

The London School of Economics and Political Science

***Crash helmet capitalism: Kampala's moto-taxis  
at the crossroads of digital inclusion***

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**A thesis submitted to the Department of International Development of the London School of Economics and Political Science for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, London, 1 September 2024.**

## **Declaration**

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## Abstract

When digital ride-hailing platforms first hit the streets of Kampala in the mid-2010s, there were high hopes that the Ugandan capital's vast workforce of informal moto-taxi operators, known locally as boda boda riders, would finally get the reforms they and the city needed. Having long been considered impervious to formal state regulation, with the arrival of the platform economy came the promise not just of safer and better livelihoods for riders but of more effective governance over the sector as a whole. To what extent have the events of the past decade borne this out? Drawing on original case study data from observations, interviews ( $n = 112$ ) and surveys ( $n = 370$ ), carried out at various points between November 2020 and February 2022, this thesis pieces together the story of the recent 'platformisation' of Kampala's boda boda industry. By situating the contemporary realities of digital boda work in relation to what came before, both in terms of the 'already-precarious' working conditions faced by riders and the wider 'analogue' politics that have locked these into place, it puts forward a grounded, worker-centred and theoretically informed analysis of what really happens to Southern systems of informal work when the promises of digital inclusion come to town. In contrast to the prevailing assumption that digital labour platforms can provide a pathway to upgrading and formalising work across the global South, it shows that recent changes in Kampala's boda sector have instead generated an 'aesthetics of formality' at the surface that not only leaves the core, underlying structures of riders' labour informality completely intact, but which also conceals a deeper mechanics of corporate control and extraction that filters into the everyday of 'platform-ised' boda work. In doing so, inclusion in the platform economy materialises for many as a new form of 'adverse *digital* incorporation' that leads to repeated waves of voluntary de-automation from below – and to fundamental questions about the apparent inevitability of digital futures of Southern work.

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

3PL	Third-party logistics
4IR	Fourth industrial revolution
A&E	Accident and emergency
AfDB	African Development Bank
AK-47	Avtomat Kalashnikova
App	Application (on a smartphone)
Approx.	Approximately
ATGWU	Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (Uganda)
AUC	African Union Commission
BBC	British Broadcasting Commission
BII	British International Investment
BMK	Haji Muwanga Bulaimu Kibirige (Ugandan businessman)
BOMOSH	Bonnie Mobile Shields (boda workers' association)
BoP	Bottom of the pyramid
BRT	Bus rapid transit
CAPI	Computer-assisted personal interview
CBD	Central business district
CEO	Chief executive officer
CNN	Cable News Network
COVID-19	Corona virus disease 2019
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EU	European Union
E-wallet	Electronic wallet (on a smartphone)
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (UK)
GDP	Gross domestic product
GKMA	Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area
GPS	Global positioning system
GSMA	GSM Association
HQ	Headquarters
IBRD	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ICT4D	Information and Communications Technologies for Development
ID	Identification
IGP	Inspector General of Police (Uganda)
ILO	International Labour Organization
ITF	International Transport Forum

k	1000
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
KAMBE	Kampala Metropolitan Boda Boda Entrepreneurs (workers' association)
KCC	Kampala City Council
KCCA	Kampala Capital City Authority
KFM	93.3 KFM (Ugandan radio station)
KII	Key informant interview
KKV	King, Keohane and Verba (see King et al., 1994 in bibliography)
KUBOCA	Kampala Union of Boda Boda Cyclists Association
LC1	Local council 1 (Uganda)
LSE	London School of Economics (and Political Science)
mn	million
MoWT	Ministry of Works and Transport (Uganda)
n.d.	no date
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NRM	National Resistance Movement (Uganda)
OEC	Observatory of Economic Complexity
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
p	p / probability value (statistical term)
PAYE	Pay as you earn
PWC	PricewaterhouseCoopers
PRA	Power resources approach
PSV	Passenger service vehicle (license)
SET	Structural economic transformation (at Overseas Development Institute)
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SOT Boda	Ssagula Online Transporters' Boda-Boda Organization (ride-hailing app)
UAL	Urban Action Lab (Makerere University)
UBoS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics
UCC	Uganda Communications Commission
UGX	Ugandan schilling
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCST	Uganda National Council for Science and Technology
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNSDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Group
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UTC	Uganda Transport Company
UTODA	Uganda Taxi Operators and Drivers Association
US	United States
WDR19	World Development Report 2019 (World Bank)
WHO	World Health Organization
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing



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*'Unlike in other continents whereby ride-hailing has been used to disrupt existing public transport models, I believe that for East Africa, ride-hailing companies can actually formalise the market'.*

- Rob Sanford, CEO SafeBoda<sup>1</sup>

*'You know, boda boda has norms. Once you ignore the norms of the sector, you fail to achieve things in your business [...] It's going to be a mess'.*

- Frank Maweje, Chairman of Smart Boda Boda Riders and Cooperative Society<sup>2</sup>

*'Everyone is looking for profits'.*

- Alex, boda boda rider (ex-digital)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Nalumansi and Kikonyogo (2023)

<sup>2</sup> Interviewed in Kampala, 3 February 2022

<sup>3</sup> Interviewed in Kampala, 2 November 2020

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

What happens when global changes in the nature of work touch down in informal and precarious economic settings? The platform economy's central offering of flexible 'on-demand' labour is often framed by its advocates as a force for greater economic connectivity, a pathway to individual empowerment and, particularly in the context of the global South, an innovative solution to widespread 'indecent' work rooted in informality. Indeed, although the rise of digital labour platforms has been generally associated with a casualisation of work in places like Europe and North America, within the already-informalised economies of the South the opposite is often held to be true: that via new 'disruptive technologies' of digital employment, platforms here are helping to upgrade and even formalise people's work.

But to what extent are these compelling claims of economic transformation actually materialising in reality? Once included in the expanding global platform economy, in what sense do informal workers stop being informal? In what ways are these new digital connections reforming the nature of their work, particularly in places where labour reforms are so sorely needed? And beyond vague notions of enhanced connectivity, precisely what kinds of processes are they being incorporated into? While the 'conventional' platform narrative, as Frank Pasquale (2016) has referred to it, is heavy on loose imaginaries of empowerment and inclusivity, it is rather more light on serious answers to such questions.

This thesis seeks to cut through conventional framings of informal workers' inclusion within the global platform economy – framings which are at once optimistic and celebratory yet

abstract and simplistic – by asking in a more concrete sense what it means to be included in such arrangements. It departs from the starting point that ‘inclusion’ is not an unproblematic end or good in and of itself, however much it may be symbolically constructed as so, but rather a material process that can lead in multiple directions and towards a variety of outcomes, not all of which are benign or empowering. Following this, it asks:

*Does digital inclusion represent a pathway to decent work  
or a new form of adverse incorporation?*

The thesis examines this overarching research question through the lens of an ‘Uberising’ informal transport sector in Kampala, Uganda: the city’s motorcycle-taxi (or *boda boda*) industry. With a long history of difficult politics and futile attempts at formal state regulation, this ‘rogue’ sector of the urban informal economy (Goodfellow, 2015) has for the past decade played host to a slick new approach to sectoral reform geared around digital ride-hailing operations – an approach that one former platform executive described to me as ‘formalising under a ride-hailing umbrella’. Using in-depth, case-oriented, mixed methods fieldwork, this study pieces together the story of how such an experiment has played out, and in doing so contributes new empirical and theoretical material to wider debates about the nature, the limits and ultimately the purpose of informal workers’ inclusion in the global platform economy.

## **I DIGITAL INCLUSION AS A SHORT-CUT TO BETTER (MOTO-TAXI) WORK? OR A DEAD END?**

Kampala’s *boda boda* industry is a site of many things.<sup>4</sup> For the masses who find work in the city as *boda* riders, it is a vital if informal source of livelihood and survival. Though accurate estimates are hard to come by, this is a sector that is widely considered to employ more Ugandan men than any other outside agriculture (Amone, 2021) – and which, in Kampala alone, is thought to directly and indirectly sustain potentially hundreds-of-thousands of urban dwellers (Evans et al., 2018). For those needing a fast, convenient means of moving about the city, or for businesses requiring rapid logistics, it represents a crucial form of urban mobility and an integral cog within the capital’s infrastructure, accounting for an estimated 30-40% of all public transport trips taking place across the capital each and every day (Musisi, 2016; Transitec, 2020). For others, however, it is a site not just of unstructured urban chaos (Clarke, 2021; Khisa, 2022) but of widespread bodily harm and injury too, with moto-taxi transit

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<sup>4</sup> Reflecting local usage, throughout this thesis I will use the terms ‘*boda boda*’ and simply ‘*boda*’ interchangeably.

consistently identified as the most dangerous way to get around the city, for both operators and passengers alike (Doherty, 2017; KCCA, 2023; Naturinda and Kamoga, 2023).

But what Kampala's boda sector has also become, over the course of the past 10 years or so, is a site of experimentation. Against a backdrop of repeated state failures to extend formal control and regulation over the capital's riders, leading Mahmood Mamdani to label them as a politically 'untouchable' urban force (see Ford, 2019), in the mid-2010s a series of platform companies specialising in digital ride-hailing operations entered the fray, beginning with 'homegrown' venture SafeBoda but soon joined by global giants, Uber and Bolt (then Taxify), alongside multiple others that have since come and gone. Armed with the language of solutionism and promises of reform, this sleek new set of actors quickly set about trying to capture and digitise as much of the existing market as they could, presenting themselves as not simply being there to improve riders' livelihood standards via digital inclusion, but also to help engineer a safer, more trustworthy and more formalised industry as a whole – a move that was widely received at the time as both necessary and destined for success (Doherty, 2022; Lule, 2018).

In this thesis, I use a case study of the Kampalan experiment with two-wheeled ride-hailing to engage critically with wider theoretical debates about what economic inclusion 'is' and what it 'does' (Hickey and du Toit, 2007; Meagher and Lindell, 2013; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012; 2013; Rajak and Dolan, 2024), with particular reference to its digital articulations (Heeks, 2022; McMahon et al., 2023; Meagher, 2021).

Far from existing as an isolated phenomenon, this particular case offers a window into the kinds of approaches that African governments, donor agencies, philanthropists and financial institutions are increasingly turning to in a bid to sort out the problems of unemployment, informality and even infrastructural deficiency. With significant expansions in digital coverage over the past decade or so across the global South (ITU, 2023), digital work in the platform economy has become widely framed as a viable livelihood option for otherwise unemployed and economically excluded populations (Jobtech Alliance, 2023; Pathways for Prosperity Commission, 2018; World Bank, 2019). Buoyed not only by impressive job creation forecasts but also by depictions of digital work as representing an 'upgrade' to existing regimes of labour informality (Carmody et al., 2024), the global proliferation of digital labour platforms has been 'welcomed by African governments' in the hope that they will help 'drive a digital structural transformation and generate much needed employment in the context of widespread un(der)employment' (Castel-Branco and Dawson, 2023: 110). Today, there are more than 500 active labour platforms operating across the continent thought to be employing, according to estimates made prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, just shy of 5 million workers (Jobtech

Alliance, 2023; Morawczynski and Porteous, 2019) – a number predicted to hit 80 million by the end of the current decade (BFA / Mastercard Foundation, 2019).

Rather than simply extending the economies of ease and convenience (Bissell, 2023; Oka, 2021), in the ‘developmentalised’ contexts of African cities (Robinson, 2002) digital labour platforms take on a different kind of meaning and significance. Here, in addition to offering ‘seamless solutions’ to a range of contemporary urban challenges (Sitas et al., 2023: 11), from job shortages (World Bank, 2019) to makeshift logistical networks (Pollio et al., 2023), it is also widely assumed that the inclusion of informal workers in the global platform economy provides a way of ‘leapfrogging’ barriers to their formalisation (Kring and Leung, 2021: 1); a process that has thus far eluded the 84% of Africa’s working-age population estimated to make their living through economic activities neither regulated nor protected by the state (ILO, 2023). Echoing long-running ideas about the virtuous effects of bringing informal actors into closer relation with more formalised circuits of economic activity (Meagher, 2013a), the contours of a new policy consensus appear to have taken shape in recent years that flips the conventional Northern narrative of platform work on its head. That is: while the expansion of digital labour platforms is understood to have contributed towards an ongoing informalisation of labour in countries like the UK and the US (De Stefano, 2016; Stanford, 2017), part of what platforms are thought to ‘do’ within the more heavily informal contexts of the global South is ‘counteract informal economic activity’ (Weber et al., 2021: 1338), thus helping to formalise the labour of those who become digitally included. A process, as it were, of ‘plat-formalisation’.

