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# The *Okada* War in Urban Ghana: A Polemic Issue or Policy Mismatch?

MARTIN OTENG-ABABIO and ERNEST AGYEMANG

**Abstract:** In recent years the government of Ghana and a section of civil society have clashed over whether motorcycle taxis, christened *okada*, which are fast becoming a major public transport mode, should be encouraged or not. In an apparent submission to public pressure and in pursuance of sustainable urban development, the government eventually enacted landmark legislation banning the use of motorcycles for commercial purposes. Using stakeholders' perspectives, this paper assesses the synergies and tensions between the respective claims and counterclaims. Among the issues raised against *okada* are traffic congestion, danger to public safety, and worsening environmental impact. Proponents of *okada* extol the virtues of maneuverability, compatibility with bad roads, and demand-responsiveness. This study does not discount these claims but rather posits that, fundamentally, substantial allocative and technical inefficiencies have generated large public transit deficits and severe highway congestion, thus creating a market niche for *okada*. Our study highlights three major outcomes. First, it reaffirms the importance of evidence-based policy making as a solution for sustainable development initiatives. Second, it identifies the human security risks associated with a short-term vision and how reactive regulations can prepare the ground for segregation and fragmented access to the urban landscape. Third, it highlights the role of pressure groups and policy makers in shaping and re-defining urban transportation landscapes in an isolated manner. Rather than taking a systematic approach, such groups and policy makers react with little consideration for their clients: the commuters. The findings corroborate our earlier empirical studies, which revealed *okada* as an unofficial but thriving mobility option.

## Introduction

Efficient urban transport infrastructure and services are the backbone of any efficient city system, and the public provision of these services remains the most socially desirable option.<sup>1</sup> In 2013 three international think tanks (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, and the Global Compact) separately and collectively underscored the importance of efficient transport systems in ensuring equal accessibility to cities. Such systems are critical to reducing the risks posed by urbanization and ensuring equal participation of both the governors and the governed. In

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general, to provide such infrastructure services, governments and policy makers have a menu of policies to choose from, such as privatization and public-private partnership.<sup>2</sup>

In recent times, however, there has been a decline in organized public transport in the face of rapidly urbanizing cities and rising numbers of private vehicles, resulting in increased congestion, reduced mobility, and more accidents.<sup>3</sup> These negative externalities affect particularly the poor and vulnerable members of society, who are locked into a web of perpetual “transport poverty.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, in light of government inactivity, prospective commuters are being forced to develop creative solution to address their daily travel needs. The socially unacceptable decline in organized public transport has led to a rapid growth in non-conventional transportation modes, such as the commercialization of the motorcycles popularly called *okada*. While positively filling the gap left by a declining public sector, and providing easy maneuverability and demand-responsiveness, *okada* have not escaped blame for increasing road accidents, traffic management problems, and pervasive noise.

In our opinion, the entrepreneurial inspiration behind the proliferation of *okada* in cities can be traced to the failure of public transport to meet commuters’ needs. This can be attributed partly to the challenges and policies adopted after the inception of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s in Ghana.<sup>5</sup> One major outcome of these programs has been a significant reduction in wage employment in both the public and private sectors, resulting from various fiscal reforms, privatization, and deregulation. It has been argued that until the SAPs, the state-owned Omnibus Services Authority (OSA) and City Express Service (CES) bus companies provided safe, comfortable, and reliable intra-urban services; but these public transport systems later closed owing to mismanagement and stiff competition from the private sector.<sup>6</sup> This has resulted in chaos on most urban roads, which are heavily congested during rush hours, and caused serious delays and continuous deterioration of roads.<sup>7</sup> In the government’s quest for sustainable urban development, one would have expected policy makers to battle against the policy deficiencies that lead to such chaos on most urban roads. In fact, Ghana’s National Transport Policy (2008) identifies an effective transportation system as a *sine qua non* for national growth and poverty reduction, particularly in urban areas. Nevertheless, transport policies all too often tend to receive scant attention.<sup>8</sup> As Gomez-Ibanez and Meyer noted, in the name of economic efficiency twentieth century governments adopted a posture of minimal intervention in the market, and thus “governments around the world are reducing their roles in transport.”<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, the deficiencies in various aspects of government policy planning, financing, implementation, and management have made *okada*, which simply fill the void created by the public sector, the most preferred option. The resultant efforts by government to regulate the situation have placed *okada* onto the political agenda and caused them to be unjustly maligned—hence the promulgation of LI 2180 as a shot-in-the-dark intervention that papers over the broader issue of inefficiencies in Ghana’s public transport services.

Our study examines the possibility of successfully implementing LI 2180, a legislative instrument (LI) that bans *okada* operations in Ghana. The study is intended to underscore the linkages between governance failure and weak transport sector performance, which have received little academic attention. The data was compiled primarily through forty qualitative surveys, a detailed literature review, and interviews. The study also benefited from our

previous empirical research. We employ a difference-in-differences strategy that explains many of the unobserved reasons that have led to the spread of *okada* across cities and towns in the country.

Certainly, *okada* have their drawbacks, including impacting adversely on some pedestrians particularly women and children, and rendering crucial non-motorized transport infrastructure riskier. Yet, rather than seeing the service as a naturalized “resource curse,” we think the imbalances between the power of the state in the provision of the infrastructural services, the rising youth unemployment, and the need for effective multi-modal transport systems in the cities are critical catalysts that have shaped and constrained the status quo. Although *okada* may be an inefficient response to inefficient transport services, in all probability the government intervention will compound the problem by distorting market structures and promoting rent-seeking that favors the interests of the privileged few.

