

For God and My Feet: A Case for Walking in Uganda

by Patrick Kabanda

If a survey were conducted to measure the natural beauty of countries, Uganda would score highly. Its vegetation alone makes Uganda a gem. And this beautiful country does not shy away from piousness—our motto, after all, is “For God and My Country”—but unfortunately Uganda the Beautiful is marred by certain barbaric behaviors that keep one wondering what is happening to national civility. One of them is the chronic disregard for pedestrians.

Walking has tremendous benefits: a pollution-free means of transport and a great way to exercise.... But instead of celebrating it, we equate it with destitution. From dust to stinking trash to reckless drivers, pedestrians face insurmountable problems. These predicaments are among the issues that qualify our nation for the International Hall of Shame. While I focus on Kampala and its suburbs—excluding posh areas such as Kololo—these problems can be found all over the country.

Uncovered Manholes and Units

Many Ugandan roads are in abject condition. But even when roadwork is done, sidewalks are often overlooked—footpaths are routinely replaced with water trenches. Holes excavated on sidewalks are left uncovered for ages. Innocent pedestrians who find themselves in a manhole may dislocate their hips, if their ankles are spared. Here and there, electric circuits on ground level are left exposed. If power is on, imagine the risk to walkers, especially children.

Crazy Driving

It seems as if Ugandan roads are meant for anything except pedestrians. In traffic jams, bikers (boda-bodas) and motorists often turn to sidewalks. In the absence of adequate parking space, drivers invade sidewalks. Seldom do drivers yield to pedestrians even at zebra crossings. One evening near Kibuye market a mother among a throng eager to cross the road pleaded with motorists: “Ssinga no wabaawo atusasira.” (“I wish someone were kind to us.”) The mother, with a frail baby on her back, was hoping that one driver would stop for the stranded pedestrians. When one kind driver finally did so, within seconds a cacophony of horns erupted. Cars commenced to bypass the Good Samaritan, dispersing crossing pedestrians as if they were duikers escaping lions.

Our chiefs-in-charge also disrespect pedestrians in startling ways. While security is admittedly crucial, the breakneck speeds at which presidential and other official convoys move leave one wondering whether ghosts are driving. These alarming convoys send every other moving object scurrying off the road, and show no mercy to pedestrians. We should remember that respect begets respect. Our leaders should lead by example: pay courtesy to pedestrians.

Dust and Stagnant Water

On our dirt roads, speeding cars routinely leave pedestrians blanketed in dust. This mess forces people to create impromptu speed bumps. The results, however, can turn catastrophic

when speeding cars hit these bumps unknowingly. When it rains, the dust disappears but then other problems arise: slippery roads and stagnant water. If you survive sliding in the mud, be ready for the stagnant water that creates mini lakes in roads. Shameless drivers splash filthy water on pedestrians. And you may regret that your hobby is not canoe building; sometimes it seems you need one to navigate the flooded roads.

Here Come the Cattle

Around the city, now and then, cows loiter on the roads as if they were in the wild. It is distressing to be walking and suddenly encounter bovines wandering the streets. If these animals don't push you off the road, count your blessings.

Untrimmed Shrubs

Shrubs along some roads are rarely trimmed. Pedestrians are susceptible to scraping limbs, not to mention deadly snakes that can hide in these thickets.

Dangerous Signposts

Roadside advertising shouldn't be erected in a careless fashion. Around the city some barefaced signposts squat in the middle of walkways like ground-hugging plants. If you blink, you risk hitting your forehead.

Tight Crowds

Ever try to walk in places like Nakivubo market? Good luck! With people jam-packed, bikes ubiquitous, and minibuses bumper to bumper, inching along here is laborious. This chaos makes our collective organizational skills look inferior to those of ants.

No Streetlights

While night walks can be delightful, proper lighting is essential to enjoying them safely. Streets deep in darkness are only navigable by moonlight. With potholes, snakes, and stagnant water, a pedestrian's life at night is too often a nightmare.

Moving Forward:

The Law

In "The Enforcer," an article in the *New Yorker* (January 19, 2009), Samantha Power, an expert on Human Rights Policy, shed light on "the chronically flawed justice systems" in the developing world. Exploring cases in Kenya, Cambodia and elsewhere, she quotes the main subject, Gary Haugen, founder of the International Justice Mission: "Without investing in the rule of law for the poor, none of the other investments we make will be sustainable." As we focus on development, the rule of law needs to be at the center of our growth. If laws that protect pedestrians are enacted, if speed limits are imposed, how do we ensure that these laws are more than a bunch of jokes?

Day of Walking

To garner global attention for pedestrians' predicaments, the United Nations, which observes days like the "World Cooperatives Day" and "International Day of Peace," could create an "International Day of Pedestrians." But Uganda shouldn't wait for the UN. A "National Day of Pedestrians" in Uganda is long overdue. Could the president launch this day by walking at least half a mile?

Benefits of Walking

Driving in Uganda is a status symbol, and as the country develops, the number of cars on the roads is skyrocketing. But realistically, if everyone in Kampala drove, how would we cope with the resulting congestion? Extravagant car use is costly, while walking helps curb pollution and induces exercise. These environmental and personal health benefits yield unprecedented social and economic rewards. Equating weight with wealth is still common in Uganda, but this is a fallacy. Being fat isn't healthy. Walking helps reduce weight; it should be an indicator of a healthy and vibrant society rather than a sign of poverty.

"If a daily fitness walk could be put in a pill, it would be one of the most popular prescriptions in the world," declares the AARP (www.aarp.org), an organization committed to enhancing the quality of aging. "Walking can reduce the risk of many diseases—from heart attack and stroke to hip fracture and glaucoma. ... A daily brisk walk also can help prevent depression, colon cancer, constipation, osteoporosis, and impotence; lengthen lifespan; lower stress levels; relieve arthritis and back pain; strengthen muscles, bones, and joints; improve sleep. ..." For other benefits of walking, including its link to social justice, see: www.walkinginfo.org.

Our yardstick for development is generally the number of cars, fancy hotels, shopping malls, and mansions we acquire. But these items alone should not define development. Imagine the time and energy wasted as engines drone in endless traffic jams. We need to heavily invest in infrastructure. Roads with sidewalks, central parking areas, public transport systems such as trams and buses (accessible by walking outside major public centers), should be a priority. Even more important, our growth in material goods should be complemented by a growth in civility. Luckily, we don't need a penny from the World Bank to promote civility, a necessary ingredient to dignify walking. From homesteads to houses of worship, from schools to the media, from parliament to local councils, let's promote the value of walking. The benefits we will reap as a beautiful, pedestrian-friendly nation are immense. Then we can proudly chant "For God and My Feet! "

Patrick Kabanda is the school organist and a music instructor at Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, USA.