The African moto-taxi industry represents but one vivid example of the way in which these transformative narratives of digital inclusion and platformisation have taken root over the past decade or so. Reflecting Nils van Doorn’s idea of the ‘platform fix’, whereby platform companies seek to gain footholds in industries ‘by identifying particular societal needs’ before ‘marketing themselves as efficient solutions to workers, citizens and [...] governments’ (van Doorn, 2022: 4), in recent years a whole multitude of moto-taxi platforms have sprung up across a range of African cities, geared primarily around ride-hailing services (Heeks et al., 2021), last mile ‘e-logistics’ (Pollio et al., 2023), and new forms of platform-enabled asset financing (Martin et al., 2023). Sometimes casting the absence of effective state regulations as grounds for ‘test[ing] potentially disruptive ideas’ in urban reform (Tun et al., 2021: 18), these new private actors have increasingly sought to position themselves as not only capable of delivering more orderly transport sectors that ‘erode the boundaries’ between the formal and the informal (Randall et al., 2023: 12), but also as an antidote to the vagaries of informal moto-taxi work. As Cirolia et al. (2023: 2005) point out, many of these so-called ‘experiments’ in digital inclusion and platformisation are ‘predicated on improving the working conditions of riders’ in African cities, which as the wider research literature shows often includes long hours,



fierce competition, high costs, unstable earnings, social stigma, physical insecurity and routine exposure to an extremely high risk of physical injury (Bishop and Courtright, 2021; Brown et al., 2022; Doherty, 2017; Ehebrecht et al., 2018).

Given the severity and the scale of many of these problems, the kinds of ambitious promises that platform companies are offering in African cities ‘should not be disregarded’ (Cirolia et al., 2023: 2005) – but at the same time, of course, they do still ‘need to be tested’ (*ibid.*: 2005). This is particularly pressing in the context of the financial arrangements that allow many platforms to operate in the first place, which compel them to generate ‘profitability and access to expanded economies’ for the foreign venture capitalists that back their ‘experiments’ (Sitas et al., 2023: 11-12), as well as the well-documented livelihood limitations that have often resulted from informal workers’ insertion into – rather than exclusion from – longer chains and larger circuits of supply, provisioning and production across a wide variety of sectors (du Toit, 2004; Meagher, 2019; Phillips, 2011; Rajak and Dolan, 2024; Roll et al., 2021; Roy, 2012). Indeed, in many cases it is neither a formalisation of labour informality that arises from inclusion within such arrangements or even an upgrade to decent work, but rather exposure to new sources and forms of economic pressure from above – a situation known as adverse incorporation that generates material disadvantage through the very terms and conditions of inclusion itself (du Toit, 2004; Hickey and du Toit, 2007).

## **II APPROACHING THE CHANGING NATURE OF INFORMAL WORK**

To cut through the celebratory yet abstract fuzziness of Pasquale’s (2016) ‘conventional’ platform narrative, in this thesis I examine the rise of digital inclusion within Kampala’s ‘platform-ising’ boda industry as one particular instance of what some scholars have called ‘actually existing platformisation’ (van Doorn et al. 2021, drawing on Brenner and Theodore, 2002). This involves approaching platformisation as a situated, uneven and highly dynamic process that plays out in the absence of foregone conclusions; its outcomes neither predetermined nor inevitable, but instead taking shape through the frictions and interactions that occur between the strategies of platform actors on the one hand, and the various social, economic and political features of the pre-existing (and ‘pre-platform’) landscape on the other. Within the context of the informalised African city, this notably includes the specific ways in which platform technologies ‘interface’ with existing informal economic institutions and the precarious livelihood systems of those they seek to include (Anwar, 2022; Cirolia et al., 2023; Pollio et al., 2023).

Before outlining the chapters that make up this thesis, in this penultimate section I briefly walk through what, to my mind, the study of ‘actually existing platformisation’ entails within an empirical context of widespread informal work. In doing so, I introduce three core principles that have shaped my approach to addressing the study’s central research question – that is, *does digital inclusion represent a pathway to decent work or a new form of adverse incorporation?* – and which in turn lead to a series of more concrete and precise lines of enquiry. These principles are: i) analogue contexts / pretexts; ii) unstable platforms; and iii) worker-centrism.

The first of these, ‘**analogue contexts / pretexts**’, departs from the somewhat obvious notion that new technologies of work do not simply emerge onto a blank slate (Woodcock, 2023). Although the ‘void filling’ perspective that has been used to study the effects of platforms in Southern cities (see Chapter 2) lends an impression of institutional vacuums and regulatory black holes, the idea that there is always something in place to begin with, even if framed in the negative, is analytically both more accurate and more productive (Ferguson and Li, 2018; Mair et al., 2012; Nason and Bothello, 2023). To take this proposition seriously demands an understanding of what came before – characteristics of the workforce in question, modes of formal *and* informal economic organisation and regulation, ‘pre-platform’ working conditions and constraints on their reform – and attention to how the corporate framing of digital solutions and platform ‘fixes’ often takes shape in relation to (actual or perceived) deficits located within those pre-existing features.

Extending this point, Gomez-Morantes et al. (2022: 997) propose that the introduction of digital platforms should be analytically framed as ‘an interaction between a new socio-technical innovation and an existing socio-technical regime’. For them, such an approach ‘contrasts with the perspective of the great majority of literature to date which has under-represented prior context, especially the systems that pre-exist and compete with platforms’, and helps researchers better grapple with questions of impact, which they suggest ‘can only be understood through a framework that analyses the before and after of the platform’ (*ibid.*: 997). Paying close attention to the ‘before’ is thus key to the approach taken in this thesis to studying the changing nature of informal work in Kampala’s ‘platform-ising’ boda sector, leading to the first of three sub-research questions:

*What was the nature of boda work like prior to the arrival of the platforms, and what are the problems that riders’ inclusion in the platform economy claims to solve?*

The second principle, '**unstable platforms**', is in some respects an extension of thinking about both 'the before' and 'the after'.<sup>5</sup> Scholars of the platform economy recognise that these technologies rarely occupy a single, static position. 'The temporal dimension is important', according to Odendaal (2022: 24). Platform companies, whose objectives tend to develop over time, are often 'short term in their impact as inputs evolve and changes to applications are made', sometimes in line with shifts in financial backing (*ibid.*: 24; Guma, 2020) and sometimes as they seek to maintain moral legitimacy in the face of public pushback and potential failure (Howcroft and Leaver, 2024). Cirolia et al. (2023: 1994) discuss how 'platform ecosystems and their urban interfaces are constantly shifting and adapting' as local contexts are navigated, while Stehlin et al. (2020: 1263) talk about how 'platforms constantly mutate', leading to shifting terms of economic inclusion within them as digital trajectories 'mature' (Gibbings et al., 2022: 634).

This is not just about how motives, approaches and practices differ from one platform company to the next, although this is certainly an important part of the picture that tends to get overlooked by much 'monolithic' literature on the platform economy (Schor et al., 2020: 852). It is also about how these dimensions evolve even *within* platforms over time. According to van Doorn et al. (2021: 715), platforms are 'restless, roving entities' that 'shift shapes, are subject to experimentation, and expand whenever the opportunity arises, thereby calling into question established (b)orders and modes of conduct'; including in relation to how they treat, remunerate, discipline and manage those who labour through them (Vallas, 2019). This leads to a second sub-research question:

*How are the terms of boda riders' inclusion in the platform economy structured, and how have these shifted over time?*

Finally, the principle of '**worker-centrism**' reflects the call made by platform economy scholars to foreground the lived experiences and perspectives of those who try to make a living by working through these 'restless, roving entities'. In the years since van Doorn (2017: 908) asked, 'when discussing platform-mediated labor issues should not we start by asking how these issues impact the everyday lives of people who actually work on/through these platforms?', there has been some progress. But for the most part such efforts have tended to focus on contexts and experiences in the North, leaving various strands of the Southern platform labour experience under-explored (Anwar, 2022; Cieslik et al., 2022; Cirolia et al., 2023; Webster and Dor, 2023; see also Chapter 2).

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase 'unstable platforms' owes a debt to recent work by Howcroft and Leaver (2024).

In this thesis I position the experiences and views of workers front and centre. But importantly, I do so in a way that replaces the unhelpful ‘exclusion vs. inclusion’ false binary with a sharper focus on how the terms of inclusion itself are structured within the platform economy, whilst also recognising that platformisation impacts not just digitally ‘included’ workers but digitally ‘excluded’ ones too, including those who have made an active choice to exit the world of online work. In doing so, the study approaches its analysis of what inclusion ‘is’ and what it ‘does’ from multiple and diverse angles, and with ‘attention to the ways that people and communities located at the nodes of globalizing networks push back against the totalizing forces of certain forms of digital inclusion’ (McMahon et al., 2023: 221); in the process generating new forms of friction as these new technologies of work rub up against existing systems of economic informality (Cirolia et al., 2023; Meagher, 2021; Tsing, 2012). Thus, the third and final sub-research question that emerges here is as follows:

*To what extent has the platform economy reshaped the working conditions and experiences of both digitally included and excluded riders, and in what ways have riders responded to these changes?*

### III STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

This thesis contains 11 chapters, including an introduction, a literature review, a methodology, seven substantive chapters on research findings (split into two ‘Parts’), and a conclusion.

We move from this introductory chapter immediately into a literature review in **Chapter 2**, which grounds the study in relevant theories and debates about economic informality and shifting approaches to its reform, the recent emergence of platform work, labour agency, and inclusion / adverse incorporation.

In **Chapter 3** the methodology is presented. Divided into four sections, I begin here by talking through the overarching methodological framework for this research – building theory through a case study – before discussing my specific choice of methods, their implementation, and then finally various issues concerning the transparency of the research, such as ethics, positionality and my experience of attempting to do some of this research during the pandemic.

Collectively forming an analysis of the changing nature of work in Kampala’s boda boda sector, Chapters 4 through to 10 constitute the substantive core of the thesis and are grouped thematically into two ‘Parts’. Part I focuses on the pre-platform landscape of boda work in Kampala and comprises Chapters 4, 5 and 6, while a slightly longer Part II examines the

subsequent dynamics of digital inclusion through Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10. Figure 1 below illustrates how these various chapters connect to and address the three sub-research questions just outlined.

Figure 1. Links between substantive chapters and sub-research questions

	Chapters						
	Part I			Part II			
	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Sub-RQ1							
Sub-RQ2							
Sub-RQ3							

Kicking off Part I with some key background, **Chapter 4** asks how the ‘rogue sector’ of Kampala’s boda industry came to be. Drawing on a mixture of existing research, media coverage and new primary data, it provides an account of the sector in recent historical perspective, whilst also reflecting in a more critical capacity on prevailing characterisations of the city’s boda riders as a politically powerful and subsequently unruly ‘vote bank’ impervious to formal regulation; characterisations that formed an essential part of the pretext for the coming ‘platform fix’.

In **Chapter 5** I delve more specifically into what boda work actually looks like – from ‘analogue’ perspective. In contrast to the still-widespread view that informal economies in general, and Kampala’s boda workers in particular, are unstructured, disorganised and hence ripe for ‘void-filling’ private interventions, I draw primarily here on rider interview and survey data to show that a distinct set of informal institutions has long been present, which: lend shape to riders’ everyday working lives; establish widely respected rules and regulations that are systematically enforced throughout the workforce; and moderate some of the worst excesses of an economy that has become saturated with informal labour. At the same time, however, these long-running analogue institutions cannot do everything and they certainly do not guarantee decent work, illustrated in this chapter by an analysis of the working conditions that have increasingly come to define and constrain riders’ everyday experiences of boda work.

