

A Small Rural Nonfarm Activity with Greater Livelihood Benefits to Poor Boys and Young Men: Bicycle Taxi Business in Rural Malawi

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Abstract

Uneducated and unskilled boys and young men in rural Malawi have to find another source of income as agricultural produce has been dwindling down over the years. The surge in bicycle taxis in rural Malawi has been triggered by the quest for self-employment opportunities; increased mobility needs; poor road infrastructure networks; insufficient motorized transport; low demand for motorized transport; and low disposable incomes among rural Malawians to own private motorized transport. With limited industrialization, 80 percent of Malawians still live and work in rural areas. Studies of nonfarm activities in Sub Saharan Africa (SSA) have concentrated on urban based activities, paying little attention on the rural based nonfarm income generating activities. This study was done to explore the role of Bicycle Taxi Business (BTB) as a nonfarm activity in rural livelihoods. Apart from augmenting on farm agricultural activities, BTB offer the operators a platform to help their dependants and also ensuring food security among rural households. Without these livelihood benefits accrued from taxi operations, life could just be a nightmare for this special group as subsistence agricultural production has dwindled down over the years; and they cannot successfully compete in the highly competitive formal labour market.

Keywords: Rural Youth; Bicycle Taxi Business; Rural Livelihoods; Malawi

1. Introduction

Rural people in many developing countries are engaged in numerous nonfarm enterprises in addition to agriculture. This is against the popular view by many people that rural areas are for agriculture alone. Reliance on farming as a source of livelihood is increasingly becoming unsustainable for people in the rural areas in SSA countries because productivity keeps on lowering down. Many researchers agree that agriculture alone can no longer sustain the livelihoods of rural people in Malawi. Among other explanations, this is due to small and fragmented land holdings caused by rapid population growth, declining soil fertility, unreliable rainfall patterns, inability of most households to access credit for inputs, low and volatile prices of produce, poor transport infrastructure, macro-agricultural policy dilemmas and inability by smallholder farmers to keep pace with technological advances in agriculture (Kambombe 2009). The dwindling agricultural sector has increased poverty levels among rural people. More rural people are now engaging in different nonfarm activities like small-scale business, on farm wage labour and off-farm wage employment to diversify their livelihood activities. Lately there has been a surge of provision of bicycle taxi services as business in rural Malawi. Uneducated and unskilled young men who cannot migrate to urban centres to look for greener pastures have to look for numerous avenues right in rural areas to obtain income to support their dependants. Bryceson et al. (2003) echoes that bicycle taxis flourish in areas where conventional motorized transport is economically or physically impossible. Rural Malawian youths have ceased the opportunity to engage in BTB in their quest for livelihood enhancement.

2. The Share of Nonfarm Income in African Rural Households

Despite the significant contribution the rural nonfarm sector makes to rural livelihood, there seems to be widespread bias against the sector. There is much publicity for the urban nonfarm income sector as compared to their counterparts in rural areas (Wiggins, 2000; Bernabe, 2002; Fox and Sohnesen, 2013; Nagler and Naude, 2014). Because of this neglect, not many people seem to appreciate the contribution of rural nonfarm entrepreneurship to rural livelihoods; hence, neither not much has been done to improve the sector in order to uplift the lives of many who rely on this source nor many studies conducted on the same. Simultaneously, many people including some policy makers and researchers still think that rural spaces are areas for farming alone. However, this is not the reality on the ground because nonfarm sources of income contribute to as much as 40-45 percent of average income in rural Africa and seem to be growing in importance (Readorn, 1997, Barret et al 2001, Acker 2013, Nagler and Naude, 2014). This entails that this source of alternative livelihood must be adequately studied and understood. Different countries have registered varying levels when it comes to the share of non-agricultural activities to rural household incomes. For instance, Readorn et al (2006) echoes that in Ethiopia the share was 20 percent in 1999, in Malawi 64 percent in 2004, and for Uganda and Tanzania 54 and 46 percent in 2000, respectively. Availability of evidence on the rise of the share of nonfarm income in rural

African households is enough justification that this sector is worthy paying attention; hence this study.