The paper is divided into four sections. The next subsection engages with the history of the motorcycle taxi in Africa and provides a context for the study. It briefly highlights some of the pertinent themes in earlier studies. The paper then turns to methodological issues and follows with an analysis. Being mindful of the inconclusive nature of the literature on urbanization, coupled with the global economic downturn and its impact on urban transportation, the final section makes a speculative assessment of the drivers of urbanization processes and of the future of *okada*. To achieve this end, we are inspired by Kumar’s (2011) strong argument for the need to understand the foundational drivers of *okada* and to adapt policy instruments to local political and economic contexts. We propose a participation framework driven by open communication across a wide spectrum of stakeholders rather than looking for the symptoms of what is obviously a policy failure. The implementation of LI 2180 is now a little over a year old. However, both the seemingly increasing numbers of *okada* operating turfs, in Accra in particular, and the commonalities in outcomes in other African contexts suggest that the prognosis for the Ghanaian situation can be stated with a reasonable degree of confidence.

### **Deciphering the Emergence of Motorcycle Taxis in Africa**

Africa is urbanizing fast. Its total population is projected to nearly double from around one billion in 2010 to almost two billion by 2040, and it may well surpass three billion by 2070.<sup>10</sup> (Habitat, 2014). Thus, the overarching challenge for Africa in the decades to come is its massive population growth in a context of widespread poverty, factors that in combination will generate complex and interrelated threats to the human habitat.<sup>11</sup> The importance of efficient transport systems in ensuring the sustainable functioning of African city systems cannot be overemphasized. Investments in road, rail, and energy networks will be crucial to boosting Africa’s urban economies by unlocking sparsely populated areas for settlement and investments in agro-industrial and manufacturing enterprises. Such investments will further facilitate flows of people, commodities, and services, thus connecting Africa’s many landlocked nations to the outside world and ensuring food, water, and energy security for development.

In practice, most political authorities appear interested in developing a system that ensures easy traffic flow, mitigates congestion, and guarantees public transport subsidies.<sup>12</sup> From this perspective, some of the approaches adopted by the authorities to achieve these objectives include building more infrastructure (build the problem away), introducing more traffic

signalization (signal the problem away), improving traffic management, and making public transport more attractive.<sup>13</sup> However, the outcomes of these interventions in recent times have been, at best, discouraging; most of these strategies do not solve the problems they are supposed to address but create additional ones and therefore are cost-ineffective. Studies show that the main features of today's transport policies are helplessness and basic ignorance.<sup>14</sup> Other studies reveal that what operates in current transport science is a kind of ideology rather than rationality, pointing to the fact that what "works" in transport policy is an increasing populism instead of responsibility.<sup>15</sup> In developing transport systems, technologists and economists often give priority to fast transport modes and adopt indicators of expected benefits without taking into account the real system effects on society and urban structures.

Africa is no exception to these global dynamics, a situation compounded by increasing financial constraints, poor planning, mismanagement, and chronic corruption. The only exception on the African continent may be South Africa, which has operated its "Rea Vaya" bus system effectively since 2009 and formalized its minibus operations, together with the Gautrain system.<sup>16</sup> In many African countries the need to coordinate land use and transport planning is widely recognized but rarely achieved. This has made all forms of public transport (which have never been particularly fast anyway) slower, less reliable, and more expensive to provide, with the ensuing externalities—congestion, accidents, pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and crime within the city—affecting the poor disproportionately. These challenges have compelled the transport-disadvantaged to search for affordable options, the most popular today being motorcycle taxis.<sup>17</sup>

In the view of Kumar (2011), the origin and growth of motorcycle taxis in most African countries can be traced to the collapse of bus transport services either directly provided by the state or contracted for, and the deregulation of the market leading to the growth of informal operators. The preponderance (ubiquity) of motorcycle-taxi services in Africa is clearly manifested in the proliferation of local names to describe them. They include *okada* (Ghana), *okada* or *alalok* (Nigeria), *kabu-kabu* (Niger), *boda-boda* (Uganda and Kenya), *zemidjan* (Benin), *oleyia* (Togo), and *bendskin* (Cameroon). In Nigeria's most populous city, Lagos, there are over 200,000 *okada* operators, providing direct employment to over 500,000 people, and such a large numerical strength gives them enormous political power.<sup>18</sup> Digging deeper into the genesis of the practice, some studies have indicated that poor management of rapid urbanization has resulted in erratic and inefficient urban transport regimes.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the decision by some African governments to waive import tax on motorcycles, with the intent of ensuring their affordability and facilitating easy mobility, also had unintended consequences—the proliferation of motor-taxis.<sup>20</sup> Other contributing factors to the growth of *okada* numbers include low start-up capital, low maintenance costs, high youth unemployment, and the general laxity in existing regulatory frameworks.<sup>21</sup>

From another perspective, the growing prominence of *okada* may signify people's desire to address the dire transport poverty that defines their daily lives.<sup>22</sup> The *okada* has created a niche for itself: it provides door-to-door service easily and can access areas with poor to impassable road networks. It is also very suitable for short trips and can save time (overcoming traffic congestion), especially in the congested urban space.<sup>23</sup>

