period, and boda-boda mode of transport was still under total lockdown. Fourth, the method allowed observance of Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) to Covid-19.

Data Collection and Analysis

A letter of introduction to conduct this study was obtained from the office of the Vice Chancellor at Kyambogo University, Uganda. Prior contacts with Boda-boda heads of the stage were made where we exchanged telephone contacts. An appointment would be made a day prior to the meeting time. The timing of the meetings was also critical because in the mornings and evenings were presumed their peak hours and so we zeroed on midmorning (10:30am - 12:pm). After introducing the aim and objectives of the study, boda-boda motorists were informed that they had a right to participate, reject or withdrawing their participation from the study at any time, without being compelled to explain reasons for their non-participation.

All FGDs were conducted at the boda-boda stages and lasted one hour. FGDs were preferred due to their capacity of generating extensive data (Nyanzi et al 2004). The questions rotated at exploring the effects of Covid-19 on the social-economic livelihoods of boda-boda motorists. Notes on each theme (food insecurity, economic gains or losses and domestic violence were being taken as the discussions went on. A select group of 4 participants (1 from each boda-boda stage) were later invited to attend in-depth interviews in which themes that emerged in the course of focus group discussions were further investigated. Data was analyzed thematically according to the objectives of the study and presented in narrative form based on objectives.

Results

COVID-19 Pandemic on Food Crisis

This study demonstrates that Covid-19 pandemic led to restrictions on mobility and most people were confined in their homes. As people stayed home,

demand for food and other stocks in households increased. Nicola et al, (2020) reports similar findings. Focus focused group of Boda-boda motorists at Kira stage had this to say about the status of food prices

“There is a high rise of prices for both perishable and non-perishable food commodities at the same time, there is limited cash income. This situation has created food insecurity in households. The fact that we (Boda-boda motorists) earn little income (hand to mouth), we find it difficult to provide enough food to our families because boda-boda transport business has been locked down. In addition, our wives are not engaged in income generation activities to supplement household income and this exacerbated food insecurity in our household’s High food prices as a result of covid-19 are also reported by Ahn and Norwood (2020). In Uganda, this could have been possibly due general lockdown which affected the transportation of farm food produce to different market outlets throughout the country. In addition, due to Covid-19 pandemic, it is difficulty for most women in Uganda to put food on the table. This is due to increased unemployment resulting from technical skills gaps, low education achievement or drop out of school, limited prospects in the labor market and social-cultural impediments among other factors (see The Republic of Uganda (2020)

Married boda-boda motorists stated that “Our families were surviving on one meal a day (maize meal and beans) and because the beans take longer to cook, and the lack of fuel to cook the beans, some families just survive on porridge. We replaced beans with mukene (silver fish) because the Mukene takes little fuel and gets ready in a short time and also it has nutritional values. Unfortunately, our spouses complained that Mukene was not palatable with maize. They also complained that the house had become a fish landing site, a food eaten by the poor communities and animals. We have sold off our household assets like televisions, beds, mattresses, music systems to buy food for our families but the proceeds could not sustain our families. We are disappointed, we have grown seeing our grandfathers and fathers provide food to their families, we have lost the provisioning role in a short time due to rapid economic and social changes resulting from Covid-19 pandemic”

A Key informant also mentioned that their identities as men in the home had eroded and created many challenges because a real man is the one who provides for his family despite challenges as stated:

“Besides my family, I also live in an extended family. My brother and sisters – in - laws have been living with us since the lockdown. They all look up to me to provide food for the family, a role I can no longer fulfil. It feels bad to see

me not able to provide food to the family. My in-laws have always perceived me as someone who is economically successful. Secondly my wife comes from a well to do family. As a boda-boda cyclist, they used to undermine me but when I paid bride wealth, they started to respect me. Now when the family starts surviving on a cup of porridge, I see my status as a head of family getting lost because my in-laws who are currently living at my home have stopped greeting me. I feel bad and I have lost my role as a breadwinner (husband and father) now my in-laws see me as useless person. I wish I have where to go and hide, I would do that for some time until the situation normalizes” Shah et al. (2020), reports similar findings that unemployed people are stigmatized and discriminated.