Rounding out Part I is **Chapter 6**, which puts forward a fresh take on the politics of Kampala’s boda sector. Based on analysis of riders’ lived experiences of boda work, data from key informant interviews and insights from existing secondary material, I argue here that rather

than finding expression through a singular, fixed articulation (i.e. 'vote bank politics'), it may be more accurate and productive to think in terms of a multi-dimensional 'state-boda' relationship constituted through overlapping layers of political-economic inclusion *and* exclusion. Although the situation that arises from this ambiguous political arrangement enables the continued existence of boda work in the capital, it locks in riders' labour informality, continually siphons off value from the sector, and compresses possibilities for the reform of 'indecent' working conditions. In doing so, this long-running status quo has engendered deepening frustration and disaffection among both riders and city planners alike, whilst stirring up the collective appetite for a change in how the sector is governed and regulated from above. Having systematically laid out this 'pre-platform' landscape, in Part II I then analyse the changing nature of boda work under platformisation.

We begin here in **Chapter 7** by discussing the 'promises of inclusion' into the new platform economy. Focusing primarily on digital ride-hailing companies, the chapter draws on material from key informant interviews and secondary sources to provide an overview of who specifically these new platform actors are and how their models work, before laying out the legitimating claims and transformative discourses that have accompanied their arrival into Kampala's boda sector.

**Chapter 8** takes us from corporate claims, platform promises and digital discourses to the 'realities of inclusion' from a working perspective. Focusing on three core dimensions of the platform labour experience – requirements, relations and returns – it uses data from interviews and surveys with riders to critically examine the extent to which the socio-economic realities faced by 'platform-ised' workers square with the promises of inclusion laid out previously, and in doing so highlights multiple points of divergence between the two.

Against the backdrop of these divergent realities, **Chapter 9** focuses on what we might think of as 'disillusions of inclusion'. Opening up questions of labour agency, it again draws on data from interviews and surveys with riders to present and unpack the ways in which workers have responded to the arrival and evolution of the platform economy over time, ranging from a variety of creative efforts to rework the terms of digital inclusion 'from below', to more exit-oriented forms of digital disconnection and de-automation, and then finally to actions that non-digital riders have felt compelled to take in response to the wider effects of platformisation.

In light of the preceding analysis, both in terms of what came before (in Part I) and then what has followed (in Part II), **Chapter 10** returns to the core theoretical question of what inclusion 'is' and what it 'does'. Framed around the 'limits of inclusion', this final substantive chapter critically examines the extent to which platformisation has altered boda riders' original working conditions, cut through the long-running political morass and led to improvements in the formal

state's capacity to regulate the industry, and more generally brought about the kind of far-reaching transformation upon which this whole experiment was initially premised. Through addressing these issues, it reveals some of the 'darker' elements (Pasquale, 2016: 314) of what it means for informal workers to be included in the global platform economy, whilst putting forward an alternative perspective on precisely what kinds of economic processes they are being connected to.

Finally, I conclude the thesis in **Chapter 11** by providing a summary of the core insights and arguments presented in each of the seven substantive chapters, and a discussion about what this research contributes to wider theories and debates in the academic literature, with a particular focus on: i) the role of digital inclusion and platformisation in formalising and upgrading informal work in the South; ii) the use of private sector-led, market-based (techno-)solutions to address existing problems with urban infrastructure and urban livelihoods; iii) questions of digital exclusion-by-choice and de-automation; and iv) the politics of informal work/ers.

In making these contributions, this thesis puts forward a grounded and detailed account of what happens when global changes in the nature of work 'touch down' in a particular concrete setting of pre-existing informality and precarity: the street-based workspaces of Kampala's boda boda sector. And in doing so, it extends beyond the empirical particular to generate not just new theoretical insights into the nature, meanings and outcomes of digital-economic inclusion more broadly; but also further evidence of why the narratives, claims and promises of those pushing this new agenda do indeed, recalling the recent words of Cirolia et al. (2023: 2005), need to be 'tested'.

## Chapter 2

### Handling informality: a literature review

To begin situating the questions and contributions of this thesis, in this chapter I review relevant strands of the literature on economic informality, particularly as it relates to informal workers in African cities and their encounters with new platform technologies of digital inclusion. Following but also expanding Amin Kamete's (2013) idea of 'handling informality',<sup>6</sup> I explore both how informal work has been 'handled' theoretically by those studying and working on these issues, in terms of how it is defined, conceptualised and problematised, as well as how it has been 'handled' in a more practical or empirical sense by wider actors seeking to address the 'problems' of informality (Lombard and Horn, 2024), including but also extending beyond state actors. In doing so, I ground the study within ongoing debates about the changing nature of (informal) work, approaches to its reform or upgrading, and theories of inclusion.

Five sections follow. I begin in **Section I** with the basics by looking at the concept of informal work itself, addressing core definitional matters and tackling some troublesome yet stubborn (and widespread) mischaracterisations. In **Section II** I then examine a range of ways in which both state and non-state actors have sought to reform economic informality over recent decades, tracing the shift from labour formalisation to the rise of the decent work agenda and from there to a more recent focus on inclusive markets, whilst raising questions about the

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<sup>6</sup> In Kamete's original usage, 'handling informality' refers specifically to the various ways in which states construct, frame and ultimately manage systems of urban informality. I deploy it here in a broader sense.



extent to which these shifting approaches either transform or simply ‘re-form’ the core features of informal work. This leads us to a more conceptual discussion in **Section III** about how to think more precisely about ideas of inclusion, bringing some more critical perspectives into play that can help us make clearer sense of contemporary changes in the nature of informal work. With these in mind, we turn in **Section IV** to look at one of the latest frontiers of economic inclusion: work within the expanding platform economy. Here, I lay out the ambitious claims and promises accompanying the global proliferation of digital labour platforms, before highlighting the recent emergence of a new counter-narrative of digital inclusion and platform work from the South. Exploring generative ways to take these debates forwards, we finish in **Section V** by looking at the important question of labour agency from a Southern perspective, showing that although states, corporations and increasingly big tech all seek to ‘handle informality’ on their own terms, they are not the only actors that determine outcomes.

## **I INFORMAL WORK: WHAT IT IS (AND WHAT IT IS NOT)**

Despite a great deal of continued ‘confusion and misunderstanding’ (Charmes, 2020: 19) in how the concept of economic informality is used by both scholars and policy makers, as Meagher (2013) is clear to point out the core issue of how to define it has actually been settled for over three decades now. Economic informality refers to *all income generating activities operating outside the regulatory framework of the state* (Meagher, 2013a: 2; Sassen, 1994). An informal worker, by extension, is someone who engages in such income generating activities and whose labour is therefore neither fully regulated nor officially protected by the state. Crucially, it does not matter whether they are ‘employed’ by a formal sector company or not (ILO, 2002); if the specific work they perform remains excluded from the state’s regulatory framework and any protections that this may confer, despite the company they work for or through being properly registered, then it classifies as informal (Chen et al., 2006).

The value of such a definition, according to Portes and Haller (2005: 404), is that it does ‘not advance an a priori judgement of whether such activities are good or bad’. Neither does it ‘anticipate from the start the conclusion to be reached’. Instead, it provides an analytical starting point that is simple, relatively unambiguous and distinct from the muddying multitude of shifting interpretations and normative views that have attached themselves to the concept over recent decades.

Indeed, despite the major definitional debates having been settled for several years now, there continues to be a number of misleading claims and assumptions about what informal work is

and how it 'works'. These take the form of what we might think of as 'stubborn epistemologies' of informal work: powerful ways of seeing and knowing informality derived from a Eurocentric starting point, which in turn incorporates highly normative ideas about formality, market-supporting institutions and the standard employment relationship into its template for constructing knowledge about economic practices unfolding elsewhere (Bothello et al., 2019). There are three in particular that are worth bearing in mind as we move forward.

### *i      Informal work as...monolithic*

In contrast to earlier modernist views of economic informality that constructed it as a transitional stage within longer-term processes of capitalist development (see Stark, 1989), by the early 2000s it had been widely agreed that the informal economy was in fact 'here to stay' (Chen, 2012: 20). In the years since, it has come to account for as much as 30-40% of total economic activity in the world's poorest places (La Porta and Shleifer, 2014), as measured by contributions to gross domestic product (GDP), whilst generating around 90% of total rural and urban employment in developing countries (ILO, 2018). As a result of continued and in some cases intensified labour informalisation, involving a shift under neoliberal political-economic systems towards temporary, casual, out-sourced, zero-hour and part-time jobs (Bromley and Wilson, 2018; Standing, 2011), the informal economy has become increasingly central to people's working lives around the world and across the North / South 'divide' (Breman and van der Linden, 2014). Today, informal work is how the majority of the global working population make a living (ILO, 2018; Pratt, 2019; UNDP, 2022), and it is insecure and 'wageless life' (Denning, 2010) rather than stable and waged employment that constitutes the 'standard' for most (Jütting and de Laiglesia, 2009).

But despite the scale of what we are talking about here, there remains a tendency to compress and homogenise the vast number of people working informally across a wide range of contexts (Kaplinsky and Kraemer-Mbula, 2022). This happens for the most part in one of two ways (Williams and Nadin, 2010).

On the one hand, the informal economy is viewed almost exclusively as a desperate site of survival to which people only turn once all other alternatives have been exhausted. Attention is drawn to the ways in which, despite its resilience in the face of continued economic growth and development, high levels of informal employment tend to be associated with lower rates of national GDP (ILO, 2018) and major economic crises (Horn, 2011). Informal workers are repeatedly assessed to be economically inefficient and unproductive (Benjamin et al., 2014; Farrell, 2004), and the activities they engage in are understood to offer few escape routes towards something better (La Porta and Shleifer, 2014). As has often been pointed out (Chen,

2012; Meagher, 2013a; Moser, 1978), such assessments feed into a framing of informal economies as not only essentially synonymous with poverty and destitution – ‘swamps of backwardness’, in the words of La Porta and Shleifer (2014: 118) – but also as forming a neatly segmented ‘place’ almost completely detached from activities, networks and opportunities located separately within its formal counterpart. This in turn reinforces a ‘dualist’ way of thinking about economic informality, in which formal and informal sites of economic activity and labour are conceived of as operating largely independently from one another (Lewis, 1954; Tokman, 1978).

Elsewhere, a rather more celebratory framing is to be found. In this more optimistic view, crystallised perhaps no more clearly than in the influential work of Hernando de Soto (1989; 2000), the informal economy is recast as a deep ocean of talent, innovation and untapped potential whose workers have exited the formal world of work voluntarily, and should therefore be alternatively viewed as forming a ‘hidden enterprise culture’ (Williams, 2006) made up of ‘plucky micro-entrepreneurs’ (Chen, 2012: 5). In this ‘legalist’ perspective on informality, individual actors have made active, informed and rational choices to evade the regulatory framework of the state in order to embrace a more free-market lifestyle, devoid of formal rules, registration procedures and taxes (Maloney, 2004). The underlying logics and subjectivities of this framing, connected to ‘mainstream economic’ notions of self-enterprise, market rule and the vagaries of excessive regulation (Peterson, 2010), are regularly put to use in the design of neoliberal economic policy (Young, 2019), international development programming geared increasingly around entrepreneurship (Flynn et al., 2017), as well as more corporate-driven efforts to incorporate informal workers at the ‘bottom-of-the-pyramid’ into new global value chains and markets (Roy, 2012) (see Section II below).

Though there may be something to both of these contrasting perspectives, the informal economy as a whole is far more ‘heterogeneous and complex’ than they each make out (Chen, 2012: 6; Meagher, 2018; Williams and Nadin, 2010), playing host to diverse motivations and structured in ways that provide more remunerative possibilities for some than for others. Rather than forming a singular lumpen mass, informal workforces tend to be heavily stratified even *within* a specific sector or site (Mezzadri and Fan, 2018; Rizzo, 2011), while the good fortunes and privileged economic access that *some* informal workers enjoy must unfortunately be weighed against the deep and widespread precarity endured by many others. Indeed, although not synonymous with informality (Millar, 2017), precarious work, defined here as an actively-made condition of economic insecurity grounded in concrete labour market experiences (see Mallett, 2020), is a reality faced by millions of informal workers around the world, exacerbated if not created by their exclusion from formal labour protections and the

poor material working conditions that stem from this (Hammer and Ness, 2021; Siegmann and Schiphorst, 2016).