The *okada* transport system has not been without safety and security concerns, however, particularly in regard to its adherence to public safety needs.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, many governments have instituted various policy initiatives to deal with the issue and its associated externalities. In Kenya, although the government continues to offer tax waivers on imported motorcycles, it has promulgated a law that bans the use of motorcycle taxis in certain areas in the capital.<sup>25</sup> In Cameroon, apart from outlawing *okada* in the national capital, motor-taxis must also to be properly registered and the operators must, by law, have a license, insurance, and a crash helmet. In addition, the use of reflective jackets by both the drivers and the passengers is mandatory. In the case of Ouagadougou, special lanes have been constructed solely for motorcycles.<sup>26</sup>

Ghanaian public opinion on *okada* is varied. However, there appears to be a growing school of thought that suggests the government can and must spend its way out of the *okada* dilemma by completely banning their use. The government's policy response appears to side with this school of thought. We find this policy paradigm particularly baffling, however, in view of its self-proclaimed social democratic stance. The present government prides itself on its commitment to improving the economic fortunes of the vulnerable in society. Thus, for it to endorse a policy of obvious short-term benefits that may lead to popular discontent in the long run, particularly for the majority of "transport-poverty" commuters, is inconsistent with its own avowed ideology.<sup>27</sup> As Kumar has strongly argued, such populist decisions are very often "taken to enhance patronage without regard to the long-term impact of the decisions taken or the need to entrench the decision on a strategic thinking to improve sector performance."<sup>28</sup>

The government enacted LI 2180 to ban *okada*, yet the future of the regulation remains highly doubtful. Indeed, earlier studies have intimated that past urban transport policies have been largely shaped by entrenched political forces, leading to huge public transport deficits, severe congestion, and construction-cost overruns, and promising more of the same for the future.<sup>29</sup> It is from this perspective that we consider the likely effect of the new law. In our opinion, this law is likely to exacerbate the transportation deficit and disrupt the city system's ability to function beyond its center, creating in the process a 'goldmine' for unscrupulous law enforcement agencies. Policymakers ought to appreciate these tendencies, lest they erroneously assume that *okada* belong to history simply because LI 2180 has been passed.

Policymakers should also appreciate the fact that the desperate need for a more viable, stress-free, and sustainable public transport system appears to have made *okada* a transport mode of choice for commuters over the traditional mobility options, which are often owned by local politicians or socially connected and financially resourceful businessmen. Moreover, in terms of power relations, *okada* operators may be quite vulnerable; but their numerical strength and youthful exuberance has propelled them into a political collision with the government, while their aggressive nature threatens other road users and is losing them public support. Be that as it may, the fact remains that any deficient policy, enacted without reference to the key stakeholders and local knowledge, tends to stifle local initiative. On this score, it remains to be seen what degree of success will be attained by the landmark legislation criminalizing *okada*.

## Interrogating the Road Safety Policy Dynamics

### *Methodology*

In our quest to understand the on-going debates on the criminalization of *okada*, we draw on our previous study as baseline information with a view to placing the discussion in a broader context.<sup>30</sup> In that study, we employed a mixed method approach involving participant observation, personal interviews, and stakeholder interviews. Using a purposive sampling technique in the current study, questionnaire surveys on the operations of forty *okada* operators were conducted at two different “turfs” in Accra (the Central Post Office and Korle Bu Hospital). Accra was selected not only because it is the national capital but also the fastest-growing (most urbanized) city and the center of economic activities in the country. It also has all public and private transportation modes: road, rail, air, and sea for domestic and international travel. In addition, it is the city where the *okada* saga has generated the hottest debate and reaction.

Following the promulgation of LI 2180, we conducted a further twenty-five key stakeholder interviews, including of operators, city authorities, and officials from both the Motor Transport and Traffic Department (MTTD) and the National Road Safety Commission (NRSC). Our interviews sought insight into the expectations of our respondents, the legal implications of the policy, and the policy’s future vis-à-vis the law. We complemented these interviews with a series of focus groups discussions (total of four) with identifiable groups—promoters of LI 2180, including the MTTD, NRSC, Assembly, and non-governmental organizations, and opponents of LI 2180, including *okada* operators and beneficiaries of the service. We also benefited from the range of literature on *okada* operations found in the electronic and print media landscape. Though researchers specializing in African cities strongly endorse the use of data from the media, since accounts of local journalists can provide valuable information, we were also conscious of potential bias reportage in some instances.<sup>31</sup> In order to minimize this problem, the accounts were drawn from a variety of media houses—national, regional, private, and state-owned—and complemented with in-depth interviews. The resultant data were subjected to thematic narrative analysis and are presented as direct quotes, interpreting the various aspects of the research topic.<sup>32</sup>

### *An Overview of LI 2180*

In general, the enactment of policies in Ghana has traditionally been a top-down exercise, initiated by sector ministries and working through the appropriate departments and agencies. It is in this spirit that the NRSC and the Ministry of Road and Transport presented LI 2180 to Parliament for consideration and passage. On 4 July 2012, Parliament unanimously passed the Road Traffic Regulation, 2012 (Legislative Instrument LI 2180), which, inter-alia, bans the commercial use of motorbikes (*okada*). LI 2180 states, in part:

- A person shall not use or permit a motorcycle or tricycle over which that person exercises control to be used for commercial purposes except for courier and delivery services;
- A person shall not ride on a motorcycle or tricycle as a fare-paying passenger;

- A person who contravenes the law commits an offence and is liable on summary conviction to a fine of not more than twenty-five penalty units or to a term of imprisonment of not more than thirty days or to both.

