



Challenges of informal motorcycle transport in Liberia

Situation

After the civil war had ended in 2003, the demand for affordable transportation in Liberia increased rapidly. Ex-combatants, often former child soldiers, quickly offered uncomplicated and fast transport services using motorcycles. This phenomenon has been typical in many African post conflict and developing countries, including Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Uganda. Due to the lack of reliable and sufficient formal public transport the number of motorcyclists in Liberia grew very fast.

Phen-Phen business in Liberia

Commercial motorcyclists are called Phen-Phen drivers in Liberia. Customers simply wave to the motorcyclists, shout “Phen-Phen” or go to the assembly points of the drivers to get a lift. For about US\$ 1 for 5 km the customer receives a service that is usually much faster than other transport modes.¹ According to estimations of the Ministry of Transport of Liberia (MoT), Phen-Phens are responsible for up to 60 % of all motorized transport in the center of Liberia’s 1.1 million inhabitant’s capital Monrovia.² The commercial motorcycle transport offers a flexible service with trips on demand, while regular taxi transport in Liberia allows transport only on certain routes. According to the estimations of

the MoT around 250,000 motorcycles are used commercially countrywide.

Data following estimations of the stakeholder (see footnotes)	Liberia	Montserado	Foya
No. of Motorcycles ¹	250,000	70,000	1,500
No. of Motorcyclists ³	500,000	130,000	4,500
Motorcycles per 1,000 inhabitants	62.6	61.2	21
Cars per 1,000 inhabitants ⁴	5.7		
Average daily profit of a Phen-Phen driver ⁵	US\$ 8.15	US\$ 8.40	US\$ 3.95
GDP per capita per day ⁶	US\$ 0.68		
No. of LMTU-Members ⁷	40,000	11,000	350
No. of drivers with license ⁸	1 %	< 1 %	0 %

Key data on Phen-Phen operations in Liberia. Sources: See footnotes

Especially in rural areas up to three or four drivers share one of these commercial motorbikes. For this reason the MoT estimates that Phen-Phen transport offers daily in-

1 The data collection and the factsheet have been planned and prepared by Alexander Czeh, Adam S. Kamara, Marco Mrozek, Siaka Nuah; GIZ “capacity development in the transport sector/ roads in Liberia” during April 2012.

2/3 MoT; Garboi, Tarnue (03.2012), Foya Police Soko G. Kamara (2012)

4 Transport Master Plan of Liberia, Draft (2011), p.149

5 Based on average of interviewed stakeholder (MoT, LMTU, women group, LNP) (2012)

6 Worldbank, GDP per capita 2010 (2012)

7 LMTU; Siname, Robert N. (2012)

8 Liberia/Montserado: LMTU: Siname, Robert N. and LNP: Saar, M. John Foya: LMTU; Gborie, George F.; LNP: Sergent Kollae (2012)



come for more than half a million drivers and their families. Additional jobs are provided for mechanics who service the Phen-Phen motorbikes. In a country such as Liberia, with high unemployment⁹ and illiteracy rates¹⁰, the Phen-Phen businesses are an important part of the service sector and highly relevant for poverty reduction.

Phen-Phen in rural areas

Around half of all Liberians live in rural areas, where roads are usually not graveled or paved. Therefore motorcycles often offer the only possibility to reach other villages. Furthermore, Phen-Phens transport goods and allow farmers to reach local markets in order to sell their products.

Income of Phen-Phen drivers

The average revenue of a Phen-Phen driver is around US\$20 a day. Most Phen-Phen drivers cannot afford to purchase motorbikes but rent them from people with more financial resources. The cheapest motorcycles are imported from China and in some cases do not cost more than US\$ 500, which offers the creditor a return of investment within a few months. After subtracting the daily fee paid to the owner of the motorcycles (around US\$ 7) and the purchase of gasoline (around US\$ 5 a day), in average around US\$ 8 per day remain as income for the driver. In Liberia, where 84 % of the populations are living below the international poverty line¹¹, this income is much higher than that of an average family. For this reason many young men prefer driving Phen-Phen to earn money instead of going to school or receiving other types of education. Even educated

people often prefer driving a Phen-Phen rather than working in a proper job.



A heavy-loaded Phen-Phen on a rural road. Photo by GIZ, 2012.

Phen-Phen Unions

With the Liberian Motorcycle Transport Union (LMTU), the Union of Safe Motorcycle in Liberia (USMOL) and the United Motorcycle Transport Union Liberia (UMTUL) three unions of Phen-Phen drivers are registered in Liberia. The biggest is the LMTU with about 40,000 members. The unions offer their members loans of motorcycles with comparatively favorable conditions. In Monrovia, about 950 male Phen-Phen drivers rent their motorcycles from the LMTU.

Challenges of Phen-Phen operations

Lack of protection and adequate clothing for drivers

Safety is the biggest problem of commercial motorcycle transport in Liberia. Due to a lack of protection, Phen-Phen drivers are much more vulnerable than users of other transport modes like cars or buses. Furthermore, motorcycles

⁹ Ecobank (2012)

¹⁰ UNICEF (2012), youth literacy rate (15-24 years) 76%, adult literacy rate (2005-2010) 59 %

¹¹ UNICEF (2012), % of population below international poverty line of US\$ 1.25 per day, 2000-2009



can reach high speeds of more than 90 km/h. Most Phen-Phen drivers do not wear helmets or provide helmets for their passengers. Moreover, most Phen-Phen drivers wear flip-flops instead of properly fitted boots. In combination with reckless driving and overspeeding they are more prone to crash injuries than e.g. car occupants.