## *ii Informal work as...unstructured*

A second stubborn epistemology of informal work concerns its organisation – or rather, its lack thereof. There has been a strong tendency within the mainstream literature to read economic informality as ‘a kind of negative space, defined by that which it is not’ (Ferguson and Li, 2018: 1), and therefore seen to lack the systems of organisation and regulation that lend structure and discipline to activity within the formal economy (see also Elyachar, 2005; Meagher, 2010). In this problematic yet still broadly influential view (Nason and Bothello, 2023), informal and formal economies are diametrically constructed as the inverse of one another. But although true in at least one clear sense – that is, income generating activities in the former exist outside the regulatory framework of the state, whereas the opposite is true in the latter – for the most part this widespread view fails to capture the diverse empirical realities of informal work.

As numerous studies have shown, the perceived conceptual dichotomy between ordered formality and unruly informality rarely holds up in practice (Basile and Harriss-White, 2010; McFarlane, 2012; Roy, 2009). Even where formal state regulations may be largely absent, there is still a kind of organised basis to activity within the informal economy that needs to be understood on its own terms. Working practices here are not devoid of logic or structure (Bothello et al., 2019), but instead actively structured by a range of informal institutions ‘created, communicated and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels’ (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004: 8), and which in turn provide layers of non-state and ‘social’ regulation (Guerin et al., 2015; Harriss-White, 2010; Minoia et al., 2015; Mosse, 2018).

Gaining and maintaining access to informal work is not a given either, as there have to be things in place to create ‘the conditions of possibility for economic activities’ (Neves and du Toit, 2012: 145), as well as to render them tolerable over time. Of particular importance here are the non-commodified social relations that enable people to pursue a livelihood in the (formally) unprotected informal economy, constituting what some call a ‘social infrastructure’ that for Elyachar (2010: 452) is ‘as essential to the economy as roads, bridges or telephone lines’. However, as McFarlane and Silver (2017: 458) explain, the social infrastructures that underpin such activity are also characterised by limits and breaking points, often proving intensely vulnerable to disruptive changes in the ‘surrounding’ political economy that range from ‘legacies of structural adjustment to ongoing forms of demolition and disinvestment’.

### ***iii Informal work as...disconnected***

A third and final stubborn epistemology concerns (dis-)connection. Informed by the 'dualist' perspective outlined above, there continues to be a strong line of thinking that frames informal work as effectively 'sealed off' from wider formal political-economic structures (see Chen, 2012: 4-5). According to Biles (2009: 222-223), this 'surprisingly resilient' take 'essentially divides the economy into two separate spheres (formal and informal), which lack functional linkages'. Informal work here is seen merely to 'sustain those who are excluded from the capitalist system', whilst contributing 'little or nothing to the "modern" formal economy' (*ibid.*: 222).

What this framing fails to recognise is that despite its core defining characteristic, work in the informal economy is usually still subject, alongside the social and non-state variants just described, to 'bits and pieces' of state regulation (Nason and Bothello, 2023). Licensing requirements are often in place for street vendors (Roever and Skinner, 2016), for example, and neither is it the case that informal transport workers are exempt from road traffic law and speed limits simply by virtue of their informal labour status. It is also true that informal workers are taxed, often in a wide range of both direct and indirect ways as well as by a range of state and non-state actors alike (Lough et al., 2013; Meagher, 2018; Rogan, 2019).

Beyond this, 'structuralist' perspectives on economic informality have long drawn attention to the ways in which informal actors constitute crucial nodes in wider economic processes, including within the workings of the formal economy (Castells and Portes, 1989; Moser, 1978). In this view, the widespread and growing presence of informal work is not a result of certain people and places being disconnected from or 'left behind' by development, but rather the opposite: informal work exists because it enables capitalist economic systems to generate profits for actors inside the formal sector, reducing risks and costs via outsourcing to cheaper forms of 'off-site labour' (Ruthven, 2010) whilst helping, through the sheer size of the informal 'labour reserve', to suppress the wages of formal workers by weakening their bargaining power (Mkandawire, 1986). In sharp distinction to dualist readings of economic informality, structuralism positions informal workers as 'inextricably connected and interdependent to [the] formal economy' (Dell'Anno, 2022: 1623), albeit on often disadvantageous terms that amount to a kind of 'exploitative integration' (Mkandawire, 1986: 68) – or to use more recent terminology, of 'adverse incorporation' (Hickey and du Toit, 2007; see Section III below).

## II RE(-)FORMING INFORMALITY

Given that informality has often been portrayed in the mainstream as economically unproductive, draining and even predatory (Farrell, 2004), what have wider state and non-state actors done about it? In this section we look at a range of approaches that have been taken over the years to try and turn informal work into something else, tracing a notable shift from: i) a once-dominant formalisation template; to ii) a focus on generating decent work; and then more recently to iii) an emphasis on creating inclusive markets. In moving the threshold of what successful transformation looks like, important questions emerge about the extent to which some of these approaches are reforming informal work in meaningful ways or, by contrast, simply 're-forming' it without addressing any of the core underlying problems.

### *i Formalisation*

Although most informal workers are subject to 'bits and pieces' of formal state regulation (Nason and Bothello, 2023), the thrust of policy for several decades across the global South has been to try and make sure 'all of it' applies via programmes of labour formalisation – an approach that is designed to bring all 'workers and enterprises into the framework of government regulations' (Bromley and Wilson, 2018: 10). Formalisation has long constituted the prevailing 'prescription' for economic informality favoured by international organisations, governments and NGOs (*ibid.*: 10; ILO, 2015), and 'in many policy circles' today it remains the 'preferred trajectory' (Walker et al., 2022: 235). State actors typically take a 'leading role' in formalisation strategies (*ibid.*: 237), and it has often been widely assumed that a range of 'win-win' benefits follow: previously unbanked or off-grid informal workers are brought into the tax net, thus 'plugging tax leaks and augmenting [state] revenues' (Awasthi and Engelschalk, 2018: 2), while gains for workers include access to employment benefits, collective bargaining structures and more secure property rights (WIEGO, n.d.).

In practice, however, the results of decades' worth of formalisation efforts have 'frequently been disappointing' (Gallien and van den Boogaard, 2023: 490). Despite considerable resources being put into this approach, the informal economy has not only remained 'resilient' in the face of widespread formalisation (Bromley and Wilson, 2018: 10), with a 'majority' of workers and enterprises across the global South remaining informal (Bruhn and McKenzie, 2014), but in many cases it has actually continued to grow (Antunes, 2016; Breman and van der Linden, 2014). Why?

The literature on formalisation points to several reasons. On the one hand are questions of design and implementation. There is often a wide gap between the ambition of the approach

on paper and the constrained, 'project-ised' (Li, 2016) nature of its delivery in practice, with formalisation agendas frequently reduced to one-off interventions targeting only one or two specific aspects of what it means to 'become formalised' (Gallien and van den Boogaard, 2023), or approached in ways that are more concerned with 'imposing the costs of becoming formal' than 'offer[ing] the benefits and protections' that should also come with it (Chen, 2012: 15). This speaks in turn to a conceptual distinction drawn by Jeemol Unni (2018) between a 'capital view' and a 'labour view' of formalisation. Whereas the latter prioritises the recognition of all workers' fundamental rights, as well as their inclusion in formalised systems of state protection, in the 'capital view' formalisation is enacted as a top-down exercise in tracking and capturing more of informal workers' economic activity via their inclusion in formal tax and financial systems, as well as in enforcing their compliance with legal rules and codes. As many have pointed out, it is this 'capital view' of formalisation that tends to take centre stage in practice (Chen, 2012; Tucker and Anantharaman, 2020; Unni, 2018), thus excluding other important dimensions of what it means to become formalised, such as accessing legal and social protections, being allowed to organise or participating in policy processes (Chen, 2012: 15).

On the other hand, there are deeper questions of politics and political economy. Despite often being narrowly approached as technical 'upgrading' exercises, all attempts at formalisation take place against 'previous histories of interaction' between states, their citizens and their informal workforces (Gallien and van den Boogaard, 2023: 506). This is not something that is widely or readily recognised within the mainstream, largely economic literature on formalisation (*ibid.*), but when we turn to the wider literatures on human geography, development studies and urban studies there is rather more to be found on the politics of informal work (Collord et al., 2021), as well as how this shapes what we might think of as the 'conditions of possibility' for reform (Porter and Watts, 2017: 249).

In contrast to the technocratic logics of the formalisation agenda, what we instead find here is a wide range of ways in which states 'handle' informality (Kamete, 2013). Sometimes this takes the form of repressing informality in certain sectors of the urban economy with a view to eradicating it altogether, such as when municipal governments seek to clear, clean and repurpose city space in the name of 'regeneration', 'decongestion' or 'security' (Gillespie, 2016; Lindell, 2019; Watson, 2009). At other times and in other places, there are different logics at play. While it is often true, for example, that urban informal workers such as street vendors and transport operators are excluded from local governance structures and official decision-making processes (Banks et al., 2019), there are no sure guarantees that this leads inevitably to their expulsion from the city (although in some instances this is of course exactly what happens – see Roever and Skinner, 2016). Instead, there may be differing degrees of

tolerance, accommodation, repression and predation that follow, sometimes reflecting the conflictual and divided nature of states that exist more as an 'organisation of organisations' (North et al., 2009: 159) or an 'ensemble of institutions' (Jessop, 2001: 151) than a perfectly coherent, monolithic actor (Cirolia and Harber, 2022; Lindell, 2019).

In situations where states tolerate or even actively facilitate the continued existence of certain sectors of the urban informal economy, research suggests there can often be a political and strategic element to this that undermines the impetus for formalisation. As Dewey (2024: 36) points out, most conventional schools of thought on economic informality propose 'regulatory changes to transform informality into something else but do not question the intention of the regulator to produce such changes'. By assuming that 'governments are interested in fighting informality through regulatory change' and that they are also 'interested in enforcing regulations' (*ibid.*: 36), these approaches overlook the political and economic possibilities that large groups of urban informal workers present to elite actors inside or linked to the state.

There is evidence, for example, that such groups may sometimes be designated for political purposes as important urban constituencies and a possible source of popular support (Collord et al., 2021; Dewey, 2024; Goodfellow and Titeca, 2012; Holland, 2016), particularly in those cities and capitals that function as key sites in the 'production of [...] dominance and the politics of maintaining it' (Goodfellow and Jackman, 2023: 6). This is a politics that has been known to generate shields of protection for select groups of informal workers, as elites with vested interests in capturing their support seek to steer policy in directions that may confer both regulatory immunity and additional material benefits.

On the other hand, there is also evidence that state actors maintain and 'protect' particular sectors of urban informal work, but primarily for the purposes of extracting *economic* rather than political value. For example, research shows that informal workers are routinely converted into 'street-level' sources of informal revenue generation for state, 'quasi-state' and non-state actors alike (Agbibo, 2022; Bensassi and Jarreau, 2019; Lavallée and Roubaud, 2019; Tanyanyiwa et al., 2023), often forming crucial links in a longer chain of economic (re)distribution within and around the state (Jené and Englebert, 2019; Kagoro, 2022; Sanchez de la Sierra et al., 2022). Sometimes state actors are directly (if covertly) involved in the day-to-day workings of the informal economy, such as when they own the sites or means of informal economic production and receive rents through this channel (Diaz Olvera et al., 2020; Ference, 2021; Roitman, 2006).

Ultimately, the particular way in which states go about 'handling informality' – whether via techniques of expulsion, repression, tolerance or protection (or complex combinations thereof) – is often related to whether such techniques 'advance or deter particular projects of rule'



(Lindell, 2019: 7). Are some groups of informal workers deemed key to reclaiming dwindling political support, for example, thus meriting either economic reward or some other form of special dispensation (Holland, 2015; Muwanga et al., 2020)? Or, by contrast, is there a different kind of value to be generated through the expulsion of informal economic activity from lucrative urban sites, such as when the material benefits of ‘accumulation by urban dispossession’ (Gillespie, 2016: 66) can be strategically used by the state to generate ‘informal side-payments’ for politically important actors (Goodfellow, 2018: 210)?