Proponents of LI 2180 aver that road traffic offences not clearly defined by the old legal traffic laws, such as the use of mobile phones while driving and the use of motorbikes for commercial purposes, necessitated the law's passage. In addition, the new LI enjoins motorbike riders to wear identifiable paraphernalia, including appropriate boots, reflective jackets, gloves, and crash helmets, failing which the riders commit an offence. Thus, LI 2180 took into account the shortfalls in the existing road traffic regulation (LI 956 of 1974) and Regulation 64 of the Motor Traffic Act. One fundamental defect in the LI was its loud silence on any alternative cash-based livelihood for the operators and any gap-filling transport option for distressed commuters.

Earlier studies reveal that attempts to criminalize motor-taxis makes operators easy targets for incessant official harassment (or extortion).<sup>33</sup> As early as February 2011, a group of about five hundred *okada* operators in Accra petitioned Parliament to legitimize *okada* and "stop the inhuman treatment of city authorities and incessant extortion from the police."<sup>34</sup> Presenting their petition, the group leader remarked:

We are here because we hear that there is a law that motorbikes should not be used for commercial purposes. . . . We want Parliament to do something about it. . . . we didn't know there is a law [that forbids our operation].... If there is a law that can create unemployment, then that law is a bad one.... You have to look at it. We believe Parliament can do something or we will go to our Father [the President].<sup>35</sup>

This action was not "an isolated cry." Some commuters in Accra admitted the risks involved in patronizing *okadas* but stressed that the practice was convenient, fast, and reliable. The *Daily Graphic* of 24 June 2013 reported residents in Segakope in the Volta region embarking on a demonstration against the LI, stressing that *okada* was their main mode of mobility. Similarly, a local radio station in Accra in late June 2013 reported on the youth in Tamale (Northern region) complaining about the ban. These developments provide sufficient reason to anticipate a strong defiance on the part of distressed commuters hoping to get to work comfortably and on time as well as the desire of unemployed youth to make a living. The ensuing "war" lends some weight to an emerging conspiracy theory allegation, which posits that some people in authority have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Accordingly, these people tend to use their economic and political power to obtain political influence and promote policies that protect their interests.

### **The Platitudes of the *Okada* War**

Until 2012, there was no law that prosecuted those who use motorbikes for commercial purposes. The recent ban was occasioned by intensified calls from sections of the public and some NGOs who disapprove of the practice. It came at a time when the practice had become a major source of livelihood for thousands of urban residents, including not only the youth but also some senior public officials. During our fieldwork, it was alleged that some public officials

have procured fleet of motorbikes, which they rent out to prospective operators at a fee of GH¢40 (\$14) daily, although we had no independent means of verifying this information. It was further revealed that the supposed enforcers of the law appear handicapped and are sometimes compelled to tolerate the presence of *okada* in the absence of public policies that provide socially acceptable, affordable, and convenient mobility alternatives in the presence of rising youth unemployment. Several informants highlighted the problems of identification and de-linking privately owned motorcycles that are genuinely used for personal mobility as opposed to those being used for the *okada* motorcycle-taxi business. There is also the likelihood that most passengers connive with operators, thus compounding the problem of identifying commercial operators.

While majority (about 60 percent) of the public, and especially road safety experts and law enforcement agents interviewed hailed the passage of the law, passionate arguments have also emerged from all the operators and their “political paymasters.” Some of these claims and counterclaims are worth interrogating. The leader of the hurriedly formed Private Motor Bikes Operators Union, for example, defended their right to stay in business: “Every citizen has the right to do something to earn a livelihood and prevent situations where the youth who are currently idling about are forced to indulge in social vices that will not augur well for all.”<sup>36</sup> Contributing to the discussion, the Secretary of the group stated that the ban will exacerbate the existing mobility difficulties in the city, adding that “clearly, if this law is implemented, areas like Juapong and Sogakope, with notable mobility challenges, will be more deprived.”<sup>37</sup>

While such remarks tend to suggest a livelihood war from the operators’ point of view, others engaged with the issue politically. As it happens, the passage of the LI coincided with the 2012 general electioneering calendar; hence the policy immediately assumed political importance and colorization, becoming a major campaign issue and receiving prominence on political platforms. After a series of agitations in Ashaiman from aggrieved *okada* operators, who threatened to derail the electoral fortunes of the ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) with “No-Okada-No-Vote” chants, the regional minister waded into the debate, questioning the law’s sustainability. He stated: “So far as I remain the Regional Minister, *okada* shall operate unless a stop is put to it in Tamale.... I am telling you this as the Minister; we won’t abolish the use of *okada*.”<sup>38</sup> The minister, who doubles as the Member of Parliament (MP) for Kpone-Katamanso, emphasized the potential problems of the LI: “There are so many laws passed by Parliament that have not been enforced. This law can also be put aside ... till we create enough jobs for the youth ... If we are not careful, armed robbery will rise... I have seen people being slashed and their bags taken away.”<sup>39</sup>

Supporting the minister’s position, NDC MPs for Ashaiman and Ketu South constituencies declared their support for the *okada* practice.<sup>40</sup> They agreed on a gradual phasing-out agenda, insisting that a total ban would affect the only means of mobility in some areas.<sup>41</sup> As expected, members of the minority New Patriotic Party (NPP) argued to the contrary and urged the police MTTD to enforce the LI rigorously. They described the position of the government as grossly oversimplified and hypocritical, criticizing it for mortgaging the country’s security for its selfish interest over an issue that had been comprehensively debated apolitically.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the NPP MP for Bekwai expressed bemusement on the sudden ‘political gymnastics’ displayed by the

NDC MPs: “the LI was presented to Parliament by government. For convenience, people will overlook everything if it will give them a vote.”<sup>43</sup>