Driving without a license and overloading

Another reason for accidents is the number of passengers. In Liberia the driver carries in average two passengers on one motorcycle¹², and sometimes even more. In rural areas all kinds of goods are transported, including heavy and/ or hazardous goods like petrol, which further compromises safety.

An important cause for reckless driving is the lack of driving education. Nearly no Phen-Phen driver in Liberia has a driver license or drives a registered motorcycle. Drivers are therefore often unaware of traffic rules and signs, and tend to overestimate their driving abilities. In addition, the MoT assumes that alcohol and drug usage is widespread among the Phen-Phen driver's.



A Phen-Phen driver waiting for the next customer. Photo by GIZ, 2012.

Fatalities and data

According to statistics of the Liberia National Police, in the first half of 2011 an average of eight people per month died in accidents involving Phen-Phens, and an additional 28 people per month were injured. However, neither the police nor the MoT is able to provide reliable data about the total number of accidents and fatalities.

Traffic Law and regulation

The Traffic Police tries to improve the road safety situation, but neither proper equipment (the traffic police in Monrovia owns not a single motorbike!) nor a statutory basis are provided. The basis for traffic police operations is Paragraph 10.5 of the Liberian traffic law:

“No person shall, ...,drive, or move, any vehicle or combination of vehicles which is in such unsafe condition as to endanger any person or property. A person who violates the provisions of this section shall be subject to a fine of not more than US\$ 100.”

The law, which was published in 1958, does not offer detailed rules like the obligation to wear a helmet. Due to the absence of regulations or penalty scales there is increasing arbitrariness. Although the MoT published the “Administrative regulation operations of motor bikes in Liberia” in 2008, which offers a regulation for motorcycles and also a penalty scale, the regulations are not accepted by all governmental stakeholders. Liberia's police therefore cannot act on the basis of these regulations.

Promoting female Phen-Phen drivers

Female Phen-Phen drivers are very rare in Liberia - nearly all of the Phen-Phen drivers are male. The networking women group in Liberia assumes that the most important reasons are lack of awareness and training of women.



Another reason could be that creditors of the loan system are afraid to give loans to female drivers. The fear is caused by cultural barriers including religious reasons. Furthermore, some creditors are afraid that female drivers will not be accepted by their male colleagues.

A lot of women also avoid using of Phen-Phen transport as customers because they are feeling afraid of the often reckless way of driving of the male Phen-Phen driver. Especially during the night time female passengers generally feel unsafe and vulnerable.

Recommendations¹³

1. Regulations and traffic law

To improve the overall safety of Phen-Phen operations, the police should be enabled to act on the basis of the already existing motorbike regulations developed by the MoT. For a use of the regulations on a statutory basis it is compulsory that all stakeholders (i.e. Ministry of Justice, police and Ministry of Finance) accept and sign the regulations. In addition, the regulations of the MoT have to be revised. Regulations like the prohibition of Phen-Phen transport after 8:00 pm could be reconsidered.¹⁴

The introduction of a clear regulation (i.e. making the use of a helmet compulsory) and clearly defined and transparent penalty fees would also help to minimize the tendency of arbitrariness on the part of the police.

2. Awareness of regulations

To raise awareness and transparency it is necessary to spread the regulations to all motorcyclists. Every driver should be aware of the rules and penalties. Partner for such a distribution could be stakeholders like the Phen-Phen unions, the women network, the MoT or the police. Furthermore the media could be used to inform all drivers on the regulations.

3. Enforcement of regulations

Starting from a specific date to be negotiated with all stakeholders, the police finally would need to start enforcing the regulations for motorcyclists. To be able to accomplish the task of enforcement, it would be necessary to improve the equipment of the police, i.e. with motorcycles. Also the police needs more breathalyzer (currently only three are available) and drug tester as well as training for their proper usage to counter alcohol and drug usage in traffic.

4. Data availability

To improve the data availability about road safety it is necessary to create one central unit responsible for collecting and making available all data related to transport, including the number of accidents or the overall number of motorcycles and drivers.¹⁵

5. Raise participation of female Phen-Phen drivers

The women networking group in Liberia and the LMTU are interested in a stronger participation of women as Phen-Phen drivers. Both have the capacity and the experience in training driving skills of motor-

¹³ The comprehensive SSATP study by A. Kumar *Understanding the emerging role of motorcycles in African cities* offers detailed information on and general recommendations for the issue of commercial motorcycles

¹⁴ Since April 2012 a working group of MoT, LNP, MoJ and BIN is working on law for motorcycling

¹⁵ GIZ is involved in the progress of restructuring if the Department of Planning of the MoT



cycling.¹⁶ The women networking group and LMTU might provide collaborative trainings. Beyond the training, loans could be provided for women who have passed the training successfully. With the help of the loans women could start their independent Phen-Phen business and achieve their own income. Spillover effects could raise the awareness of women and motivate creditors to give loans to women, especially if they recognize that well-trained female Phen-Phen drivers treat the motorbikes better and drive with less accidents than their often untrained male colleagues.¹⁷ Furthermore, women could provide transport services for other women who are afraid to drive with male Phen-Phen drivers.

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¹⁶ Liberia needy women and children organ. implemented in Maryland training for female Phen-Phen drivers/automotobike repair collaborative with UNDP
¹⁷ Experiences of LMTU and Liberia women and children organ. showed that female drivers treat their bikes better and drive more carefully