While the underlying motives behind these ‘projects’ vary across time and space, as well as between fragmented state actors (Lindell, 2019), what remains constant is that, at the end of the day, it is the livelihoods and prospects of informal workers that bear the force of their impacts. Indeed, even though many sectors of the urban informal economy today are tolerated and thus to some extent ‘included’ within the framework of state politics, because a ‘repressive’ dynamic may continue to be present (Kamete, 2013, following Marcuse, 1969) there are few guarantees that work within them will be secure, stable or peaceful, let alone remunerative (Yiftachel, 2009; Zinnbauer, 2020).

## **ii      *Decent work***

More than common parlance to denote the subjective quality of a job, the concept of decent work has a specific institutional foundation and meaning. It emerged ‘officially’ in 1999 under the guise of the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda, which laid out an ambitious objective to ensure ‘decent work for all’, regardless of the type of employment one finds themselves in (ILO, 1999). Decent work as it is defined here refers to work that adheres to four key criteria, or ‘pillars’ in the ILO framing (although multiple more specific indicators also exist). One, it must constitute *productive employment* that delivers a fair income and opportunities for further advancement. Two, there must be compliance with minimum *labour standards* so that people’s rights at work are guaranteed and respected. Three, it must provide access to appropriate and adequate forms of *social protection*, referring to measures designed to improve workers’ income security such as paid annual or sick leave and insurance schemes. And four, it must be work that enables *social dialogue* to take place among and between workers and employers, including so that the former have a say in workplace matters that affect them directly. In 2002 these goals and standards were extended more explicitly into the realm of informality through a landmark conference on ‘decent work and the informal economy’ (ILO, 2002).

Although nation-states are important parties to the decent work initiative and jointly responsible for delivering on it, employers, intermediaries and other actors in the private sector are also envisioned as playing a crucial role in helping ‘the ILO to achieve decent work’ (Ryder,

2015: 5). Under decent work arrangements, private actors and enterprises are expected to take a lead in developing new forms of 'private self-regulation' and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Hauf, 2015: 141), such as implementing voluntary codes of conduct, improving occupational health and safety, monitoring compliance along the supply chain, and other variants of 'soft regulation' beyond statutory labour law (Brill, 2021). Since the incorporation of 'decent work for all' into Sustainable Development Goal number 8 in 2015, such measures are understood to have only gained in importance (High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, 2019).

While not strictly constituting a transition out of informality, decent work as it is conceived here is widely considered to represent an important shift in debates about what the standards of informal work should constitute. For many, it marks a pragmatic step in the direction of improving the conditions and outcomes of informal workers, promoting a series of goals which, while ultimately falling short of formalisation proper, can nonetheless lead to vital improvements in workers' wellbeing (Chen et al., 2004; Kantor et al., 2006). It also exists to hold corporate actors accountable, preventing them (on paper at least) from presiding over precarity (Barrientos, 2007).

Elsewhere, a more critical line of research raises fundamental questions about the impact and purpose of the decent work agenda. Some of those approaching decent work from a political economy perspective, for example, have critiqued the agenda for almost entirely glossing over the underlying reasons why so much work around the world is 'indecent' in the first place: because in the absence of effective state regulation, capital tends towards the exploitation of labour (Lerche, 2012; Selwyn, 2013), in many instances 'deliberately developing' systems of informality as a way of out-sourcing risk and off-loading costs (Harriss-White, 2010: 170). From this perspective, decent work is more about treating the symptoms of precarious or exploited labour than addressing its actual causes.

A related critique originating from what Hauf (2015) describes as 'counter-hegemonic sites' is that the concept of decent work serves as a hegemonic 'antidote' to mounting agitations and demands for more radical change within the world of work (see also Barchiesi, 2012). According to Hauf (2015: 150), from this perspective the initiative 'responds to a problem of legitimation in the current conjuncture of global capitalism [...] by symbolically proclaiming the right to decent work for all without challenging the structural mechanisms creating indecent work in the first place'. Substantiations of this emerge not only in Leah Vosko's early assessment from inside the ILO that decent work initiatives 'lack force' (Vosko, 2002: 21), thus ultimately posing only a limited challenge to 'unfettered global capital' (*ibid.*: 39), but also in the many minimalist interpretations and implementations of the decent work agenda that even

a cursory scan of the policy landscape returns, from the ‘minimum standard approach’ found in voluntary CSR schemes (Hauf, 2015: 150) to stripped-back forms of social protection that essentially serve to (state-)subsidise labour’s continued exploitation by capital (Lerche, 2012; Meagher, 2021; Rubery et al., 2018).

### *iii      The inclusive turn*

Beyond the decent work agenda, more recently we have seen new forms of ‘developmental’ engagement between corporate actors and informal workers built around a core rationale of economic inclusion. Rooted in increasingly influential ideas about the transformative effect of strengthening formal-informal linkages (Meagher, 2013a), as well as dualist perspectives that define the problems of informality in terms of exclusion and separation (see Section I), it is understood here that what informal workers need, rather than new standards or a different kind of employment relationship, are closer connections to global markets and the formal corporate entities operating within them. Harmoniously combining profit motives with poverty reduction, under the inclusive markets model previously ‘unbanked’ or ‘off-grid’ informal workers are presented with new opportunities to earn income and access credit, whilst the companies bold enough to offer those linkages and opportunities are rewarded with access to both new markets and new workforces at the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ (London and Hart, 2011; Prahalad, 2004; Simanis and Duke, 2014).

Reflecting and advancing the repositioning of ‘business as a development agent’ (Blowfield and Dolan, 2014), bottom of the pyramid (or BoP) schemes refer to a wide range of initiatives led by corporate actors that seek to ‘empower’ poor people as both consumers of low-cost products and as entrepreneurs involved in the circulation and sale of those things, from snacks produced by global food manufacturers (Roll et al., 2021) to ‘shampoo, saris and SIM cards’ (Dolan et al., 2012: 33). Through projects like these, informal economies previously considered ‘unusable’ (Dolan and Roll, 2013; see also Ferguson, 2005) are recast as a ‘new kind of business infrastructure’ (Roy, 2012: 106), propelled by the tantalising idea that the ‘creation of new markets around the needs and aspirations of the poor can be both an efficient technical solution to problems of poverty and an engine for corporate profit’ (Cross and Street, 2009: 4).

Informality here is no longer understood to be a burden or drag on economic development (Farrell, 2004; La Porta and Schleifer, 2008; 2014), but is rather creatively reimagined as a site of value to be benevolently tapped into by the private sector with mutually shared results. Picking up on the old ‘de Soto-ian’ idea that low-income informal workers are simply ‘entrepreneurs in waiting’ (Bateman, 2014: 8), advocates of the BoP’s inclusive markets

approach emphasise the emancipatory potential of economic integration, insisting that with the right connections to corporate actors and more ‘complete’ market systems (Bothello et al., 2019: 1506) informal micro-entrepreneurs can ‘flourish’ (Dentchev et al., 2022) and ‘thrive’ (Manlan, 2016). Crucially, they are clear that the approach is not about ‘formaliz[ing] the informal’, but about ‘identifying existing strengths in the informal sector’ and then working with / through them (London et al., 2010: 583).

In addition to the acknowledgement of some BoP proponents that the model has often ‘either failed outright or achieved only moderate success at great cost’ (Hart, 2015: 1), critical research published outside the orthodox business and management literatures raises deeper issues with the kinds of win-win discourses that continue to embellish and ‘moralise’ corporate engagements at the bottom of the pyramid. Drilling into the profit-centred motives of the leading firms involved, Dolan and Roll (2013) suggest that BoP projects are better understood as constituting ‘capital’s new frontier’, showing how the creation of BoP markets ultimately renders informal workers more legible to global capital and more includable in formal financial circuits (see also: Elyachar, 2010; Maurer, 2012; Roy, 2012). In more recent work, Rajak and Dolan (2024) suggest that by exposing informal workers to new market-generated pressures and demands ‘from above’, BoP schemes reify the loose concept of ‘the inclusive market’ into a material ‘space of precarious dependency that falls short of its inclusionary ideals’ (*ibid.*: 53).

Meanwhile, Meagher (2021: 741) underlines the fact that by emphasising the apparently self-evident benefits of greater economic connectivity without having to get tied up in the difficult business of transforming employment relations, what the inclusive markets approach fundamentally does is “normalize” rather than formalize informal labour’ (see also Roll et al., 2021). The final point here, then, is that having already previously slipped from formalisation to decent work, under ‘the inclusive turn’ the threshold for what counts as the reform of informal labour shifts once again to closer integration with formal economic actors (Meagher, 2019; 2021) – and in ways that threaten to simply ‘re-form’ informal workers into newly legible revenue streams, rather than do anything much about their precarious lives.

### **III TURNING FROM INCLUSION TO ADVERSE INCORPORATION**

What are we talking about when we talk about inclusion? At its heart, this thesis is concerned with understanding what inclusion ‘is’ and what it ‘does’, with particular reference to the changing nature of informal work as it becomes included within the expanding frontiers of the global platform economy (see Section IV). But although discourses and models of economic

inclusion have become increasingly central to the current development orthodoxy (Rajak and Dolan, 2024), there remains a general fuzziness in how the concept is often used; not unlike, in fact, the continued ‘use[s] and misuse[s] of informality’ (Finn, 2024: 1) discussed in Section I above. In this section, we ask what exactly it is we are dealing with here.

To begin with, there are a few different perspectives to clarify. In the orthodox economic view so readily evident within the mainstream development agenda, the economic inclusion of low-income and marginalised people is seen as being intrinsically connected to improved material outcomes at the individual or enterprise level by virtue of their closer integration into wider market systems. The central livelihood problem here is defined as one of *exclusion* from the formalised circuits of market activity where all the action happens, with ‘left behind’ populations consigned to a fate of low-return survival and subsistence. This is a perspective on inclusion that sets it up as the unfailingly positive, desirable and even ‘fabulous’ (Porter and Craig, 2004: 389) inverse to exclusion, and which resonates most clearly with what some call a ‘residual’ view of poverty and disadvantage: essentially, that people are poor because they are marginal to the growth process (Ferguson, 2015; Mosse, 2010).

On the other hand, from the more critical furrows of inclusive markets research that have surfaced in recent years, a rather different perspective on inclusion emerges. This is one that situates the problems of livelihood precarity *in relation to* the economic structures and processes that informal workers are already in contact with. The problem here is not one of exclusion *per se*, but rather of the economic controls, conditions and pressures that people are exposed to once their livelihoods become more dependent upon the market and (relatively) powerful economic actors within it (Harriss-White, 2006). Inclusion from this angle exists as little more than a feel-good buzzword that provides cover for the insertion of informal workers into unequal and potentially exploitative economic relationships with formal market actors, with little in the way of protective regulation by the state. It is a perspective that shares more in common with a ‘relational’ view of poverty (Hickey and du Toit, 2007), which locates the causes of material disadvantage precisely *within* the economic relations that people share with the growth process (Mosse, 2010), as well as with earlier schools of dependency thought about international political economy (Bracking, 2003).

This second, more critical perspective moves us in the direction of an important concept called adverse incorporation. Already used quite extensively in the study of chronic poverty and in-work poverty within global production networks (Barrientos et al., 2013; Bracking, 2003; du Toit and Neves, 2007; Meagher, 2019; Murray, 2001; Phillips, 2011),<sup>7</sup> adverse incorporation

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<sup>7</sup> Adverse incorporation shares similarities with the concept of ‘predatory inclusion’, which has been more recently developed and applied by scholars looking at how housing, education, credit and labour markets in the

refers to a conceptual approach that pays close attention to the ‘precise ways’ in which a particular unit – whether a specific individual, a household or a social group / workforce – is ‘inserted into the economic power relations within which they are caught’ (du Toit, 2004: 43). Adverse incorporation draws closely on relational ways of thinking about material disadvantage (Hickey and du Toit, 2007), but does so in a way that avoids labelling all forms of inclusion as inherently problematic straight off the bat. Crucially, what matters according to this approach is the ‘terms and conditions’ of a given unit’s inclusion within wider circuits of economic activity (du Toit, 2004: 43), thus presupposing no uniformity or inevitability about the relational dynamic and remaining attentive to the ways in which different kinds of people can be ‘differentially included’ within a given process or framework (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 67).