Other public officials referred to some deep-rooted problems associated with *okada*. In an in-depth interview with the Director of Policy, Monitoring and Evaluation of the NRSC, the director re-affirmed their resolve to enforce the ban from a safety perspective. She argued that countries with good transportation systems do not depend on *okada*, alleging (perhaps erroneously) that even Nigeria, which has gained notoriety in the business, had advised Ghana to ban it. The Commander of Police MTTD corroborated the stand of the NRSC, adding emphatically: “the law has come at the appropriate time and will be enforced to the letter.”<sup>44</sup> The Head of Research, Education and Training at MTTD also explained that motorbikes are licensed exclusively for personal uses and it is unlawful for any person to commercialize them. He argued:

The use of motorbikes has now become a “curse.” Most people want to make money through criminal means at the expense of other people’s lives. In January [2012] alone, 148 motorbikes were involved in crashes nationwide out of which 62 were recorded in Greater Accra, mostly from commercial motorcycle operators.<sup>45</sup>

A section of the respondents also agreed that *okada* could be problematic, at least conceptually. A resident, who appeared to have once been a victim of an *okada* robbery incident, bemoaned the current state of affairs:

Stop this *okada* before things get out of hand. Check Nigeria and you will see what it can do to the society. Very soon, our society will become noisier, agitated and irritated; pedestrians will find it difficult to cross roads, accidents will triple; and we might as well create an *okada* ward in our hospitals.<sup>46</sup>

During the focus group discussions, however, most participants opposed the LI and predicted its “doom.” In their opinion, *okada* stands tall in terms of reliability, ubiquity, access, and commercial speed. They pointed out that the service fills an important gap in urban transport demand and also provides employment for the youth. Others referred to some real consequences of the practice of using *okada*, particularly in unplanned areas where some *okada* operators and their clients veer off the main road into settlements and into alleyways at unsafe speeds. A group of women from Nima (a suburb in Accra) unanimously agreed that the use of pedestrian alleyways by *okada* travelling at top speed posed a threat to their children (who walk to school and play in these alleyways) and render crucial (and scant) non-motorized transport infrastructure riskier. Others raised concerns about how some riders display outright disregard or ignorance of traffic regulations. In addition, the question of affordability was raised, as the poor generally travel by motorcycle-taxis twice less frequently than the non-poor.

Despite these resentments, the general consensus was that while *okada* may, for now, be an inefficient response to an inefficient status quo, they do solve acute mobility issues within the metropolis and, like all transport services, have to be regulated. Clearly, the practice has become a demand–response service, and that is yet another reason why it is so important to invest in bus rapid transit (BRT) systems and non-motorized transport (NMT) modes so as to reduce the need for *okada*. A police officer in one of the forums conceded that the dangers outlined against

the use of motorcycles were not the preserve of *okada* operators alone, adding that there were instances where other private riders equally breached traffic regulations. In his view, such persons are as guilty as the *okada* operators. He noted that already (by 31 January 2012) 248 such persons had been convicted, and he pessimistically suggested:

The effort to end *okada* is not for the police alone; it would take an educated and well-disciplined society to succeed. The government must also provide an efficient, reliable and timely public transport system, since at times we are compelled to tolerate their [*okada*] presence in the absence of policies providing alternative modes for passengers as well as the lack of employment opportunities for the teeming youth.<sup>47</sup>

Our findings are in accord with a commentary in a 2010 issue of *The Economist*, captioned "Tame these Taxis: A well-intended governor is annoying frustrated commuters." It read, in part:

A rush-hour commuter in Lagos can take 3 hours to cover 15 kilometers. A rare beneficiary has been the Okada rider. On his cheap motorbike taxi, he often carries an entire family or a week's grocery.... His widely time-saving tactics include riding on the wrong side of the road and ignoring red lights. But Babatunde Fashola, Lagos's popular governor, is clamping down on the daredevil bikes as part of his push to tame an unruly city.... Many Lagosians moan that, though he has virtually banned the bikes, the governor has failed to provide alternatives.... Many poorer Lagosians, facing long journeys from the suburbs, must now use the far slower taxis or unlicensed minibuses.... But many think the campaign against Okada is premature. Whether Mr. Fashola can enforce his curbs is another matter.<sup>48</sup>

Clearly, the *okada* affair requires critical apolitical analysis, not least because it has assumed epic proportions between the operators, some civil society organizations, and the police. Its repercussions for city governance and the general social and economic development of Ghana could be drastic. Such analysis must evaluate and ascertain the basis for passing the LI, which, at least at first sight, seems to be emanated from an empirical vacuum.

### **Encountering Okada Realities: Assets and Liabilities**

The ban on the operation of *okada* has been in place for over a year, yet it remains unclear whether it will be effective and sustainable. We reiterate our earlier position that any successful policy intervention demands well-researched data as its foundation or it runs the risk of failure. Unfortunately, in this particular case, the authorities seem to have failed to first appreciate and address the fundamental challenges and causalities that have made *okada* the most preferred mobility option in Ghanaian cities. Clearly, the calls for their ban came hot on the heels of recent increasing road fatalities, some of which have been attributed to the over 400 percent increase in *okada* accidents due the aggressiveness and recklessness of operators. A review of data from the NRSC shows high rates of road accidents and increasing fatalities over ten years (Table 1).