3. Bicycle Taxi Operations in Africa

Bicycle taxi operations in Africa originally started in Uganda between the 1960s and 1970s. The operations are popularly known as Boda-boda, although they are called by different local names in many parts of Africa¹. The term is derived from the English name “boarder-boarder.” The name originated from a need to transport people across the “no-man’s-land” between the border posts without the paperwork involved with using motor vehicles crossing the international border. This started in southern border crossing town of Busia (Uganda), where there is over two kilometres between the gates and quickly spread to the northern border town of Malaba (Kenya). The bicycle owners would shout out /boda-boda/ (border-to-border) to potential customers. Since 1960s, the idea of bicycle taxis has spread in many parts of Africa. With advancement in technology and the availability of affordable motorcycles from China and India, bicycle taxis in Kenya and Uganda are slowly but increasingly being replaced by motorcycle taxis and the trend is spreading into many parts of Africa (Bryceson et al 2003; Howe 2004; AFCAP 2010; Starkey 2010; Porter 2013). In Malawi, people used to walk or use own bicycles in routes not serviced by motorized means of transport. Since early 2000s, bicycle taxis started emerging in major cities like Mzuzu (Jimu 2008; Kadaluka 2011). Bicycle taxis are known by many names² in Malawi. Most bicycle taxi business is usually informal in nature; they are either run by a household, an individual or individuals with or without any employees (Jimu 2008; Kadaluka 2011). Bicycle taxi operators stand in strategic places and wait for potential customers. These places are road junctions, shops, markets, churches, mosques, schools, hospitals, bus stages and railway stations. Some are spotted cycling within the residential areas in search for potential clients. There are no specific places that are originally organized for bicycle taxi business in both rural and urban centres of Malawi. The operators operate their business wherever it deems fit for them. The last five years have witnessed the proliferation of BTBs in many parts of rural Malawi.

4. Technical Framework

The technical framework used in this paper illustrates the role of bicycle taxi transport operations within rural livelihoods. Transport is recognized in a unique way in a livelihood approach (Bryceson et al 2003). It is an economic or financial capital in terms of basic infrastructure (like roads) and production equipment and technologies of user goods (like bicycles and vehicles) (Scoones, 1998). Subsequently this was split by DFID (1999) into two categories; physical and financial capital, with transport assigned to the first in the form of the basic infrastructure and producer goods needed to support livelihoods. Transport is both a construction industry in form of building and maintenance, and a service industry in its operation (Howe, 1999; Starkey, 2001). People use transportation services to access social services (schools and health centres), income-generating opportunities (both formal and informal sources of income), and social pursuits (visiting relations and friends). These social networks may facilitate livelihood opportunities and offer a social security backup in times of need. Rural public transportation services are crucial since many rural people do not own motorized transport and depend on public transport to access their needs (Starkey and Njenga 2010). Operators are motivated by being offered direct source of livelihood (employment) hence diversifying their income sources and reducing poverty in the final analysis.

5. Methodology

This study adopted a case study methodology. Quantitative data was coded and analysed using excel. Qualitative data was analyzed using a thematic approach method. In this method, data was coded and sub grouped into relevant themes.

5.1 Study area

The study was conducted in Luchenza, a rural trading centre in Southern Malawi. It is composed of two villages namely Lolo and Kanthawire. The area is an economic backbone of the surrounding areas and therefore attracts a lot of people who come to buy or sell their goods. It has a total population of 10,751 (GoM, 2011). Lolo village has 1,295 people, and Kanthawire village has 1,082. Most people within Luchenza trading centre and the surrounding villages use bicycles and/or bicycle taxi transport services. One is, therefore, likely to find a rich source of bicycle taxi operations that could be studied in relation to the objectives of this study. Many people in Lolo and Kanthawire are also farmers. They grow crops like maize, millet, sorghum, cassava, potatoes, cowpeas, pigeon peas, sugarcane, tea and vegetables like lettuce and cabbage. Some keep livestock like chicken, pigs, goats, cattle, and doves. Uneducated and unskilled young men who cannot migrate to urban centres to look for greener pastures due to limited manufacturing industries to absorb the rural labour force have to look for

¹In other African countries, the taxis are known as *ganzemidjan* in Benin, *bendskin* in Cameroon, *kabu-kabu* in Niger, *okada* in Nigeria and *oleiya* in Togo.