Moreover, although helping to move beyond the ‘simplifying narratives of inclusion and exclusion’ (McCarthy, 2010: 821), the concept of adverse incorporation does not foreclose the important role that processes of exclusion can and usually do continue to play in shaping people’s precarity. In other words, the emphasis is not solely on how inclusion is structured in and of itself. As Fischer (2020: 388) points out, it is exclusions from certain spaces or institutions that often ‘form the basis for subordinated or adverse forms of inclusion’ elsewhere. Similarly, states of ‘alternativelessness’ can prefigure entrance into exploitative economic relations (Dawson, 2024), as the absence of viable alternatives vis-à-vis employment, housing, access to credit (and so on) effectively forces people to take whatever they can get, regardless of how bad the terms might be. In some cases this may still lead to an improvement in material outcomes relative to what came before, ‘however small and to however few’ (Dolan and Roll, 2013: 141), but not necessarily so.

Finally, adverse incorporation encourages consideration of both market *and* non-market relations. Though the analytical focus remains squarely on the *precise nature and terms* of exclusion and inclusion, there is room with the framework for capturing relations beyond those with formal market actors alone. According to Andries du Toit, theories of adverse incorporation are ultimately interested in understanding people’s relative position within ‘the larger social totalities (institutions, markets, political systems, social networks) that enable and constrain their agency’, and then exploring the ‘positive *and* negative implications’ that arise from this (du Toit, 2008: 2, emphasis in original). For this reason, the approach is as well-gearred towards dissecting the wider institutional and political dynamics that produce labour precarity in the first place – for example, by analysing the repressive terms under which groups

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global North, and particularly the US, produce and perpetuate racial inequality (Charron-Chenier, 2020; Seamster and Charron-Chenier, 2017; Taylor, 2019)

of street workers are sometimes tolerated by the urban state (Kamete, 2013) – as it is towards prising apart the adverse economic relations they may subsequently find themselves entering into with other kinds of actors. By directing focus towards these important issues whilst circumventing the unhelpful yet persistent false binary between exclusion and inclusion (as well as the normative ‘bad vs. good’ values typically assigned to these), adverse incorporation thus offers a promising avenue for ‘better theorization of inclusive formal-informal connections’ (Meagher, 2021: 733), particularly as these take on increasingly digital articulations.

#### **IV DIGITAL INCLUSION IN THE PLATFORM ECONOMY**

Representing one of the latest frontiers of economic inclusion, the expanding global platform economy has been enthusiastically described in some quarters as enabling the coming ‘future of work’ for millions of those labouring informally around the world. In this section we first consider some of the core transformative claims underpinning this celebratory conventional narrative, including the novel (if somewhat surprising) idea that platforms may be ‘formalising’ rather than ‘normalising’ informal labour in the South once and for all, before moving on to some of the more critical questions and perspectives contained within an emerging ‘counter-narrative’ of digital inclusion and platform work.

##### ***i Conventional narratives of digital inclusion***

In its 2019 World Development Report (WDR19), the World Bank (2019) put forward a ‘notably optimistic’ outlook on the future of work (Anner et al., 2019). With new technologies, it was argued, come new opportunities. What matters is that societies are able to re-tool and adapt in order to take advantage of them, with appropriate (but not excessive) levels of state support in the form of scaled-up social protection, flexible labour regulation and a concerted push towards cognitive re-skilling. At the forefront of the ‘changing nature of work’ is the rise of digitally-enabled labour within what many refer to as the platform economy (Schmidt, 2017), a vast ‘online marketplace’ comprised of at least three parties (those supplying labour, those demanding it, and a website- or app-based intermediary that coordinates the two) (*ibid.*: 5), which according to the WDR19 ‘brings economic opportunity to millions of people who do not live in industrialized countries or even industrial areas’ (World Bank, 2019: 3). Generating both remote and location-based work opportunities, from crowdwork to digital ride-hailing, platforms have become an increasingly ‘durable’ feature of the global economic landscape’ (Langley and Leyshon, 2017: 25) that, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (ILO,

2021), have sought to digitally include growing numbers of workers around the world – many of whom are incorporated through contingent (rather than ‘full’ employment) arrangements and remunerated on a piece-rate (or ‘gig-by-gig’) basis.

There is what Pasquale (2016) calls a mainstream or conventional narrative surrounding the rise of platform work and digital inclusion. In this view, platforms are praised for bringing jobs to the unemployed or struggling masses through flexible and autonomous work arrangements, helping people to ‘become their own boss’ (Ravenelle, 2019) while simultaneously ‘disrupting’ (Hill, 2017) the modern-day service industry for the better. Emphasis is placed on the ability of platforms to include, support and connect, constituting a kind of ‘liberation technology’ (Mann and Iazzolino, 2019: 1) that offers individual economic empowerment alongside ‘new paths to equality’ (Meagher, 2020: 669). This has proven a powerful and influential framing, with developing countries encouraged by big business alongside various high-level international organisations to embrace the latest disruptive innovations and advances of capital under the banner of the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ (4IR) (Bussolo et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2019; PWC, 2016; Strusani and Hounghonon, 2020; World Bank, 2016; 2019; International Panel on Social Progress, 2018).

As outlined in the Introduction (Chapter 1), one important strand of the conventional narrative concerns the capacity of platformisation to generate new jobs at scale (BFA / Mastercard Foundation, 2019; Jobtech Alliance, 2023). In an African context where the rate of formal job creation is understood to be lagging seriously behind expansions in the labour supply (AfDB, 2018; Sumberg et al., 2021), and where, as on other continents, the pandemic has only emboldened calls for a future of work delivered through digital labour platforms (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021), many governments have ‘welcomed’ this digital turn (Castel-Branco and Dawson, 2023: 110). Indeed, in a bid to ‘attract foreign investors’ in platform infrastructure, they have even ‘offered generous incentives including exemptions from labour regulations and fiscal benefits’ (*ibid.*: 110).

Another core strand of the mainstream narrative is that, in addition to *creating* new jobs in developing countries, platformisation is also capable of *upgrading* the many unproductive and indecent forms of work that already exist informally (Carmody et al., 2024). According to this view, the platform economy is widely ‘touted to have great economic development potential with poverty- and inequality-reduction impacts’, and is often framed by the likes of the World Bank as a ‘technological fix for eliminating some of the structural constraints found in the labour market, particularly in Africa’ (Anwar, 2022: 750). Appeals to reducing poverty, improving livelihoods and upgrading employment also feature heavily in the self-promotional discourses of platform companies themselves, whose ‘glossy promises’, specifically ‘curated



for the developmental context of African cities', portray 'seamless solutions' to entrenched socio-economic problems and a slick alternative to the unproductive 'legacy systems' of informality (Sitas et al., 2023: 11). Central to this is the idea that part of what digital platforms 'do' in the global South is *disintermediate*, allowing workers to enjoy more 'frictionless' and direct connections with customers by cutting all kinds of middlemen and intermediaries out of the labour process (Ettliger, 2017; Langley and Leyshon, 2017). Inclusion here, then, is actually constructed as a way of excluding or disassociating oneself from the physical and institutional constraints of one's immediate geography (World Bank, 2019), with digital connections cast as an escape route to something better; perhaps, even, to something more *formal*.

## **ii      *The 'plat-formalisation' of labour***

Within this mainstream narrative strand of employment 'upgrading', there is also a very particular proposition to have emerged in recent years and around which a degree of consensus appears to have formed. That is: while the rise of platform work is widely understood to have contributed to the informalisation of labour in the global North, both accelerating and intensifying a process of casualisation that has been ongoing in countries like the UK and the US for several decades now under neoliberalism (De Stefano, 2016; Lata et al., 2023; Stanford, 2017), across the global South the very opposite is assumed to be happening. That in these 'developmentalised' contexts of high labour informality (Robinson, 2002), the expanding platform economy is actually helping to 'leapfrog barriers to formalization' within the labour market (Kring and Leung, 2021: 1), especially where industrial transitions have largely failed to materialise and state-led efforts to formalise may have fallen short (Anwar et al., 2023; Wei et al., 2024). A process, as it were, of 'plat-formalisation'.

Just within the last few years, this line of thinking, which stands in stark contrast to the idea that existing modes of economic inclusion "normalize" rather than formalize informal labour' (Meagher, 2021: 741), has gained considerable traction within mainstream debates about the transformative promise of digital inclusion. It has derived credibility from the insights and propositions of an increasing array of academic studies and literature reviews, such as Ayentimi et al. (2023), Daramola and Etim (2022), Fietz and Lay (2023), Fox and Signe (2021), Gustale and Cottica (2023), Ramalingam (2016), Randall et al. (2023) and Weber et al. (2021). And it has been amplified by the bolder claims and recommendations put forward in more policy-oriented work, including that which is either funded or commissioned by high-profile backers of the digital economy, such as the Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the World Bank (for an illustrative and non-exhaustive selection, see: AUC/OECD, 2021;

BII, 2022.; Dalberg and Rockefeller Foundation, 2013; Genesis Analytics and Mercy Corps, 2019; GSMA, 2021; IBRD/World Bank, 2023; Klapper et al., 2019; Kuek et al., 2015; Lane, 2020; OECD, 2023; Pathways for Prosperity Commission, 2018; Ramachandran and Raman, 2021; UNDP, 2024).

This particular way of thinking about platformisation is linked to and partly informed by a stream of research into ‘institutional voids’, most notable within the business and management studies literature (Mair and Marti, 2009; Webb et al., 2020). Heeks et al. (2021) draw on the influential work of Khanna and Palepu (2005; 2010), who define institutional voids as absences or shortcomings in the ‘range of institutions to facilitate the functioning of markets’ (Khanna and Palepu, 2010: 10), to propose that part of what digital platforms ‘do’, or at least have the potential to do, is to help fill in the missing pieces that make markets work more efficiently and effectively. As the authors suggest, this includes: improving levels of certification among (informal) workers; reducing information asymmetries between service providers and their clients (e.g. so that the latter can be more certain about who they are dealing with); aggregating different types of market user and thereby overcoming the territorial limits of ‘traditional’ economic networks; and standardising processes like market entry and price setting, which is turn understood to root out subjective, exclusionary and discriminatory behaviours (Heeks et al., 2021; see also Agarwal and Assenova, 2023; Barbour and Luiz, 2019; Malik et al., 2021). By ‘filling in’ these voids or gaps, it is suggested that digital labour platforms are helping to ‘counteract informal economic activity’ in the South (Weber et al., 2021: 1338), whilst providing a stepping stone to labour formalisation through the registration of workers’ details, monitoring and documenting their activities, ensuring their compliance with existing regulations, and rendering them more legible to – and taxable by – formal state institutions (Daramola and Etim, 2022; Lakemann and Lay, 2019; Prasetyo, 2022; Weber et al., 2021).

In the mainstream economic view, having private companies engage in ‘void filling’ is often framed, as with the inclusive markets approach outlined in Section II, as another kind of ‘win-win’ solution. For proponents of the model, it is not just ‘emerging’ (yet still incomplete) markets and their users that stand to gain from all-round better functioning, but the companies helping them to achieve this too. Rather than simply existing as developmental problems to be solved, institutional voids are presented here as a ‘business opportunity’ to be taken advantage of (Khanna and Palepu, 2010: 53), with the potential to generate significant economic returns for those bold enough to tackle them (Parmigiani and Rivera-Santos, 2015). In this framing, ‘gaps’ in service delivery systems and ‘fractures’ in urban infrastructure likewise become re-designated as sites of value from which, through their fixing or in-filling, corporate actors hope to one day turn a profit (Pollio et al., 2023).

