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Transport services, jobs and motor cycles – John Mendelsohn

We generally look to the developed world for ideas on how to improve circumstances in Namibia. And normally we adopt formal, rather than informal systems or services. We do this because development needs to be regulated, attractive to ‘investors’, and to contribute to GDP.

However, the informal world has much to teach us, especially when it comes to innovation and filling gaps left by the formal sector. One good example comes from our northern neighbour, Angola.

There are few places, even in very remote rural areas of Angola, where you won’t find motorcycle taxis, willing to take you anywhere for a modest fare. Most road junctions in rural areas have several taxis parked there for much of the time. All are ready to go, wherever and whenever needed. They carry not only people, but also goods that have to be transported from rural homes to markets. Many a motorcycle is to be seen carrying one or two goats, or bags of charcoal or maize. Imagine how long rural residents would have to walk without this service. And incomes earned from sales in markets are invaluable in rural areas where there are no other sources of money.

The majority of taxis though operate in and around urban areas between residential and commercial zones. Here they complement the services of blue and white mini-bus taxis (called *candongueiros*), which provide transport along major roads and in-and-out of central business districts. These two services work together. It is the motorcycles that make their way along narrow, rough roads in dense informal settlements, for example. And they fill other gaps left open by the bigger, more formal mini-buses or even large inter-city buses.

Cheap motor cycles are available for sale in every town, and every significant market offers spares, workshops and mechanics to fix problems. The motorcycles are licenced, but helmets are not required and several passengers can squeeze themselves on to ride pillion.

Accidents happen, of course. But their costs are outweighed by the number of jobs and services provided by Angola’s motorcycles. They provide millions of Angolans with transport services, and with livelihood opportunities that come from people being able to move themselves and their goods. Tens of thousands of motorcycle drivers are gainfully employed, and their taxis are supported by thousands more mechanics and traders who help maintain this service.

Many of us see these motorcycles as dangerous, messy. We just don’t want this kind of informality. We are somehow better, more organised, perhaps more developed. But those perspectives only come from people who seldom, if ever need a taxi. Certainly, no critic has had to take a bag of vegetables to market, and then use the proceeds to buy medicine for a child.

Namibia would gain much by allowing motorcycle taxis. Thousands of jobs would be created, and valuable services would be available to those Namibians who spend too much time ‘footing’.

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