²Bicycle taxis in Malawi are known as *Nanjanje*, *Kabanza*, *Sacramento*, *Tchapa* or *Boda-boda*.

numerous avenues to obtain income to support their spouses, children and siblings right in the villages. This has included the establishment of bicycle taxi business, hence a good place to study this phenomena.

5.2 The respondents and Sampling Procedure

The respondents for this study were 30 bicycle taxi operators in Kanthawire and Lolo. The sampling technique for bicycle taxi operators was random. This was done to avoid bias in selecting respondents as regards to age, gender and income level. The operators usually ply their business from stages or ranks. 3 stages were selected from Lolo and 3 from Kanthawire villages at random. At each stage, 5 operators were selected at random. The study also collected information from selected key informants. The key informants were: representatives from Luchenza Local Government office, 2 village leaders, and 5 female representatives of bicycle taxi operator households. Female family members of operator households were interviewed because they are focal point for development in the household, hence can have in depth overview of the role of bicycle taxi operations in livelihoods. Purposive sampling was used to select key informants for the study.

5.3 Data Collection Instruments

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews; in depth interviews; observations and informal discussions in the study villages. Secondary data was collected from written accounts such as notices, government documents, books, minutes of meetings and other relevant publications from libraries

6. The Role of Bicycle Taxi Business in the Livelihoods of Operators' Households

6.1 The nature and Role of Bicycle Taxi Operations in Luchenza, Malawi

6.1.1 Age and Gender of Operators

All operators interviewed in the two villages were male. It can be argued that the nature of the business requires working long times away from homes. Most women in rural Malawi have household responsibilities like taking care of children hence they prefer the income generating activities that are close to their homes. In addition, the cycling requires a lot of physical energy which men are willing to do. The bicycle taxi operators in Lolo and Kanthawire were of varying ages. Majority of the bicycle taxi operators (70%) in the study area were within the 16-25 age limits. Age is an important factor when it comes to engaging in nonfarm entrepreneurship. Kadaluka (2009) reported that the domination of the production age group in small scale businesses in the rural nonfarm sector shows that they are energetic and willing to explore other new sources of income apart from subsistence farming. Bicycle taxi business is relatively a new income generating activity in the area.

6.1.2 Bicycle Taxi Ownership

Majority of operators (80%) reported that own the bicycles they use as taxis. The study found out that the main ways they acquired the bicycles were through crops and livestock sales, given by relatives, wage labour income, or bought using income from other nonfarm activities. The rest 20% of the respondents indicated that they rented the bicycles from other people. Renting a bicycle for taxi business happens in such a way that the bicycle owner agrees with the operator on a daily, weekly or monthly fee the operator is supposed to pay the owner for using the bicycle.

6.1.3 Education Background of Bicycle Taxi Operators

Results revealed that half (50%) of the operators just completed primary education. 8 (36.67%) of the total bicycle operators completed junior secondary school. 3 (10%) of the respondents had no formal schooling background. 1 operator representing (3.33%) of the respondents completed Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE)¹.

It can be seen that many bicycle taxi operators did not go further with school as such had no competitive skills to thrive at formal the job market. It can also be argued that most well educated young people in Malawi are likely to travel migrate to nearest towns and cities in search for remunerative employment and nonfarm activities. It also implies that the most educated rural people are involved in other highly rewarding wage employment. The majority of operators being less educated also show that they actually originate from poor backgrounds, diversifying their livelihood strategies into bicycle taxi operations which require no skills and/or schooling to ply business. In a similar study, Gamberini (2014) found out that most boda-boda operators in rural Uganda completed only primary school. It needs to be mentioned that majority of Malawians (80%) still live in rural areas. Despite the fact that subsistence agriculture in SSA is failing to sustain the livelihoods of many rural people, it can be argued that nonfarm enterprises like bicycle taxi operations are contributing to keeping young people in rural areas. For this special group of people, moving to urban centres in Malawi is no guarantee that they will be employed and gain higher incomes. Comparatively, China has approximately 150 million migrant workers in towns and cities chiefly due to accelerated urbanization, modernization and

¹An academic qualification achieved upon successful completion of a four-year Malawian Secondary School Education System.

industrialization after the opening-up policy in the early 1980s. This has helped to absorb the surplus rural labour force. Evidence exist that Chinese migrant workers earn some incomes to support the livelihoods of their left-behind women and children. The situation in Malawi is quite different.