**TABLE 1: ROAD TRAFFIC CRASH ACCIDENTS (2000–2010)**

Year	No of registered vehicles	No. of vehicles involved	Reported crashes	Fatalities
2000	511,063	21,152	14,654	5,161
2001	567,780	17,807	11,853	1,659
2002	613,153	18,337	11,872	1,665
2003	643,824	18,961	13,039	1,718
2004	703,372	20,353	14,739	2,173
2005	767,067	19,122	12,903	1,782
2006	841,314	17,877	11,668	1,856
2007	922,784	17,496	12,038	2,038
2008	942,000	17,608	11,214	1,934
2009	1,030,000	17,404	12,229	2,237
2010	1,122,722	18,584	11,506	1,986

**Source:** NRSC 2011; MTTD Quarterly Report 2010

The data show variations as the number of accidents rises and falls, sometimes more steeply than before. For example, the period 2001–2003 saw a steady decline from 14,654 crashes recorded in 2000 to 13,039 in 2003. This changed in 2004 when a 13 percent increase was reported. In terms of fatalities, the data from the NRSC show a consistent average rise of 73 fatalities per annum. Between 2001 and 2010, the rise in fatalities has been consistent though considerably lower than the 1990s, at a rate of approximately 48 fatalities per annum, a 37 percent drop in the annual rate. Nevertheless, the fatality figure of 1,986 recorded in 2010 highlights the fact that the country recorded 762 deaths more than the NRSC estimates of 1,224 for 2010.

These disturbing statistics have been used as a justification and legitimating factor in the criminalization of the *okadas*, though there may be more fundamental causes of the large number of fatal accidents, such as attitudinal, economic, and planning causes. One of the immediate unintended consequences of the ban has been to remove any legal authorization for the operators and thus expose them to official harassment. The MTTD arrested seventy-three *okada* riders, of whom twenty were fined between GH¢600 (\$252) and GH¢1,000 (\$420) each.<sup>49</sup> In spite of the official crackdown, however, the practice continues to thrive, even increasing its geographical extent.<sup>50</sup>

While the list of operators is expanding to include public servants who engage in the business on a part-time basis, the implementation of LI 2018 is gradually mimicking the 2007 Nigerian case.<sup>51</sup> In 2007, the Lagos State Government banned the circulation of commercial motorcycles between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m. According to the state police commissioner, the move came in response to a sharp rise in the number of robberies using motorcycles as getaway vehicles. The punishment for violating the ban included seizure of the motorcycle and a fine of N50,000 (\$400). The ban initially led to the disappearance of motorcycles from many parts of the city, leaving many commuters with no way to get to and from work. Transport fares tripled. The Motorcycle Operators Association of Nigeria contested the ban because no alternative emerged. Commuters, too, wanted the government to find a more appropriate solution than an

outright ban on the operation. As a result, the ban was later modified and its operation is now restricted to arterial and link roads.

Similarly, our findings show a number of inconsistencies in the implementation of the policy. First, during the study and indeed in their public discourse, some public officials made no secret of their abhorrence of *okada* and the fact that Ghana's economic future lies in an efficient formal transportation system.<sup>52</sup> There is therefore a growing suspicion that the current transportation system—directed mainly by the informal sector—is perhaps not the best growth strategy. Present urban transport policy reforms, including the World Bank-sponsored on-going Urban Transport Project, which seeks to introduce a BRT system remain conspicuously silent on the informal sector as a key stakeholder; yet, traditionally, this sector commands approximately 70 percent of the market.<sup>53</sup> The official position suggests that Ghana is “overexposed to the *okada* and underexposed to faster-growing emerging systems.”

Secondly, the proponents of the LI 2180 policy have failed to recognize that the substantial allocative and technical inefficiencies, in the face of the high youth unemployment, coupled with the *okada*'s “low entry requirements” and “no technical expertise required” attractions, provide sufficient incentives for most residents to “join the band-wagon.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, operating *okada* is made even more attractive by the perceived high financial returns. Our prior studies indicate that operators earn on average GH¢50 (about \$20) per day, excluding daily rental (about \$4) and operating expenses (\$5).<sup>55</sup> In addition, the ability to adapt to changing travel demands—convenience, door-to-door service, ability to save time and serve low-density areas, and flexibility—works positively in favor of popularizing *okada* transport.

The current retail structure of the city also creates powerful disincentives for the business community in particular to move away from the *okada*. The economy has been over-concentrated in the Central Business District (CBD) for decades. The CBD accounts for approximately 80 percent of the country's merchandise trade and over 90 percent of the headquarters of both public and private offices, yet “less than 10 percent of road networks in the CBD have seen modification since the 1960s.”<sup>56</sup> Almost all these road networks are single-lane, being fed by double-lane roads from the periphery. Furthermore, in most cases parts of the traffic lanes are taken up by pedestrians (and hawkers) and parked vehicles, which also reduce their capacity and pose safety hazards. These conditions only exacerbate the weariness of commuters, who continue to lament the government's poor planning.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, the *okada* saga needs to be understood as a response to residents' desire to navigate the rush-hour congestion and improve mobility beyond the declining public transport systems. A comment by an interviewee encapsulates this anxiety:

Accra today is on the edge of making a historic choice: to improve the transportation infrastructure and reduce traffic congestion or maintain the status quo. Virtually all traffic flows in and out of Accra Central remain at a standstill in the mornings and evenings. For AMA [Accra Metropolitan Assembly], the choice is clear: they need to manage the city holistically as a system, in which all the sub-systems work independently but efficiently in order to ensure sustainable development and economic growth for all.<sup>58</sup>