It is here that Nils van Doorn's (2022) intriguing idea of the 'platform fix', first outlined in the introduction to this thesis, might best be situated, which although initially conceived in relation to platform operations in Europe and North America resonates strongly with these developmentalised notions of void-filling and problem-solving. As van Doorn (2022: 4) himself puts it, the way that platform companies have increasingly sought to expand their influence and capture value is by 'identifying particular societal needs and marketing themselves as efficient solutions to workers, citizens [...] as well as governments'. Indeed, it is against this backdrop that, by 'embodying a promise of greater efficiency and cost-saving', digital platforms have increasingly sought to fix gaps, voids and fractures across a variety of African contexts 'still reeling from the rollback of the state' under earlier structural adjustment (Iazzolino and Strelau, 2024: 9).

### ***iii Questions and counter-narratives***

While concerns around the shift towards platform work have been present in the North for some years now (Calo and Rosenblat, 2017; De Stefano, 2016; Stanford, 2017), it is only more recently that a Southern-based critique has begun to emerge. In addition to increasing scepticism over the enthusiastic estimates of how many new jobs are actually being created by digital labour platforms (Meagher, 2022a), questions have also been raised about both: i) the relative quality of what *is* nonetheless being generated in the South; and ii) the effects that platformisation may be having on wider systems of economic informality and 'already-precarious' work, which although problematic in various ways are also vital to the livelihoods and wellbeing of vast populations struggling to access formal or decent work.

In contrast to the celebratory narrative of the mainstream perspective, a growing number of empirical studies point to an emerging picture of Southern-based platform work that is at best mixed and nuanced, and at worst something rather more harmful and predatory. Crowdwork, for example, tends to be not only completely unprotected but can actually de-skill those who perform it (Berg et al., 2018; Rani and Furrer, 2019), while research by the Oxford Internet Institute highlights the hard limits that crowdwork platforms place on the autonomy and bargaining power of African 'gig workers' (Anwar and Graham, 2020; Wood et al., 2019). In doing so, these studies lend support to those who have criticised the tendencies of platform companies to create neoliberal 'myths' and 'mystiques' around flexibility (Kincaid and Reynolds, 2023; Rani et al., 2022), selling the promise of independence, entrepreneurial empowerment and disintermediation from inefficient or predatory informal institutions, whilst nonetheless exerting a new range of controls over people's working lives.

Similar sets of problems have been identified in the world of platform-mediated but 'location-based' work, such as digital ride-hailing. Research into ride-hailing across a variety of Southern contexts questions the ability, to date at least, of 'Uber-isation' to create work that represents either a vastly improved alternative to pre-existing livelihood options in the transport sector or even much of a departure from them. We see this in: South Africa, where the rapid expansion of ride-hailing has been described as producing 'not-so-decent work' (Giddy, 2022: 1022; see also Carmody et al., 2024); in Nigeria, where indications of progress towards decent work standards are offset by long working hours, oversupplied labour and weak bargaining power (Cieslik et al., 2022; Meagher, 2022a); and in Kenya, where frustrations with the Uber business model and problems with indebtedness via vehicle financing appear widespread (Anwar et al., 2023; Iazzolino, 2023; Sperber, 2020).

Underpinning much of this is the fact that, whilst conventionally framed as something transformative, both ride-hailing work in particular and platform work more generally does not tend to involve a formalisation of the actual employment relationship itself (ILO, 2021). Because they tend to be engaged through service agreements rather than employment contracts, gig workers, like so many already within the informal economy, remain fundamentally 'unable to access entitlements and protections as employees' (Kring and Leung, 2021: 12), leading some to talk instead of processes of 'selective formalisation' (Hunt and Samman, 2023), 'semi-formalisation' (Carmody et al., 2024), and of formalisation 'to some extent' (Chen and Qiu, 2019) or that is 'partial at best' (Ray, 2024a).

What the Southern ride-hailing literature also shows is how platformisation affects not just the work and livelihoods of those who become included in these new digital systems, but also wider sets of social and economic relations that stretch beyond the digitally included alone. This can be seen in relation to vehicle access and financing, for example, when platform workers lacking a vehicle meeting minimum standards – standards usually imposed by the platform – either enter into hire-purchase arrangements with asset financing companies or instead rent out from fleet owners (Carmody and Fortuin, 2019: 201; Geitung, 2017; Sperber, 2020). In many contexts the rise of app-based alternatives has also led directly to new divisions and conflicts in the workplace, as contests between different categories of worker over territory, jobs and 'rightfulness' feeds into new forms of labour politics, often local / everyday and occasionally violent (Danielak, 2019; Frey, 2020; Nguyen and Turner, 2023; Peters, 2020; Turner and Hanh, 2019). Extending this, other research suggests that platformisation can in some cases threaten the 'social infrastructures' (McFarlane and Silver, 2017) that make informal work both possible in the first place and tolerable over time, with reciprocal networks providing a modicum of social security splintering under the weight of

renewed labour force fragmentation and never-ending, platform-enabled hustle (Ibrahim and Bize, 2018; Reilly and Lozano-Paredes, 2019; Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev, 2018).

Emerging here is a rather different take on the platform economy, no longer a purely supportive force seamlessly linking Southern informal workers to the emancipatory embrace of bigger, less institutionally 'devoid' markets but instead representing a disturbance to the basis of informal economic life (Vallas and Schor, 2020; Wood et al., 2019), with sometimes uncertain but nonetheless very real effects on people's livelihoods. What this in turn speaks to is a possible 'counter-narrative' of digital inclusion and platform work (Pasquale, 2016), in which calls to 'Disrupt Africa' by 'riding the wave of the digital revolution' (PWC, 2016) find themselves being weighed more robustly against what it truly means to disrupt precarious work/ers. This is not simply an accounting problem of how many 'traditional' jobs are being displaced by technology and automation, but rather a question of how selective processes of digital inclusion may be reconfiguring, and in some cases unravelling, the social infrastructures and institutions that underpin informal economic life; creating new kinds of *friction* within the informal economy itself rather than simply removing them from individual economic transactions (Nguyen and Turner, 2023; Tsing, 2012).

In this alternative framing, while platforms are acknowledged for bringing new options and possibilities for income generation to populations surely in need of them, they are also understood to reproduce some of the inequalities and problematic working conditions that already beset informal labour markets (Anwar, 2022; Carmody et al., 2024; Castel-Branco and Dawson, 2023; Hunt and Samman, 2023; Rani et al. 2022). Stripping away the slick 'techno-solutionism' that accompanies so much of the mainstream narrative (Qadri and D'Ignazio, 2022), in which complex questions of power and political economy are reduced to market failures to be solved by capital itself, the revised focus here includes examining whether – and indeed how – platforms may be creating 'new terrains of precarity' for informal workers (Nair, 2022) and novel forms of what Richard Heeks (2022) has called 'adverse digital incorporation'.

At the same time, there is still much we do not yet know. In addition to several unanswered questions about digital labour agency and gig worker power (see Section V), there are also certain sectors of the global informal economy where the effects of platformisation (and 'platformisation') remain especially poorly understood. The African moto-taxi industry, where ongoing efforts at digital transformation are prefigured by often contentious and extractive landscapes of 'analogue' state-sector politics (Agbibo, 2022; Ezeibe et al., 2017; Goodfellow, 2015; Kumar, 2011; Rollason, 2017; Sambaiga, 2018), serves as a notable case in point.

In a wide-ranging overview of motorcycle taxis across the continent, Ehebrecht et al. (2018) identify the rise of digital ride-hailing as a potentially transformative phenomenon in how moto-

taxi services are delivered but also highlight the lack of evidence in this area, concluding that: ‘the question now is if the services will benefit from these [digital] developments and how they will change and adapt accordingly’ (*ibid.*: 254). A more recent review of digital evolutions across the moto-taxi sectors of East Africa suggests there has been relatively little progress in advancing our understanding of such questions (Martin et al., 2023). More specifically, the review notes that relevant data continue to be ‘scarce’ whilst underlining a pressing need for: more longitudinal research that takes into account the volatile nature of digitisation processes; more refined engagement with the ‘plurality of impacts’ stemming from this, including how riders’ jobs are affected; and more critical examination of the ‘increasingly important role’ played by platform-enabled forms of motorcycle financing (*ibid.*: 2, 9-10). Such questions have arguably only become more urgent in the wake of COVID-19, which presented both an extreme threat to the livelihoods of Africa’s moto-taxi riders as well as further opportunities for ‘rewiring’ riders’ work in response to the new needs and constraints created by a series of extended lockdowns (Anwar et al., 2023; Brondum et al., 2021; Peters et al., 2023).

At a more concrete level, research by Cirolia et al. (2023) into the platformisation of moto-taxis in Kigali and Nairobi makes an important contribution to this under-researched field whilst also reiterating just how ‘little is known about what is happening [with these processes] on a city scale’ (*ibid.*: 1994). They suggest that although platform(-ising) dynamics are ‘constantly shifting and adapting’ as new ways to incorporate and experiment with motorcycle taxis are sought, it is nonetheless ‘undeniable that this important and powerful sector is being changed through the development of dedicated digital platforms’ (*ibid.*: 1994). And yet, from a labour and livelihoods perspective, ‘there remains a lot to understand about how the management of “platform labor” [...] transforms a sector where the majority of riders are already precarious and depend on inconsistent forms of work’ (*ibid.*: 1994). This is notably true in relation to Kampala’s boda sector, where despite one or two engagements during the early days of ride-hailing (Doherty, 2022; Inoue, 2019), there has been very limited academic enquiry into what the evolving and ‘volatile’ (Martin et al., 2023: 1) trajectory of platformisation here has meant for the city’s informal moto-taxi workers.

## **V      LABOUR AGENCY**

What has so far been missing from this review of the changing nature of informal work is the role of informal workers themselves to challenge, negotiate or resist change. Indeed, as an increasing body of work makes clear, the actions of states and the forces of capital may be heavily influential in shaping what kinds of livelihoods and conditions are made possible for

informal workers, but they are not the only things that matter (Lindell, 2010; Munck et al., 2020; Rosaldo et al., 2012). And as the extensive literature on precarity shows, just as precarious work is actively made through particular processes and by particular actors (Lee and Kofman, 2012; Parry, 2018), it can also be 'unmade' through and by others (Della Porta et al., 2015).

At the collective level, it was for a long time assumed that traditional labour unions, with their conventional focus on very particular categories of work and worker (Atzeni, 2021; Jordhus-Lier and Coe, 2024; Kabeer et al., 2013), were both ill-equipped and reluctant to represent and bargain on behalf of those in the informal economy (Standing, 2011). In recent years this perspective has begun to shift (Chun and Agarwala, 2016), with research increasingly showing how some unions have adapted to the informalised (and informalising) nature of the labour market by actively engaging in the collective mobilisation of informal workers or by incorporating them as members (Rizzo and Atzeni, 2020; Webster et al., 2021). In other cases, new kinds of arrangements have formed outside the mainstream trade union movement altogether; self-organised networks and associations of informal workers have sprung up across a wide variety of contexts, engaging in activities that range from addressing immediate needs within the workplace (Jongh, 2020) to pressing legal claims for protection through the formal judicial system (Agbibo, 2018; Lindell et al., 2019).

Beyond collective formations, the literature is also replete with examples of informal workers expressing agency through more individualised responses to repressive or at the very least challenging working conditions, whether through practices that help them cope, get by better or pursue more radical action in the form of resistance (Adama, 2020; Carswell and de Neve, 2013; Rogaly, 2009; Tanyanyiwa et al., 2023). The work of Cindi Katz (2004) has proven particularly influential and valuable in this regard, whose conceptualisation of acts of 'resilience' (everyday adaptations to deal with circumstances in the present without fundamentally altering them), 'reworking' (more active attempts to improve working conditions) and 'resistance' (direct challenges to existing power relations and structures) has been widely used by scholars examining the individual agency of precarious workers in both the formal and informal economy alike (e.g. Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Cumbers et al., 2010; Raj-Reichert, 2023). Although 'game-changing' acts of resistance are generally 'much harder to find in the contemporary era' than acts of resilience and reworking (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011: 216), refusal and exit, which some have suggested might constitute a form of resistance within the world of work (Fleming, 2014; Perry, 2020; Waite et al., 2015), is another tactic that many (if not all) workers have long had at their disposal (Hirschman, 1970). It is also one that continues to be exercised when attempts to rework or stay resilient are exhausted (Dawson, 2022; Dawson and Fouksman, 2020; Sallaz, 2017).

