



Forum

News

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Rural Water Transport

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Waterways & Livelihoods

For many of the poorest people in the world water transport is their only means of mobility and access to basic services. In today's transport climate dominated by motorised vehicles and roads, traditional waterways have become neglected and de-prioritised. Yet if policy makers and practitioners genuinely want to reach the 'poorest of the poor', improvements made in rural water transport technologies, infrastructure and services have the potential to eliminate poverty and reduce isolation.

This edition of Forum News draws upon the outputs of the Waterways and Livelihoods Research Project and International Seminar to highlight the importance of rural water transport (RWT) in the lives of the rural poor. It focuses on the RWT sector's struggle for recognition in mainstream transport and development debate and the impact of this invisibility at policy level and in practice. It then introduces new networking and information resources developed to promote the integration of rural water transport through improved policy and practice.



Colin Palmer

Overloaded in Bangladesh

Basic Access and Mobility Needs

Access to basic services such as schools, health services, markets, government services and clean water are the basic rights of all citizens, and key indicators in all poverty alleviation indexes. However for many of the world's poorest people these services can only be reached by water transport.

On the islands in the middle of Uganda's Lake Victoria and in Cambodia's floating Kampong Lourng commune, people have to travel long distances, using water transport, to get to hospitals and schools on the mainland or in the district centre. In some parts of Madagascar the only way to get to hospital is by motorboat. Rural water transport also facilitates poor people's access to economic opportunities, helping them to access employment in the cities while living in less expensive locations, and forming an integral part of fishing and fish marketing livelihoods.

For many communities water transport is an important source of employment, based on skills such as boat building, that have developed over generations. In Bangladesh men work as boat operators transporting goods and passengers along the waterways. It is estimated that these boats provide 60% of all employment in the transport sector and are the main source of income for 4 million people supporting 10 million dependants.

The sector can be of importance to national and local economies; Uganda earns US\$8.8 million in fish exports caught by fisher folk using small boats and 18,000 fishermen ply the Pangalanes in Madagascar daily in motorboats taking fish to markets. Similarly in the remote areas of Amtali, Bangladesh, female respondents in the case study frequently stated that it was impossible for them to get to markets without using rural water transport. Rural waterways can also provide an indirect source of employment. In India's Southern state of Kerala up to 2000 people are employed in houseboats and other motorboats that cruise inland waterways filled with tourists.

Boats are an important vehicle of trade carrying consumer products and medicines to remote communities and serving as shops for their owners (often women). Floating markets are widespread in the Mekong delta of Vietnam and without water transport the farmers of the Mekong delta would be unable to take fertiliser or seed to their fields or to carry away the resultant crops.

Respondents in the Bangladesh Waterways and Livelihoods research consistently identified Water Transport as the area with the most potential to transform their livelihoods.

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Call for Integration

The primary recommendation of the Waterways & Livelihoods research project and International Seminar has been the integration of Rural Water Transport (RWT). The consequences of allowing RWT to remain outside of mainstream transport and development planning are manifest in the deterioration of traditional thoroughfares and the vessels that ply them. For example in Peru boats are said to be 'characterised by antiquity' and subsequently users face increased maintenance and operation costs. Similarly a lack of investment in maintaining or establishing waterway infrastructure increases the inefficiency of RWT as a means of mobility. Around Lake Victoria, Uganda, much time is wasted loading and off loading passengers and cargo due to poor infrastructure, increasing travel times for all.

Conflicts can develop between the use of waterways for boat transport and other uses, for example interventions related to irrigation or energy use may obstruct traditional waterways or land transport interventions such as a land bridge may limit the height of vessels able to ply waterways. The integration of RWT will highlight the need for complementarity of different transport modes and for inter-sectoral planning.

Without investments in the development of RWT we lose the potential to improve the livelihoods of the rural poor through improved access to basic services and economic opportunities. In particular RWT is a means to target the marginalised poor, for example women or the elderly. In Bangladesh women expressed dissatisfaction with some prohibitive characteristics of local boat services, particularly the lack of privacy on long journeys and the unstable infrastructure used for boarding.