The promulgation of LI 2180, in response to emotive criticism of *okada*, lacked a comprehensive (holistic) appreciation of the problem; and it is now likely to lead to

implementation difficulties. Presently, for example, little is known in terms of the cost to industry, traders, and commuters of the incessant traffic congestion in the city. In South Africa, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2010) estimated the costs of traffic congestion to be 15 million rand per hour, excluding costs related to items such as fuel and vehicle maintenance. To avert such implicit socio-economic costs, countries like Uganda and Togo have officially embraced the *okada* challenge. In Kampala, for instance, a law on the wearing of helmets is being vigorously pursued; in Togo, operators have been directed to use motorcycles with mirrors to enhance the safety of the operators and patrons. These measures bring a two-fold benefit: meeting commuters' transport needs and providing livelihoods for the masses of unemployed youth. In 2010, there were 83,000 *okada* operators on the streets of Benin, 40,000 in Togo, and 2,350 in Niger.<sup>59</sup>

Judging from the current state of affairs regarding the implementation of LI 2180, and leaving aside the political dimensions of the debate, we remain quite optimistic that the future will revisit the *okada* issue, insofar as Accra's mobility level (and indeed that in all urban centers) is not as reliable as it once was, in spite of the increasing car ownership.<sup>60</sup> According to Knoflacher, "mobility can only increase if local deficits increase, which means poor urban planning, poor logistics and poor management. These deficits have to be compensated for by physical mobility."<sup>61</sup> We see mobility as purpose-related, and therefore each trip by car replaces a trip by another mode of transport. It follows that increasing car mobility means decreasing mobility for pedestrians, cyclists, and public transport. Failure to increase car mobility means the present modes of transport do not address commuters' main concern (i.e. congestion). Given that peoples' desire for flexibility in mobility remains strong, we posit that the demand for *okada* will continue to show robust growth as long as the public sector remains dormant. Despite strident criticisms of the *okada* practice, we see enough evidence to suggest that the ban will come only at the cost of restricting freedom of mobility. The government's "deafening silence" on alternatives for navigating the city may in fact indirectly endorse the *okada* business, the ban notwithstanding.

The "ban-*okada*" posture appears to be a function of government's perspective on causality and its failure to appreciate the city as a "system." Similarly, the rise of the *okada*, when traced to its roots, is an indictment of successive governments' shirking of their responsibility regarding transportation in general. From our results, we can affirm that the attempt to ban of *okada* is fundamentally based on a misreading of causality. We believe that city authorities must wean themselves from planning for "their" geographical region alone. The realities of transport affect the city as a whole, operating as it does as a unified system. The authorities' lack of appreciation and reluctance to plan and implement policies from this perspective negatively impacts development. In the case of *okada*, our earlier study supports efforts to place the issue onto the development agenda and build on its less controversial legacy of participatory democracy.

Discussions with some city officials suggest that the *okada* problem is perceived as a minor matter in the urban economy; it is thus much less meaningful to engage with than the myriad other important infrastructural issues. This contradicts the position and expectation of representatives of the business community and the *okada* operators, who remain outspoken advocates of the practice. Be that as it may, the practice legally remains off the cities' transportation radar for the time being. Whether the ban will endure and succeed remains

unclear, and its eventual impact on the functionality of the city is, at best, uncertain. We can only re-echo our earlier position that the collective public official psyche has yet to appreciate and incorporate into its mental map the *raison d'être* and subsequent proliferation of *okada*.

### Lessons Learned and the Future

This study sought to examine the ability of LI 2180 to curb the operation of *okada* in Ghana. Our findings highlight two main issues. First, this study vindicates our earlier conclusion of the significance of *okadas* in Accra's transport options, and it re-enforces our call for the re-conceptualization of the problems confronting the transport sector as part of the citywide system failure. In general, the livability of a city depends on the smooth functioning of its sub-systems, including management, finance, and good governance, whereby a society is guided toward collective outcomes that benefit all and integrate the poor into a city's tissue. Our findings show that the antecedents of the *okada* issue lay in the increasing urbanization of poverty, coupled with poor planning and the growing car ownership which has overwhelmed city authorities, creating increased congestion, reduced mobility, and "avoidable" accidents. Responding to such a systemic failure through a legal framework seems to be a misplaced, miscalculated, and mismanaged intervention. Rather, we deem it more plausible and appropriate to adopt a more comprehensive and well-coordinated system of urban land use planning and city management.

The first issue dovetails into our second observation: the functionality of a city, not its size, is the metric for measuring its performance. Thus, ensuring an efficient mobility within and without a city is a *sine qua non* for harnessing its potential for socio-economic development. The intelligent management of the *okada* challenge must form a building block in ensuring future efficient mobility and economic success. The city authorities need to plan with functional territorial jurisdiction in mind. This calls for cooperation and coordination among metropolitan and regional agencies, especially where there is a mismatch between municipal boundaries and a city's economic footprint, in order to ensure more effective service deliveries. The *okada* policy fiat has exposed the urgent need to create governance mechanisms that facilitate the dynamic exchange of knowledge and resources. Such exchanges can generate innovative solutions for urban governance from the local level. The authorities should map the possibilities of such effective collaboration, including in particular the informal local economic processes and activities that impact urban growth. In so doing, local governments will be able to create a forum for interaction among the key stakeholders within and beyond the city.