“In my culture, if your house has enough food, you automatically qualify to be considered a ‘real man’ rich and at peace with each and every one. People will always respect you. Not only because of the materialistic things at your disposal, but because of the potential to provide food to your family. A well feed family is the richest -because this family will not fall sick due to malnutrition. Its better for me to have good looking children even when they are not well dressed than having malnourished children who are living in a double storied house. Food in a home is a stabilizer. When I have a conflict with my wife, I make sure that at least I buy meat, the next day I bring fish. If she had plans of leaving me, she will think twice and offload the baggage. My father was given a second wife for free because there was a lot of food at home. With this Covid-19 pandemic, we are really hit hard, because our role and identity as men; heads of families the provider and protector has been collapsed. Our manhood identity has been insulted and crushed to the marrow”

Participants further reported that although Government of Uganda was providing food to the neediest communities, boda-boda motorists in the studied areas did not receive any food supplies (posho, beans and milk) that were being given out by the government. Sadly, participants expressed disappointment due to lack of explanation from the side of central government or local leaders as to why the boda-boda motorists were not supplied with food supplies. They indicated that government had exploited them and promised that they will vote wisely in the coming national elections. From the discussions above, food insecurity was contributed to unemployment among boda-boda motorists. Motorists who were heads of households were more affected than single headed households. The motorists were psychologically affected and had lost self-esteem due to the humiliation from family members due to non-provisioning. In this situation, feelings of despair were all over their faces

which made them look sickly (see Yamben & Asaah ,2020 on health risks due to unemployment).

COVID 19 Pandemic and Economic Losses

Boda-boda motorists demonstrated that the Covid-19 measures affected their working routines in terms of working hours, created more fear while others had to abandon the boda-boda transport business as stated.

“As boda-boda motorists Covid-19 pandemic measures contributed major financial setbacks for us. For example, we were restricted to work from 7:00am-2:00pm. Although our work schedule was later increased in the month of June 2020 from 7:00am -5:00pm, we were used to earning more money by working late evening and night hours. In addition, the fact that we were restricted to transporting cargo, this also created income shortages and forced us to make more money by flouting Covid-19 Standing Operating Procedures (SOPs). We were arrested for non-adherence to SOPs, tortured while in police custody, fined and while our other colleagues their motorcycles were confiscated by police or local defense. Our colleagues who were unable to pay the heavy fines and bribes imposed by police in order to recover their motorcycles committed suicide. For example, Hussein Walugembe a boda-boda motorist aged 29-years old from Masaka district in Uganda, his motorbike was seized by police operatives. His inability to pay a bribe to the Police Traffic Officers of about \$40 and the frustration of his next survival, triggered him to commit suicide on 3rd, July, 2020 by setting fire on himself while in police custody. Another colleague from the Shimon Stage, also set fire on himself after losing about \$30 in bride to armed men on the roads. Although he was rescued by a neighbor, the fire burns left deep wounds on his legs. We can say that about ten boda-boda motorists committed suicide by burning themselves. In addition, due to security operative brutality, boda-boda motorists who hired motorcycles for commercial business, the motorcycle principle owners withdrew them from motorists. Even after partial easing of the lockdown, boda-boda owners did not renew contracts with the motorists. Our colleagues who had bought boda-boda motorcycles loans or higher purchase, such arrangements were cancelled and vendors recalled their motorcycles. This situation has pushed most of our colleagues out of business and has created mass unemployment without any compensations” The situation of boda-boda transport business in Uganda is not different from other sectors of the economy. For example, Burger (2020) and Nicola et.al, (2020) demonstrate that worldwide, Covid-19 worldwide led to a reduction in the labor force across all sectors of the economy and that some businesses are in credit crisis and have faced mass unemployment.

As already mentioned above (context section), Kira town council is a strategic business centre for boda-boda motorists due to many attractions in the area as stated by a key informant. “We usually make a lot of money in the month of May-June when we transport pilgrimages to the Basilica at Namugongo. The money I make in these two months (May-June) school fees for my children for a year. The balance of the money I use it to visit my relatives up country, or plan to buy myself a new motorbike. But all these money merry making seasons were disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. I had a debt and I had promised myself that I would clear it in the month of June. Now everything has been overturned by Covid-19 pandemic. What I am going to do. I already got the motorbike on credit. Where am going to get the money to pay?”

A key informant further mentioned that during soccer season, their incomes increased. When there is a match at Mandela National Stadium (in Uganda) most people prefer to use of boda-boda transport as mentioned. “There is usually heavy congestion on all roads, soccer fans prefer use of boda-bodas because they navigate and pass through short cuts to overcrowded destinations. Also, during soccer season, transport charges rise and sometimes doubled due to the high demand for boda-boda transport. Soccer fans parked their lavish cars and without out any bargain, flashes out an equivalent of \$10 for transport to be dropped at the stadium. What an exciting experience we had before Covid-19 pandemic. The stadium now was turned into a covid-19 treatment center, even if I’m called to pick free money free there, I can’t dire step my feet there, I even don’t want to know what is happening there. I would rather stay poor than going to that centre”

