

Uganda's boda boda riders are taking on new technology – and new organising challenges

In Uganda, informal motorcycle taxi drivers are building workers' power
by joining unions and utilising digital technology.

By Evelyn Lirri¹

When Kanyike Kiviri first joined the transport industry in 2003 as a motorcycle rider, he lived from hand-to-mouth. His savings were meagre and working conditions were harsh, just like it was for many riders in Uganda's bustling capital, Kampala. Motorcycle taxis, or boda bodas as they are commonly known in Uganda, are a huge part of the public transportation network. With an estimated 200,000 boda boda riders in Kampala alone, they offer a quick means of transport for a significant number of the city's residents where traffic congestion remains a major day-to-day challenge. "Because boda boda riders earn on a day-to-day basis, it can be hard for them to save money. And when they fall sick or get into accidents, they have no fallback position. That's why we decided to organise ourselves," Kiviri explains.

Kiviri is a founding member and current treasurer of the *Kampala Metropolitan Boda Boda Entrepreneurs (KAMBE)*, a cooperative society whose membership spans over 60,000 individuals. He says that through the cooperative, they are working towards transforming the largely informal industry by making it more structured, while at the same time improving the livelihoods of those engaged in it.

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KAMBE has gone through its transformation to reach where it is today. Some of its members were previously affiliated to the *National Federation for Professional Cyclists Network*, which was formed in 2009. But because it was mired in unending conflicts, the federation eventually disintegrated. Then in 2014, another boda boda association called KAMBA was formed, which in 2015 morphed into a cooperative society and was renamed KAMBE. That same year, KAMBE also affiliated to the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU). At the time, the ATGWU had embarked on a plan to revitalise itself as a robust trade union through effective mobilisation.

Formed in 1938 as one of the pioneering labour organisations in Uganda, ATGWU started off as a strong union with a significant membership and influence, fighting for secure and safe working conditions and rights for workers. But it suffered several challenges, especially after the introduction of structural adjustment by the World Bank and IMF, which among others things, gutted the secure, public services jobs of many of its members, resulting in a massive drop in trade union numbers and driving the ATGWU to near collapse. However, in recent years the union has embarked on a long-term strategy to address its internal weaknesses, which include a lack of infrastructural resources, organisational inefficiencies, a lack of member participation and internal cohesion. The ATGWU recognizes that addressing these issues will be key if it is to command a strong influence once again in Uganda's transportation industry.



There are an estimated 200,000 boda boda drivers in the Uganda capital of Kampala alone. Organising these workers has been key to the resurgence of one of Uganda's oldest unions, the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (Nils Macher/Alamy)

Part of that strategy has seen it successfully bring on board a significant number of new members. "One of the major achievements of the ATGWU is the dramatic swelling of membership within a short span of time. Surging from a membership

of just over 5,000 members in 2014 to a paid-up membership of 105,000, its strategy of revitalization was premised on the affiliation of mass organisations of informal workers, each of which has its own associational and structural power resources,” notes the findings of a new report – *Riding on a Union App – Uganda’s Public Transport Workers’ Digital Response to Platforms* by Erick Manga, Paula Hamilton and Stephenson Kisingu – by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES).

Currently, ATGWU’s membership spans workers in the transport, oil, chemical, private security and property services industry. In the public transport sector, it has affiliated to its ranks the Boda Boda, Tuk Tuk and the *Taxi Workers Union (BOTTAX)*, the *Kampala Metropolitan Boda Boda Entrepreneurs*, the *Kampala Operational Taxi Stages Association (KOTSA)* and the *Airport Taxi Services Cooperative Society*.

Going digital

The report reveals that despite this achievement, the union’s rapid membership growth has also presented new challenges for the ATGWU, which now needs to “design and develop acceptable service arrangements and internal reforms to address the full integration of the considerable number of informal workers who are now members.” The ATGWU is also working to increase its share of boda boda and taxi operators in Kampala around the digital economy by supporting its affiliates to develop their own ride-hailing apps, in a market where huge multinationals such as Uber and Bolt, and big regional companies such as Safe Boda are already operating while undermining workers’ rights. So far, KAMBE, KOTSA and the *Airport Taxis Cooperative Services* have all developed separate digital platforms with the help of AGTWU.

KAMBE’s app for example has been developed with features that enables its user-members to manage passenger and courier requests, pay membership fees, save money, withdraw funds and track transactions. “With the app, our members will no longer have to go to the different offices to save their money. They can save through the app and the money goes directly into their KAMBE account,” says Kiviri.

But as the report notes, rolling out the app requires a lot of financial resources, which KAMBE does not have at the moment. Having a smartphone is also an

essential element of using the app. But as the report found, many boda boda riders do not possess smartphones. Kiviri says the KAMBE cooperative has partnered with the Chinese telecoms company TECNO, which has agreed to sell smartphones to its members on loan.

But there are still challenges abound for the AGTWU, as it seeks to introduce digital solutions into the industry. One of the key issues it is grappling with is how to address existing gender gaps and increase the digital representation of women. In Uganda, gender gaps around phone ownership remain considerably wide, with 77 per cent of men owning a mobile phone compared to just 54 per cent of women. “Smartphone distribution will be highest amongst male trade union members in each of the associations that have developed, or are planning to implement, platform apps within the AGTWU initiative,” the report reveals.

Mobilising female boda boda riders to join the industry also remains an uphill task. The KAMBE leadership says it is trying to change this by recruiting more women into the association as riders but also to take on leadership roles within its executive. One way it has done this is by starting a women’s group, as an arm of the association. This has led to the recruitment of 12 women to KAMBE’s executive and 40 boda boda riders within the Kampala Metropolitan area. “Through this group, we have managed to convince the women that they too can ride boda bodas and earn a decent income. This wasn’t something we could easily do before,” explains Kiviri.

Noeline Mukisa, one of the female executives in KAMBE says women still face several challenges in the sector, such as sexual harassment and poor working conditions. “When they know that the environment is not safe for them, you will not see many female riders. The same problem has been experienced with taxis,” she says. With all the innovations and mobilisation that KAMBE is spearheading, Kiviri believes the future of many riders like him is bright. “We want to see an organised boda industry where there is discipline, where we are respected and riders can make a decent living,” says Kiviri.