We also lose the potential to develop ecologically and financially sustainable transport technologies for the future. Viewed globally the sector demonstrates a wide range of options and a high level of innovation. Some poor communities with no knowledge of alternatives, in for example Madagascar, use imported and inefficient technologies such as outboard motors that were originally developed for completely different conditions. By contrast in countries such as Vietnam there are a wide range of very effective RWT technological options that could be adopted for use in other locations such as Longtail engines. The Longtail boats of Thailand, Cambodia and Peru are a far cry from the old paddle steamers and manually propelled craft of the past, and carry passengers and cargo at speeds competitive with road transport. They are a good example of the sector's ability to innovate and meet changing demands using locally available skills and material. Avoiding a high dependency on imported technologies to retain control of developments and ensure reliable operation, maintenance and repair:

Waterways & Livelihoods Research Programme

Waterways and Livelihoods is a programme of the IFRTD. It aims to raise the profile of RWT in the transport sector and among development planners; increasing its visibility, contributing to new knowledge about the impact of RWT on poor people's mobility and access, exploring potential improvements to RWT technologies, services and infrastructure, and highlighting its potential benefits for the environment.

The programme initiated an international research project funded by **DFID's knowledge and research programme**. The project adopted a networked research methodology working with a team of researchers across Asia, Latin America and Africa. The team, including development practitioners, government transport ministries, and academics in universities, were well placed to investigate the institutional and policy contexts within which people use water transport. They identified locations in vulnerable areas where there is a significant incidence of poverty and where rural water transport is a principle or sole means of transport. The case studies did not aim to be representative of each country context but to illustrate a wide range of rural water transport environments: delta environments in Bangladesh and Vietnam, canals in Kerala (India) and Madagascar, rivers in Cambodia, Indonesia and Peru, lakes in Uganda, lagoons in Nicaragua and Cote d'Ivoire, and inter-island waterways in Indonesia.

The research culminated in a three day researcher workshop to synthesise findings in preparation for an international seminar. The international seminar held in Pontianak, West Borneo in April 2003 attracted other interested stakeholders including government planning officials, donor agency representatives, transport professionals and rural development planners. Participants evolved strategies for improving rural water transport in countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

For the full case studies see www.ruralwaterways.org

Colin Palmer



A vessel just clears a low road bridge in Vietnam

Making Visible the Invisible

The failure of Rural Water Transport (RWT) to make it onto the mainstream agendas for transport and development, its 'invisibility', was a recurring theme at the Waterways & Livelihoods International Seminar. Participants identified this invisibility as both the cause and effect of, a dearth of reliable statistical information, RWT's poor public image, and an unfair institutional playing field through which it suffers in comparison to other transport options.



All of the case studies completed for the Waterways and Livelihoods research reported a lack of data both locally and nationally. For example in Iquitos, Peru it was impossible to determine the number of vessels that operate in the region as official registrations at the Ministry of Transportation are incomplete and do not consider the smallest crafts. This lack of consistent and accurate information about rural waterways contributes to an ignorance of its significance to the development of rural areas and perpetuates its marginalisation at policy level. It is difficult to quantify the importance of RWT or establish trends due to this lack of reliable statistical information. Even in for example Bangladesh, where RWT has been studied comprehensively, the available data is dubious and produces conflicting results. This lack of accurate data reflects a lack of official interest and recognition for RWT. For many that make policy at national level RWT is a symbol of a rural unsophisticated past they prefer to forget.

The ability to compare and contrast the social, economic and environmental characteristics of different transport modes is an important component of any transport related planning. Thus with little comparative data available regarding the costs of road construction versus waterway development it is difficult for policy makers to make informed choices. This has exacerbated the neglect of isolated areas where road building is difficult and expensive. Hidden subsidies disguise the real costs of competing forms of transport, particularly roads, and create the illusion that RWT is an unviable alternative. For example in Indonesia imported public vehicles are tax exempt whereas boat engines for public service boats are not. In Madagascar, Indonesia, Cote d'Ivoire and Cambodia individual boat owners cannot access credit from private banks and micro credit institutions while land vehicle owners can. To address this 'unfair playing field' more data about the exact nature of the institutional frameworks that influence the face of rural water transport is required.