A Key informant at Semugonde Stages revealed that Kira town council has the first-class primary and secondary schools where majority of well to do families take their children. “I had a contract from four customers of dropping and picking their children to and from school. I would do this very early in the mornings. In the evenings, I would take my time because their schedules of leaving school were not universal. I would get my clean money at the end of the month enough to pay for school fees for my children in similar schools like those of the rich. With Covid-19 pandemic and its effects, once my clients with draw their children from these schools, I will automatically withdraw my children because I can’t afford the fees on my own, I need a good job to sustain my children in those schools. It is so disheartening when you have set a good foundation for your children and then it is interrupted. I don’t know how I will explain my predicament to my family when schools open”

In addition, participants reported that “As boda-boda motorists, we are expecting more frustrations. The town (Kampala Metropolitan) has been redesigned which has locked out boda-boda transport services in the city center. The implementation of this new change was planned to commence in November, 2020. Only those registered associations like safe Boda-bodas (e.g. safe-bodas) will be allowed to operate in the city area where high income is generated. Most of us who are not registered with boda-bodas associations should count ourselves out of business. This is a new development. You have nothing to eat and yet authorities are demanding registration fees”

Another reason why the Covid-19 pandemic had significantly affected the Boda-boda jobs and income was the failure to perceive Boda-boda taxi as formal employment with policies governing its operations and full protection from government. Those who lost jobs were fearful of the dreaded spread of Covid-19. The restrictions on mobility had also prevented them from seeking other sources of livelihoods in both formal and informal employment. They were also challenged by low levels of education and skills to acquire new jobs. They were also mindful of the fact that most companies and institutions had retrenched employees in their institutions and thought chances of being recruited were slim. All these fears combined with lack of income to meet their daily needs had pushed boda-boda motorists on the streets carrying cargo on their heads, a desperate action they thought had exposed them more to risks of catching the Covid-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Domestic Violence

Boda-boda motorists also reported an upsurge of domestic violence from their female spouses due to Covid-19 confinement. “We have been trapped at home with our wives (abusers) the situation is more stressful, fatiguing and depressing”. Similarly, Campbell, (2020) & Taub, (2020) demonstrated that domestic violence is common due to longer stays with family members especially in vacations or in times of pandemics. “We are disturbed by the insensitive approaches to curb down domestic violence for both male and female. The focuses of government and communities has been on women and girl child. We as boda-boda motorists have suffered physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence from our spouses”. Authors like Malathesh (2020); Peterman et. al, (2020) & Van Gelder et. al, (2020) investigated violence against women and children but none of them looked at violence against men. This is not different from other literature available (Peterman et al, 2020), there were no protective systems to address domestic violence against men. This supports Usher et al (2020) demanding family sustenance and facilities to victims of family violence in the Covid-19

pandemic era. It was reported that all sorts of domestic violence against Boda-boda motorists resulted into loss of power, a sense of hopelessness since they could no longer provide for their families.

Participants further reported that they had suffered violence from both their spouses and children. “As men and heads of households, we feel our status and identity insulted by our wives and its worse when it is done before our children. We are vulnerable, dying in silence in own homes. We have been denied food and sex. We have been accused and insulted of infidelity. The fact that we were not working, the decrease in income triggered emotional abuse and physical violence, our homes have become terrorist sites. We fear to report case of violence to authorities or seek help due to stigma associated with being coerced by a wife. We are really dying in silence”

It was further reported that women had separated with their husbands, leaving children to the care of males. “We are now in a life and death situation. Our colleague has set himself ablaze because the wife eloped with another man who was supporting her economically. Another woman poured boiling porridge to death to his husband for failure for non-food provisioning to the family” Participants alleged that violence from spouses and police brutality were responsible for suicidal acts stated above. By the time this study was conducted, all health systems and protective agents had focused on women and girl child issues and ignoring male and boys’ issues. The Minister of Gender Labour and Social Development in Uganda stated that the months of March 30th - 28th April, 2020 a total of 3280 cases of reported. Gender-based violence case totaling to 283 victims (children and women) were reported by (Hauxia, 2020). The figures were not gender disaggregated, hence the concerns of boda-boda men on violence against males could be true.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that movements restrictions due to Covid-19 pandemic did not only lead to loss of employment, increased food insecurity and violence from their female spouses and brutality from security agencies; but Covid-19 pandemic had birthed another virus called collapsed hegemony and masculinity among boda-boda motorists. The motorists power had been collapsed by government security agencies and household systems. There is need to conduct studies and agitate policy reforms on domestic violence against men generally and also create awareness about increased risk of violence against boda-boda motorists and social protection systems and services for men who suffer violence both in public and private spheres are required.

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Declaration of interest statement

I the author of this work declare that I have no competing interests

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