6.1.4 Agricultural Production

In terms of production characteristics of the bicycle taxi operators, (86.67% of the operators) explained that they are also small scale farmers apart from the bicycle taxi business. They grow crops like maize, upland rice, pigeon peas, cassava, groundnuts, cowpeas, sorghum and vegetables. They also explained that they keep livestock like chickens, cattle, goats, pigs, ducks and doves. 13.33% of the operators explained that they rely solely on the business and wage labour for survival. The researchers were interested to find out why the rest were not interested in agriculture. One operator indicated that he had "... no land to cultivate..." This agrees with White (2011) that even if young people are to venture into agriculture as a career path, access to land remain a serious problem for them and this this case portrays similar instances.

6.2 Annual Incomes Realized from Bicycle Taxi business

As seen from the results in **Table 1** below, the operators obtain some income that they can use to in their livelihoods. More than 50% of the operators in the area got about \$725-1,087 annually. In rural Malawian contexts where many people are poor, these incomes, minute as may be, have the potential to uplift the living standards of the rural operators. One bicycle taxi operator had this to say:

"Before I started this business, I used to struggle to get income to buy basic needs and other necessary items for myself and my family. The produce I get from the farm was not enough for consumption the whole year and also for sale to obtain extra income. We usually grow maize and potatoes at our land. During harvesting, the prices of maize are so low that sometimes I feel like quitting the whole maize farming business and just buy during the harvesting period. Though this is the case, I cannot do so. I was born a farming household and I will continue with both taxi and farm operations. With this bicycle taxi business I am able to get extra income almost on daily basis and the welfare of me and my family has really improved; while the farm provides some food we need in our household. It is this diversification that drives me to work hard in this business. I can make up to MK10, 000 (25USD) in a week when business is good."

Table 1: Annual Incomes obtained from Bicycle taxi operations

No. of operators	Percentage (%)	Income Range (Mk)	Equivalent (in \$) ¹
16	53.55	288,000-432,000	725-1,087
5	16.67	144,000- 288, 000	397-725
4	13.33	432,000-576,000	1,087- 1, 450
5	16.67	48,000-144,000	129-397
30	100		

6.3 Typical Bicycle Taxi Operator

The researchers were interested to find out what distinguishes the operators from not doing other nonfarm activities but bicycle taxi business. When asked, one operator agreed to this finding by giving a detailed account of his story, and had this to say:

Example Profile of a Bicycle Taxi Operator in Rural Malawi
"My name is Boyisi (gave permission to be mentioned). I am also a Kabanza (bicycle taxi) operator in this area. I am 21 years old. I am originally from Chiromo village but relocated to Lolo because I am married there, and have 2 children. I dropped out of school after I sat for standard 8 national examinations. I did not make it to secondary school. My mother sold a piece of land and shared part of the money. I used the same to buy this bicycle to use for bicycle taxi business. I have a piece of land, about 0.6 hectares which I use with my family for agriculture. I grow maize, potatoes, cassava, cowpeas and some vegetables. I also keep 11 local chickens, 3 ducks and 2 goats. My wife sales the vegetables at the nearby markets. Most of the maize, cassava and cowpeas are used for household consumption. We do sale some potatoes to buy basic needs. Before I started this business, I used to use my spare time to do on-farm wage labour like tilling the land using the hoe, and harvesting in other local farmers maize fields. However, this was not only seasonal, but also paid less as compared to this business. Imagine, with land cultivation, I could be paid 10,000Mk (equivalent of USD 25) to till a 0.4 hectares of land. I could take two weeks to complete that job. But now, in the same two weeks I can make up 15,000Mk (equivalent of USD 38) when business is really good. The beauty of this job is that I operate all days, as long as I am healthy and have the energy to cycle on the road. On the other hand, the on farm wage labour is both scarce in some instances and seasonal. I initially saw my cousin doing this business and I decided

¹ 1 USD= 397.3 Mk. This is the exchange rate during the study period (Reserve Bank of Malawi, 2014). This is the exchange rate that has been used in this paper.

