

# Off-road trading: Some perspectives from Africa

*Once the hub of even a small community, the market has changed dramatically. Infrastructure development that was intended to improve access has in some cases had just the opposite — or at least an unpredicted — effect. Larger centralized markets selling a wider and more sophisticated range of goods are becoming the norm, and small markets are losing out. Gina Porter explains how these changes are affecting rural communities.*

EFUAH KUMAH, a small middle-aged woman, sits under a tree by the dusty roadside on the edge of the village of Adabra in Central Region, Ghana, early one Friday morning. By her side she has a large basket of freshly harvested maize and a number of small plastic containers. Suddenly a heavily laden minibus lumbers into sight, and bumps crab-fashion down the narrow pot-holed track towards her; it is already full and does not even reduce its speed as she struggles to her feet to try to wave it down. Two hours later, Efuah is still waiting. Disconsolately, she gathers up her load, and retraces her steps homewards. No more vehicles are likely to make the journey through Adabra to the market-town of Kasoa today. Now she must wait until the following Tuesday for the next opportunity to market her maize.

## Market decline

Getting crops to market and transporting goods and agricultural inputs back to the farm is a complex procedure for millions of traders and farmers across rural Africa, but for the women and men who live at any distance from an all-season road, these essential livelihood activities can be a logistical nightmare. Efuah's village is located down a severely pot-holed track about five miles from the nearest paved road. Until about 25 years ago the village was an important market centre where local people sold their maize and cassava to wholesale dealers from urban centres in the region, and a wide variety of goods could be purchased, including fish from the coast, kerosene, cloth, and clothing. But when the local roads deteriorated the village market declined and eventually died, and villagers in the area now depend on the main market at Kasoa, about 15 miles away.

Unfortunately, no one in Adabra has enough money to purchase a vehicle — although six men have bicycles — and the villagers depend on minibuses passing through from other settlements to take them to Kasoa on market days. During the rains the minibuses often become stuck in the mud; then there may be no further vehicles going past the village for weeks at a time: 'Your goods are ready', complain local farmers, 'but then perish'. If a minibus does come through Adabra and there is room for

more passengers, it costs 1000 cedis per person for the single journey to Kasoa and an additional sum for any accompanying load. This amount is sometimes too much for the women petty-traders, in particular, who often trek to Kasoa with grain and return with salt, fish, tomatoes, and other items for resale in the village.

The village elders have made representations to the regional government about the problems the village has experienced since the loss of its market. A contract to build a new road was awarded some years ago to a man from a nearby town; according to the villagers he squandered most of the advance and then disappeared with the remaining money. As a result, the road remains in poor condition; on occasions, whole sections are washed away completely in the rains.

SAPs, deteriorating access, and market decline; the story of Abora is repeated across rural Africa. In many countries, condi-



Headloading is often the only option open to farmers.

Photo: Gina Porter

*For many women the only alternatives to walking miles to market are investing in a bicycle — which few can afford — or waiting for a minivan to pass through.*



tions have become worse for farmers and traders living in off-road locations because of economic recession and the imposition of structural adjustment programmes. Road maintenance programmes come to a halt through lack of funds, vehicle purchases decline because of the escalating costs of imported vehicles, petrol prices rise as subsidies are removed, and spare parts become more expensive and difficult to obtain. In these conditions, transport services to off-road settlements are often the most severely affected: urban-based transporters and traders are unwilling to take their vehicles down badly rutted tracks in such circumstances, and when they do make journeys along bad roads they may charge passengers at higher rates to offset the costs of vehicle deterioration.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, this impacts on local economies, and in some remote rural areas of Ghana, for example, agricultural prices have dropped because of the transport costs associated with road deterioration.<sup>2</sup>

The loss of off-road markets is an associated issue of particular concern to many rural people in Africa, though one which seems to be ignored in government documents. When researching rural marketing in northern Nigeria in the 1970s, 80s, and early 90s, I found numerous cases of market decline and disappearance in off-road settlements: paradoxically, these were frequently associated with regional road construction and improvement programmes.<sup>3</sup>

Road construction is often accompanied by remarkably rapid population movements as off-road inhabitants (generally perhaps the younger and more entrepreneurial) migrate to the new road and roadside markets appear, in the first instance catering for passing vehicular trade, but subsequently developing into bulking centres for surrounding areas. These roadside markets tend to grow at the expense of less accessible markets, which may suffer further erosion when road/track maintenance declines and the operating costs of off-road vehicles escalate because of structural adjustment programmes. The death of a rural market can have devastating economic and social consequences for local inhabitants, particularly in remote areas like Muslim north-eastern Nigeria, where women's mobility is often restricted and travel to distant places, particularly distant markets, is associated with promiscuity.