In conclusion, we concur with other researchers that cities are undoubtedly arenas of creativity, innovation, and learning. Fostering these attributes preserves the integrity of the city in the face of unprecedented urbanization, and city authorities must take a leadership role in promoting this course. Equally important is that corporate business entities are generally not interested in the wellbeing of a city per se. Their core business rests on well-functioning systems within and beyond the city, and they typically have significant expertise in managing the interface between their activities and the city systems on which they depend. Getting them involved in knowledge sharing with urban managers fosters innovation. There is therefore an important lesson to be gleaned from the current *okada* saga. The promulgation of LI 2180 was an attempt, albeit arising from an empirical vacuum, to assist local authorities tackle traffic

challenges. However, the process was devoid of participatory processes in which local stakeholders set their own priorities while at the same time more effectively engaging higher levels of governments. Hence, frustrated by the failure of policy makers to seek their consent, *okada* operators and their cohorts have defiantly pledged to protect their turf (i.e. livelihoods) where national-level inaction has typically prevailed. To date, there is a perceptible tension between the enforcement of the LI and the expected results, with many operators ignoring the so-called traffic regulation with impunity.

While there may be reservations about *okada*, their continuous operation has shown that many are prepared to do just that. Clearly, there has been a behavioral shift, particularly among those who have traditionally been focused on commercial cars. Since the *okada* ban is based on a fundamental misreading of causality, this paper proposes an evidence-based and cross-sectoral approach involving all the key stakeholders (including the informal operators and their clients). Only such an approach will produce an appropriate and acceptable policy with the aim of improving efficiency, innovation, and accountability, and possibly bring closer a future that does not see congested roads, bad traffic, and unnecessary road fatalities.

### Postscript

Since the original submission and revision of this paper in 2014, the impact of the LI has become clearer. We can now say that the law will remain on the shelves as the number of participants and their operational turfs have expanded and extended beyond the precinct of Accra Metropolitan Assembly.

### Notes

- 1 Winston 2000.
- 2 For the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, and the Global Compact, see [www.unsdsn.org](http://www.unsdsn.org); [www.post2015hlp.org/](http://www.post2015hlp.org/); [www.globalcompact.org](http://www.globalcompact.org).
- 3 World Bank 2002.
- 4 UN-Habitat 2013.
- 5 Addo 2002.
- 6 Abane 2011.
- 7 See Armah et al. 2010.
- 8 Meyer and Gomez-Ibanez 1981.
- 9 Gomez-Ibanez and Meyer 2001, p. 56.
- 10 UN Economic Commission for Africa 2014.
- 11 BBC 2013; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/0/20979973>; UN-Habitat 2010, 2013.
- 12 Zhang et al. 2004.
- 13 Knoflacher 2004.
- 14 Schafer 1998.
- 15 Knoflacher 2007.
- 16 Deng and Nelson 2011.

- 17 Howe and Dennis 1993; Oluwadiya et al. 2004; UN-Habitat 2010; Abuhamoud et al. 2011
- 18 Kumar 2011.
- 19 Miller et al. 1999.
- 20 Sietchiping et al. 2012.
- 21 Peden 2004; Olvera et al. 2010.
- 22 Agyemang 2009; Oteng-Ababio and Agyemang 2012.
- 23 Sietchiping et al. 2012.
- 24 Odelowo 1994; Nantulya and Reich 2002; NETS 2011.
- 25 Sietchiping et al. 2012.
- 26 Ouongo 2009.
- 27 Obeng-Odoom 2011.
- 28 Kumar 2011, p. 19.
- 29 Knoflacher 2007.
- 30 Oteng-Ababio and Agyemang 2012.
- 31 Yahya 2006.
- 32 Boyatzis 1998; Brauna and Clarke 2006.
- 33 Abuhamoud et al. 2011.
- 34 GNA 2011.
- 35 For Leader's petition to Parliament, see [www.myjoyonline.com/news/201102/60416.asp](http://www.myjoyonline.com/news/201102/60416.asp).
- 36 *Joy News* 2012.
- 37 *Citi-FM News* 2012a.
- 38 *Daily Guide* 2012.
- 39 *Joy News* 2012.
- 40 *Daily Guide* 2012.
- 41 *GBC News* 2012.
- 42 *Citi-FM News* 14 July 2012b.
- 43 Parliament House. 2013. *Order Paper for the Ninth Sitting Of The Third Meeting of Parliament*. The second session of the sixth Parliament of the fourth Republic of Ghana. Tuesday, November 19, 2013.
- 44 For the police commander's comment, see <http://www.ghanaweb.com>, 7 July 2012.
- 45 All Ghana News. 2012. "'Okada' road crashes on the increase as operators defy the law." 13 February (<http://www.allghanaweb.com/general-news/7208-okada-road-crashes-on-the-increase-as-operators-defy-the-law?start=324>; accessed on 13 February 2012).
- 46 Personal interview with a resident, 12 October 2013, Accra.
- 47 Comment by a participant of one of the four focus group discussions, 10 September 2013, Accra.
- 48 *The Economist* 2010 (9 September), see <http://www.economist.com/node/16996825>.
- 49 *Daily Graphic* 2013.
- 50 Bentil 2013.
- 51 Kumar 2011, p. 13; Oteng-Ababio and Agyemang 2012.
- 52 Addo 2002.

- 53 Finn et al. 2009; Kwakye and Fouracre 1998.
- 54 Amankrah, 2006.
- 55 Oteng-Ababio and Agyemang 2012.
- 56 Kwakye and Fouracre 1998; also see Grant and Yankson 2003.
- 57 Winston 2000.
- 58 Personal interview with a development consultant, 12 October 2013, Accra.
- 59 Kumar 2011.
- 60 Quarshie 2007; Armah et al. 2010.
- 61 Knoflachner 2007, p. 296.

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