RWT has a tendency to 'fall out' of regulatory frameworks and there is often no clear line of responsibility for the sector. In the Amazon region of Peru rural water transport management is limited. Centralisation in decision making has reduced the capacity of local authorities to implement specific RWT policies and regulations in the region. Similarly there is often no clear line of authority to enforce regulations where they exist. The Bangladesh study revealed policies 'in black and white only' with the government failing to regulate maintenance, supervision and development of the sector. Meanwhile in Uganda where safety is a big issue that has had a significant influence over public perceptions of water transport, the regulations that govern it are 'obsolete or disjointed'.

Both waterways users and operators lack the organisational and lobbying power to influence government decisions and defend their rights. With influence they could demand regulations to protect themselves and improve the transport options available to them. For example in Bangladesh boatmen could lobby for registration of their vessels to protect themselves from the discrimination and harassment they face at landing places from government officials and the police.

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Water Talk

Participants of the Waterways and Livelihoods International Seminar have formed an email discussion group to enable the community of practice formed at the Seminar to continue their dialogue, to share new research and information, and to continue to advocate for greater visibility and integration of rural water transport issues.

This is a forum for debating issues, exchanging information and seeking answers to your RWT questions. Members include transport planners, NGO's, members of transport ministries, academics, and development workers, from countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.

Anyone with an interest in rural water transport issues is welcome to join the email group. The predominant language of the group is English however French and Spanish are also welcome.

To subscribe please send an email to ruralwaterways-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

Journey to the Mainstream

RWT clearly needs to project a more accurate (positive) image and raise its profile within the transport and development sectors. To support the arguments for its integration with mainstream policy and practice there is a need to generate qualitative and quantitative data regarding the nature of rural water transport technologies, services and infrastructure. In addition the sector needs to exercise its voice, to encourage debate both internally and externally to initiate the cross pollination of ideas. For example exposure to different technologies at the Waterways and Livelihoods Seminar has begun a dialogue between participants from Madagascar and Vietnam. The participants from Madagascar are keen to explore the more efficient engine technologies available to their Vietnamese counterparts.



RWT provides a vital link between disconnected land routes, Madagascar

The Waterways and Livelihoods programme has developed a resource with the wider aim of improving the efficiency and appropriateness of rural water transport to improve the livelihoods of the rural poor. The resource achieves this by addressing the issue of positive visibility as a first step towards the integration of RWT in mainstream policy and practice. The resource comprises three complementary components: an advocacy folder providing a brief overview of the issues and advice on how to promote them to key audiences. A CD-Rom containing information (facts, figures, photos) that can be used to support existing knowledge and experience. And finally a website www.ruralwaterways.org providing an updated version of the CD-Rom and a portal through which to access people, organisations and further information resources that may be useful.



News and Events

Launch of Rwanda NFG

On March 13 2003, members of the Rwanda Forum for Rural Transport and Development (FRTRD) gathered to discuss the national agenda for rural transport. The event was supported by the IFRTD and opened by the Secretary General of the Ministry in charge of Infrastructure.

Participants represented public institutions, non-governmental organisations, and grassroots associations, and the event was an opportunity to officially launch the FRTRD and to invite other institutions with similar objectives to join the Forum. This profile raising event led to an invitation for the FRTRD to participate in a seminar/workshop focused on "The National Transport Strategy and Its Contribution to Poverty Alleviation", organised by the Ministry of Infrastructure.

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Focus on Rural Roads Engineering

The IFG or International Focus Group is a platform for articulating and disseminating information on rural roads engineering within the context of poverty reduction. It aims to promote priority research needs, facilitate the application of research outputs, and mainstream good practice to meet sustainable transport access needs in support of the poverty reduction objectives of developing countries.