to try. Finally I decided to fully commit myself to this business after I heard success stories from other operators, and also my hands-on experience during my trial period. I make a lot of money in this business than agriculture. That is a fact. However, I cannot completely quit farming. I get most of my nutritional needs from the crops I harvest and livestock I rear. You need to understand that bicycle taxi business in not a fancy business to do. When one does this business, the understanding is that they are very poor. The many young men like me that do this business are those that are really poor and do not have good academic qualifications. In my opinion, I feel that if I had other important things to do, I would have not been using this. However, I have great plans. If I save more money, I would like to expand my business. I can get more bicycles and employ other people. I also want to invest more resources at my piece of land and grow more high yielding varieties, and also access necessary farm inputs. So far, I use the money I get from this business to buy medicine, pay motorized transport when travelling far distances, buy clothes, buy extra food like meat products at the market, renovated my house, among many other uses. Despised as it may, the taxi business has huge benefits to me and my family.”

6.4 Motivation for Starting Bicycle Taxi business.

It was the researcher's interest to find out the motivation why people started operating bicycles as taxis in the villages. The following are some of the motivating factors for the operators to start BTBs.

- They wanted to get employed and supplement farm incomes. Therefore they decided to start the business to earn extra money to buy basic needs. Most rural people in Malawi rely on rain fed agriculture. As such during farming offseason, there is excess labour in the household. The bicycle taxi operations create more working days for the rural people and absorb the excess labour.
- They imitated their friends in towns and cities doing the business. As such, they eventually ventured into it after looking into its success stories.
- To make extra income apart from other nonfarm income activities like farm wage labour and other artistic work like hoe-handle making. Some operators explained that they are also farm wage labourers apart from being employed as operators. Wage labour is seasonal. In Malawi, rural people get more income from wage labour during maize weeding and harvesting seasons. Operators can ply business all year round. Some section of operators reported that they also engage themselves in farm labour although not often. This is normally done when they are some problems like the bicycle has broken down, to the extent that they cannot operate. Some operators explained this because they once were involved in farm wage labour before joining the taxi operations.
- Lack of schooling and relevant skills to compete in the formal job market was a reason to some section of operators. The operations in both rural and urban areas are termed as “transport by the poor.” It can also be seen from this study that it is the “business for the school dropouts.”
- Compared to farm wage labour, a significant number of operators explained that they make more money in bicycle taxi operations. Readorn et al (2006) substantiates that rural nonfarm incomes greatly exceeds the value of farm wage earnings by a factor of 20:1 in Sub Saharan Africa.

6.5 Social Economic contexts that have contributed to bicycle taxi business Development in Rural Malawi

The researchers were interested to understand the contextual realm within which bicycle taxis have all of a sudden become a force to reckon with in terms of employment of poor young men and in local transport solutions in rural Malawi. In the first place, it is the change in larger societal values, traditions and culture. Most of the rural services like transportation for instance were free in between villages. Before the introduction of bicycle taxi business in the study area, people could either just walk or ask a favour to be carried at the bicycle when travelling, in most instances free of charge. With the villages now being introduced to larger market-led and individualized behaviours, concentration is about getting more income for one and their family. Village Chief Leader of Kanthawire village agreed to this notion by saying:

“I can tell you that in the past, one could be carried on a bicycle for free. I remember about 10 years ago when travelling in faraway villages; there was no need to worry about food, water and accommodation. We used to go any house and ask for a favour to be accommodated when it is dark. They could cook food, gave us water to drink and a good place to sleep. In the morning, the only token we could give was a mere thank you. However, things are different nowadays. It seems to me that now the society has really changed. The water that we were giving each other is now being bought. Go to the market, or travel to other villages, people will tell you now to buy most basic things. The same transformation has happened in transport that it is rare for one to provide transport service for free as things were ten years back. Many things are being traded at the market now and the situation does not seem to take change in the near future. We just need to embrace this new way of living. No wonder the establishment of bicycle taxis.”