*Vehicle owners will test the depth of water in a pothole before attempting — or refusing — to take a vehicle through.*

### **Access and the poor**

Since off-road rural areas and populations are characteristically markedly poorer than those in comparable roadside locations in the same region, the decline in off-road transport services and the loss of markets can be particularly



Women traders in an off-road village meet to discuss their problems in getting to market.

damaging. Larger, wealthier farmers may be able to withstand the impact, to an extent, through both the purchase of vehicles and their relationship with large produce dealers, but small farmer-traders, in particular, will be hard hit. They do not produce sufficient quantities for sale to attract dealers to their farms on a regular basis, and cannot build up sufficient capital to buy vehicles. Post-harvest losses will be high in such circumstances, given the low capacity of on-farm storage and processing. In West Africa, women often bear the brunt of deterioration in access, since they are frequently required to headload not only their own produce, but also their husband's, to the paved road at regular intervals in order to minimize such losses. For petty traders attempting to operate marginal businesses from such areas the chance of improving their economic circumstances is slim. It is now recognized that income from off-farm employment plays a crucial role in supporting farm families in rural Africa; in off-road areas such opportunities are often minimal.

Part of the problem for most off-road areas is their political powerlessness. In countries where the decision-making process tends to be strongly influenced by personal contact, those resident in remote, inaccessible locations are at an immediate disadvantage. The decentralization programmes now in place in Ghana and many other African countries will bring some devolution of power down to local government offices, but even between these local government headquarters and the people living in small off-road settlements, contact often remains minimal and opportunities for lobbying district officers extremely rare.

## Conclusion

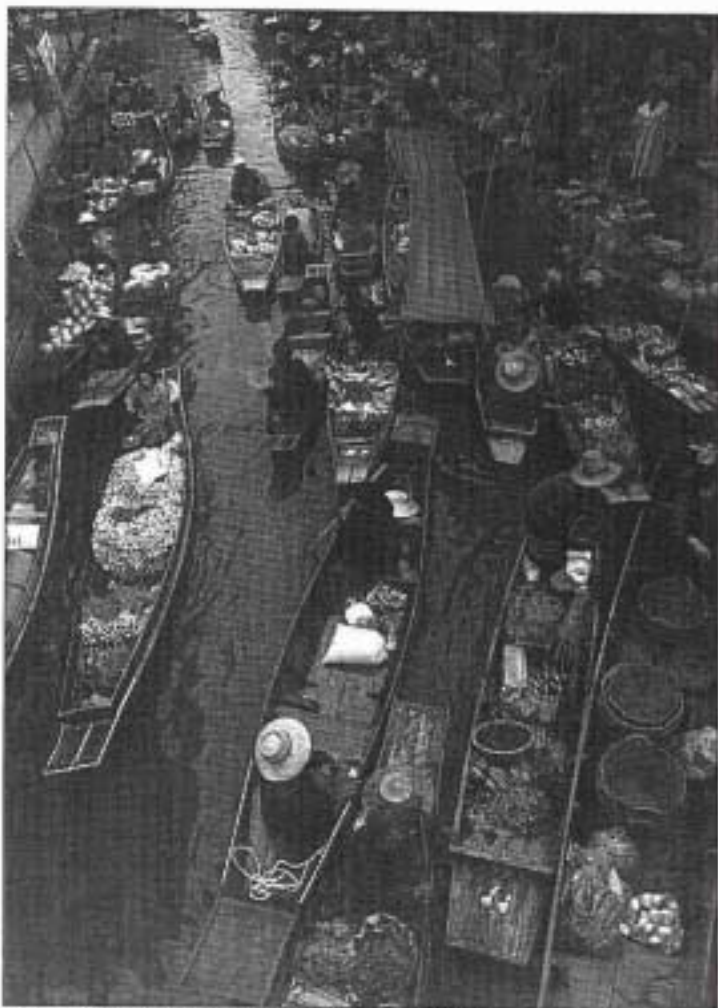
Off-road inhabitants in rural Africa remain, for the most part, invisible to planners and developers. We need to know much more about the specific problems they face as a result of poor access: this extends, of course, beyond economic considerations *per se* to linked questions such as access to health facilities and other services. Obviously, feeder roads cannot be built to every rural settlement. There is a clear role for the further development and promotion of culturally acceptable intermediate transport technologies to help traders to move their goods to market and for other purposes across off-road areas. Other avenues for further exploration include low-cost local processing technologies to add value to local produce, and the potential, in different cultural contexts, for the development of co-operative transport and other institutional arrangements to improve market access. Such work is crucial if the needs of off-road communities are to be met.

## References

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In Thailand, the transport sometimes is the market!