The IFG channels its activities through a number of NFGs or National FOCUS Groups, not to be confused with IFRTD's own affiliated national networks also known as NFGs or National FORUM Groups, and provides a key focal point for debate on rural roads engineering issues.

The establishment of the IFG is an important indication that rural transport issues are receiving more attention within the wider transport sector. The IFRTD welcomes this change and looks forward to networking with the IFG and its NFGs in the future.

If you would like to find out more about the IFG please contact:

Dr Colin Gourley

Email: ifg@transport-links.org Web: www.transport-links.org/ifg.htm

ORN 20 – Management of Rural Road Networks

Overseas Road Note 1 – Maintenance Management for District Engineers, was first published in 1981. It guides road engineers in the organisation and control of road management operations and has been one of the most popular documents in the ORN series. In 2000, TRL was commissioned by DFID to produce a third edition and bring it up to date with developments in prioritisation, the private sector, appropriate standards and road user participation.

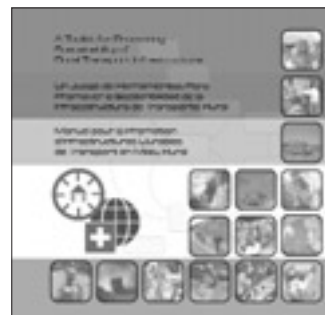
Whilst work on this new edition of ORN 1 will shortly be complete, the project has also led to the production of Overseas Road Note 20. This new document provides guidance to those managing low volume rural road networks. The guidance is based upon the two principles of prioritising the maintenance of roads in good or fair condition over the rehabilitation of roads in poor condition, and the provision of safe and reliable access when under financial constraint.

ORN 20 includes sections on road user and road industry participation, technology choice, prioritisation, basic access, safety engineering, contracting and environmental protection and has an extensive listing of useful organisations and publications. It will be launched at the International Focus Group on Rural Road Engineering in June of this year. Copies can be obtained from TRL as below.

Sue Stoneman, TRL Limited, Old Wokingham Road, Crowthorne, Berkshire RG45 6AU, United Kingdom Email: International_enquiries@trl.co.uk

Interactive Infrastructure

With this edition of Forum News you will find your own interactive CD-Rom copy of 'A Toolkit for Promoting Sustainability of Rural Transport Infrastructure'. This toolkit aims to assist rural development practitioners and transport planners in the formulation and implementation of local level rural transport interventions. Through a series of steps, questions and useful suggestions the toolkit guides the user through an analysis of their particular situation, examining strengths and weaknesses, defining realistic objectives, and asking relevant questions to choose the best possible options



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The user-friendly tri-lingual CD-Rom (English, French and Spanish) is brought to life by case studies drawn from the IFRTD network and highlights key lessons learned from each case study in relation to the issues raised. It demands a greater understanding of the political and social relationships between stakeholders and promotes recognition of the interdependence of rehabilitation and maintenance as a condition for sustainability. It is not a technical guide but a complement to the existing technical inputs available with respect to rural infrastructure.

We would like to build upon the case studies presented in the Toolkit with your experiences, please use the yellow form enclosed with the CD-Rom to send us your contribution and feedback about the Toolkit.

More information can be found on the IFRTD website at www.ifrtd.org/proj/proj.htm or through contacting the IFRTD Secretariat (see 'About Us' box below)

About Us:

The International Forum for Rural Transport and Development (IFRTD) is a global network of individuals and organisations interested in addressing poverty and isolation.

As a recipient of Forum News you are a member of this global network, some of whom have joined together to form affiliated national networks (known as NFGs) that engage in networking, research and advocacy activities to effect change at country level.

The IFRTD Secretariat is a small de-centralised team located in the UK, Senegal, Kenya and Perú, tasked with facilitating networking, advocacy, information and research initiatives among network members, nationally, regionally and internationally.

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Remember to take a look at the IFRTD website www.ifrtd.org

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