In addition, there has been an increase in both population and mobility needs for rural people in Malawi, but the provision of good road infrastructure and transportation services have not been improved to

catch up with growing demand. As such, people have to use creative home grown initiatives to fill that existing gap. Luchenza Local government administrator agreed on governments' failure to satisfy rural transportation needs in his own words as follows:

"Usually, many road construction projects target urban areas and areas of political influence. As such, many rural roads continue to be in a dilapidated state. This is the case despite the fact that many Malawians are rural and it's the place that employs majority of people. I believe that rural development projects should also dwell much on rural access needs as transport is a very important service development. Even in rural areas with good roads, government have been concerned with the provision of the roads, with an assumption that transportation services will pop up on their own, a thing that in most areas does not happen. The presence of bicycle taxis in rural areas can be seen as rural people's innovation, copied from other areas to satisfy immediate transportation needs. The bicycle taxis are not replacing the motorized transport services. In my opinion, they are supplementing the motorized transport services as still many people use the motorized transport services for longer distance travels."

Another reason could be the search for more income generating activities. Nampapa (gave permission to be mentioned), one of the bicycle taxi operators agreed to this sentiment by saying that:

"I have been a farmer since I was born as all my parents were farmers. All the 25 years of my lifetime I do not have many things to show as benefits of my farming career. It is difficult in the rural area like we are in to obtain extra income apart from farming. We do not produce much for household consumption and for sale. When an opportunity rose itself for me to get more income, I could not hesitate but to join the bicycle taxi operations to get more money. These factors have contributed to the rise of bicycle taxi operations in rural areas."

This shows that bicycle taxis is just one way of getting extra income away from the farm, just like any other non-farm activity.

6.6 The Role of Bicycle Taxi Business in Rural Livelihoods Operators

6.6.1 Self Employment

Firstly, bicycle taxi operations offer access to self-employment which would otherwise be difficult for them to be employed in other nonfarm activities. Information from Luchenza Local Government authority indicates that there were between 250-300 bicycle taxis operating in the surrounding villages. However, the figures fluctuate due to freedom of entry and exit into the business. Considering the fact that many operators sampled in the study were the youth, it concludes that bicycle taxi business has the potential to contribute to youth employment especially those from uneducated, unskilled and impoverished backgrounds thereby reducing high unemployment and poverty among rural people. Bicycle taxi operations exist in many Malawian rural areas hence the number of people employed as operators in the whole country is likely to be very high. Bicycle Taxi Operations in rural Malawi is contributing to reducing high unemployment and poverty among rural dwellers.

Apart from creating gainful employment, the taxi operations have also created more working days for the operators apart from farming thereby increasing their income earnings. Most people in the area rely on rain fed agriculture. This means that there are some seasons in the year that they are not doing some farm work. The bicycle taxis have also stimulated other associated services in the area like bicycle repair centres and sell of spare parts. It was discovered that there were 11 bicycle repair centres in Luchenza Trading centre where operators in surrounding villages repair their bicycles and access spare parts.

6.6.2 Helping Dependants

The other contribution of BTB to the livelihood of operators' households is that they help their dependants using incomes got from taxi operations. The dependants include children, wives, parents, orphans and other extended family members in need from using money realized from the same business. The contribution of the bicycle taxi to operator households cannot be underestimated. It has been revealed in this study that majority of the operators had 4 dependants excluding the operators. The operators explained that they offer both material and monetary support to their dependants. This translates that the operations are supporting approximately 1,200 people around Luchenza Trading Centre alone, approximately 11 percent of all the people in Luchenza area.

6.6.3 Ensuring Household Food Security

The study found out that majority (88%) of the respondents do not harvest enough for the whole year. 12% of the respondents reported to harvest enough. It can be shown however that majority of the respondent's households were unable to produce more from their farms for subsistence. It is evident that subsistence alone has failed to sustain livelihoods of the majority of the operators in the study area. The researchers were also interested in the coping mechanisms in times of food scarcity when they run out of food crops harvested from their farms. A significant number of operators (66.67%) reported that they got their additional food supplements by procuring on the market using money from the bicycle taxis. From this analysis, it can be seen that more than half of the operator households are able to access food in times of need from the bicycle taxi operations. It must be mentioned that for many rural Malawians, shortage of food translates to shortage of maize which is used to make

local staple food called *nsima*¹. Most Malawian rural families experience acute shortage of maize in the period between November and March. In operator households, this is the period when incomes from bicycle taxi business become crucial in accessing food on the market. The bicycle taxi business is helping the operators to cope with the shocks from low farm productivity

6.6.4 Investing in Agriculture

As stipulated earlier, majority of the operators were also small scale farmers. Farming requires inputs. Most Malawian rural farming households rely on Farm Input Subsidy Program (FISP)² to access inputs like improved seeds and chemical fertilizers. The study revealed that FISP face logistical and technical glitches like late delivery of farm inputs to rural areas, diversion and corruption, scrupulous traders add more on the buying prices, omission of deserving beneficiaries, among many other problems. The operators/farmers stated that they use the money they get from bicycle taxis to access farm inputs because they usually pay more money than the intended prices of the FISP due to the aforementioned problems. 73.33% of the operator households reported that they find it easy to obtain money from their operations to buy the inputs in their quest to improve crop yield. Sometimes the operator/farmers have to save more money to purchase inputs in addition to those under FISP. More than half (68%) of the bicycle taxi operators reported that they use some of the money from their business to buy pesticides to prevent their crops from post-harvest losses. It can be seen that the operators are not only diversifying their income sources, but also re-investing in smallholder farming which still remains the backbone of many rural peoples' livelihoods.

6.6.5 Paying School Fees, Medical Bills and Motorized Transportation Bills

The bicycle taxi operators explained that they spend some income they get to pay school fees for relatives and other dependants. Majority of the bicycle taxi operators (73.33%) reported that they help their dependants by paying school fees and buying necessities like writing materials. Furthermore, the study found out that 68% of the respondents also spend the money they got from the bicycle taxis to buy medicine and pay basic health care. The costs also include transportation to referral hospitals which are more than 30 kilometers away from the study villages. During interviews, the operators also reported that they use part of their money in paying motorized transport services when their dependants are travelling for long distances. Key informants also shared similar opinions: *My husband provides me with transport money to pay for motorized transport go to Thyolo district hospital*³. (Bicycle taxi operators spouse). There is evidence therefore that the incomes obtained from the bicycle taxi operations are also spent on medical and transportation expenses to access wellbeing services like health care.

7. Bicycle Taxi Business as a means of Capital Accumulation

Many respondents were of the view that the bicycle taxi business is not among the highly rewarding nonfarm activities in the region. The study found out that many operators doing this village consider it as a means to save more money and venture into other more rewarding non-farm activities. One operator had this to say when asked:

Obviously I cannot be doing this until the near future. I would like to venture into an agricultural enterprise after I save money. I will be purchasing foodstuffs and sale in this area and make more money

Barret et al (2001) agrees that entry into non-farm activities is highly dependent on the amount of income and other physical and social assets a household possesses.

8. Conclusion

The findings from this study uncovers that a small nonfarm income sector in rural Malawi brings a huge positive impact to a special group of poor, uneducated and unskilled young men by providing them and their dependants with a means of meaningful survival despite their plight in academic and vocational skill training. This is happening in an environment where agriculture production, the sole source of livelihood among the majority of rural Malawians, is dwindling down and cannot singlehandedly sustain rural peoples' livelihoods. By extension, bicycle taxis are creating more working days for rural poor people, increasing their income earnings, decreasing poverty levels which are extreme in rural Malawi and increasing wellbeing and capabilities among rural people; thereby contributing to rural livelihoods. This paper has highlighted that rural spaces are no longer for subsistence farming alone, but complex and interdependent activities that are interwoven together to create rural livelihoods. This study covers in part the forgotten research gap in rural nonfarm activities as for a long time many studies in Sub Saharan Africa have put more emphasis on urban non-farm enterprises.

¹*Nsima* is thick dough made from a mixture of boiled water and maize flour. This is the staple food for Malawi. It is commonly served with relish like vegetables, meat and/or legumes.

² Agricultural sector in Malawi has benefited from fertilizer subsidies since 2006. The initial investment in FISP was USD 50 million for this programme solely to import improved seeds and fertilizer for distribution to farmers at subsidized prices (Juma, 2011).

³Thyolo District Hospital is a major referral hospital in Thyolo district located approximately 25 km away of the study area.

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