Such evidence suggests there is far more to the question of informal labour agency than can be deduced either from low membership rates with traditional unions (World Bank, 2019: 118) or from the ‘trade union fetishism’ that besets much of the existing scholarship on labour relations (Atzeni, 2021: 1349). As Tania Murray Li (2019: 29) has argued, the capacity for politics is ‘permanent and broadly distributed’ and expressions of labour agency take multiple rather than singular forms (Webster et al., 2021). At the same time, however, that ‘broad distribution’ is also an uneven one, and while there are multiple theoretical possibilities for agency, the question of whether workers’ individual actions translate into effective bargaining power at a collective level is another matter altogether (Li, 2019; Pattenden, 2016).

To try and better understand why collective bargaining power develops under some circumstances but not others, several researchers working on informal labour have adopted a conceptual framework called the ‘power resources approach’ (PRA), which in turn draws on earlier insights from Beverley Silver (2003) and Erik Olin Wright (2000) (e.g. Rizzo and Atzeni, 2020; Schmalz et al., 2018; Spooner and Mwanika, 2018; Webster and Ludwig, 2023).<sup>8</sup> Though some have criticised the PRA on the grounds that it fails to fully decentre trade unionism from its frame of analysis whilst also giving short shrift to questions of politics beyond an immediate sectoral focus (Nowak, 2018; 2022), what remains most helpful about this body of research is that it draws attention to the different types of power that particular workforces may hold, lack, develop or lose relative to others.

For example, simply because a particular group of workers may be relatively powerful in a ‘structural’ sense, perhaps owing to their capacity to disrupt economic processes within the workplace or to interrupt the logistical flow of a city by virtue of sheer numbers, without a similar level of ‘associational’ power, formed through concerted efforts to organise workers into an effective and coherent group, they may ultimately have very limited potential to secure significant, broad-based improvements in their working conditions (Tetteh and Mustchin, 2023). Rosaldo’s (2024) recent analysis of waste pickers’ formalisation in Latin America serves as a case in point, suggesting that ‘top down’ reforms ostensibly geared towards improving working conditions may only result in such outcomes, especially at scale, when organised groups of informal workers possess sufficient associational power to directly shape processes of policy design and implementation – a phenomenon he terms ‘formalisation from below’. This is the kind of ‘fine-grained understanding’ that some suggest we need more of in the study of contemporary workers’ power (Refslund and Arnholtz, 2022: 1971), helping as it

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<sup>8</sup> Nowak (2022) provides a more detailed account of the origins and development of PRA.



does to address Kendra Strauss' (2020: 154) claim that recent research on labour precarity has occasionally fallen into the trap of 'seeing worker agency everywhere or nowhere'.

Both Katz's (2004) conceptualisation of individual labour agency and the more collective-focused approach of the PRA have recently been used by scholars looking specifically at *platform worker* power, demonstrating the continued value of these frameworks for examining contemporary *digital* changes in the nature of informal work and the ways in which these changes are being contested 'from below' (Anwar and Graham, 2020; Castel-Branco and Dawson, 2023; Heiland, 2022; Kassem, 2023; McDonald et al., 2024; Mendonça and Kougiannou, 2024; Webster et al., 2021). Moreover, despite still being largely Northern-based, an increasing number of studies are revealing insights into the *rejection* of platform work altogether (Frapporti and Pirone, 2023; Maffie, 2023; Muszyński et al., 2022), as the 'extreme variant of capitalism' encapsulated by digital labour platforms, 'stripped of the vestiges of labour protection and regulation' (Fleming et al., 2019: 497), pushes workers beyond acceptable limits. While important questions arise from this about the 'location' of these limits in more informal and precarious economic contexts where, for many people and for many years official labour protections have been largely absent (Munck, 2013; Nair, 2022), there are nonetheless interesting resonances here with an emerging body of work on digital 'disconnection', 'de-automation' and what we might think of as 'voluntary' forms of digital distancing and exclusion (Bissell, 2023; Kuntsman and Miyake, 2022; McMahan et al., 2023; Syvertsen, 2023). And what these resonances suggest, in turn, is that rather than simply removing friction from the economy, processes of digital inclusion may themselves be accompanied by new forms of friction that disrupt deterministic visions of an 'Uber-ised' future of work for all (Fleming et al., 2019; Popiel and Vasudevan, 2024; Qadri, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

This review has surveyed a diverse yet connected range of research into what Amin Kamete (2013) has termed 'handling informality'. It has sought to show that 'handlings' of informal work and informal workers operate at both a conceptual level (see Section I), as scholars and policy makers debate appropriate ways to think about what economic informality is (and what it is not), as well as at more of an empirical one, as wider state and non-state actors attempt, on the surface at least, to sort out the problems of precarious and informal work.

In Section II we looked at a range of approaches to 'reforming' informality, tracing the shift from labour formalisation to the decent work agenda, and from there to the 'inclusive' ways in

which formal corporate actors have increasingly sought to do business with (and through) informal workers across the South in an effort to generate both economic and social value. We noted how, as this inclusive markets approach has gained traction, questions have been asked about the extent to which such formal-informal linkages are upgrading informal work into something less precarious or simply 're-forming' it into something more profitable for others.

This led us towards a more detailed conceptual discussion, in Section III, of how to think about this core idea of 'inclusion' in a more precise way. In an effort to move beyond the false 'exclusion vs. inclusion' binary, as well as highly normative mainstream assumptions that the latter represents an always-desirable end in and of itself, I suggested (as others also have) that the idea of adverse incorporation opens up productive avenues for thinking about what really matters here: the nature of the economic arrangements that particular sets of informal workers find themselves in; the initial conditions and dynamics that led to them being there in the first place; and the way in which the specific terms of their inclusion within such arrangements shape subsequent material outcomes.

With these new theoretical perspectives in mind, in Section IV we ventured onto one of the latest frontiers of economic inclusion: digital work within the global platform economy. We noted here how prevailing mainstream perspectives on platform work, which champion the empowering economic effects of digital connectivity whilst emphasising the supportive role that processes of platformisation can play in helping to formalise informal workers once and for all (i.e. 'plat-formalisation'), are being increasingly challenged by an emerging 'counternarrative of platform capitalism' (Pasquale, 2016: 314). Research in this more critical vein draws attention to the continued reproduction of inequality and material disadvantage under the platform economy model, raises fundamental questions of its formalising capacities / tendencies, and reveals new forms of 'friction' that arise through processes of digital inclusion that are so often portrayed as 'seemingly seamless' (Popiel and Vasudevan, 2024: 3).

We finished in Section V by looking at new forms of informal and digital worker agency on the rise, which although thinly evidenced in some respects nevertheless highlights the continued capacity of a 'politics from below' to contest, refuse and ultimately disrupt processes of digital transformation often thought inevitable. Perhaps, as Rida Qadri (2022) insightfully notes, digital disruption is not a 'one-way street' after all.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

Far from being monolithic, unstructured and disconnected (see Chapter 2), there is a complexity and a nuance to informal economic life that is all too often missed by studies of the informal economy. Sometimes they fail to grasp its remarkable internal differentiation, such as when inequalities within a particular workforce are ‘rarely addressed’ (Ibrahim and Bize, 2018: 82), or when labour agency is seen either ‘everywhere or nowhere’ (Strauss, 2020: 154); at others they deploy crude quantitative indicators of formal vs. informal work that struggle to capture the diverse realities of ‘self-employment’ and the existence of waged but unprotected activity (Devey et al., 2003; Rizzo et al., 2015). By contrast, the study of informal work is something that requires patience, close attention to detail and a degree of sensitivity to be properly understood (Kamalipour and Peimani, 2024), and in this sense represents perhaps another dimension of what it means to ‘handle informality’.

Over the course of five sections, in this chapter I explain how I went about researching the changing nature of informal work within Kampala’s moto-taxi sector in a way that takes these finer points seriously. I begin in **Section I** by outlining what makes case studies a good framework for engaging with this study’s research questions, and conversely why the platformisation of this particular sector serves as a good case for engaging with wider theories and ongoing debates about the meanings, articulations and effects of digital inclusion. Across the next two sections I then discuss which research methods I used more specifically and how I implemented them, starting in **Section II** with the qualitative side of things (semi-structured interviews, observation, review of media coverage) before turning in **Section III** to the

quantitative (a small-scale survey). In **Section IV** I briefly outline my approach to data analysis. Finally, I reflect in **Section V** on how the pandemic and various ethical considerations shaped the implementation of this study, before ending with a discussion of limitations.

## I BUILDING THEORY FROM CASE STUDIES

The platformisation of informal work is a global process, but it is not one we can fully make sense of in the abstract. Universalising portrayals, sweeping conclusions and neat theory may sometimes seem appealing in a complex world (Cirolia et al., 2023), and conventional narratives with strong institutional backing can certainly appear convincing (Pasquale, 2016), but without being grounded in a strong understanding of how this process unfolds in particular ways and in particular places, theoretically they have relatively little to offer. Indeed, to follow a process without once asking what happens when it ‘touches down’ somewhere concrete, is to never really know anything about how it actually *works* (Yeung, 2019).

Neither a unique or isolated phenomenon, the platformisation of Kampala’s motorcycle-taxis is a concrete example of a wider and ongoing trend towards the use of digital labour platforms to sort out the problems of unemployment, informality and urban disorder across the global South. Although little studied relative to many larger metropolises, both within Africa and further afield, Kampala’s boda sector offers a vital window onto broader debates about the extent to which platforms might help to elevate poor working conditions in already-precarious settings; where waged work has rarely, if ever, existed, and where economic insecurity has long constituted the norm rather than the exception (Denning, 2010; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). In fact, it is precisely because there is so little existing data about this specific articulation of the ‘platform fix’, whereby platform companies seek to address pressing ‘societal needs’ of various kinds (van Doorn, 2022: 4), that makes Kampala’s ‘platform-ising’ boda sector such a valuable site for developing fresh theory (Eisenhardt, 2021; Kamalipour and Peimani, 2024) – not only in relation to the ongoing digital ‘transformation’ of urban Africa’s moto-taxi industries, but also to processes of economic inclusion, ‘plat-formalisation’ and adverse (digital) incorporation more broadly. It is of these ‘things’, to follow Christian Lund (2014: 225), that this is a case.

Case studies offer a tried-and-tested framework for researching questions that have no straightforward or obvious answers, for developing a deep and nuanced understanding of issues that require close attention to, rather than an abstraction from, context (or ‘noise’), and for carefully uncovering theoretical mechanisms that link particular events, phenomena or

processes together (Eisenhardt, 2021; Small, 2009). While competing definitions abound, in its simplest form Gerring (2004: 342) argues that a case study denotes the ‘intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units’. The framework predetermines no particular method and accommodates a wide variety of data (*ibid.*; Simons, 2014). It can be multi-sited, allowing for comparisons between cases of ‘something’ that can be very similar to or very different from one another (Eisenhardt and Graeber, 2007; Seawright and Gerring, 2008), or focused exclusively on a single unit, thereby enabling the researcher to spend an extended period of time in more or less one place in an effort to understand that ‘something’ in all its ‘rich ambiguity’ (Nietzsche, in Flyvberg, 2006: 237).

If so constructed, case studies can be well-attuned to embrace uncertainty and flexibility, allowing for initially broad research questions and lines of inquiry to be refined as new insights emerge and understandings of complex phenomena develop (Eisenhardt and Graeber, 2007). Though such design is incompatible with positivist approaches seeking statistical verification or falsification of fixed, preset hypotheses, often with the specific number of required respondents already established prior to implementation (Small, 2009), for research into relatively underexplored issues and which do not lend themselves to neat hypothesising, this is of critical importance. As Small (2009: 25) explains, while the former statistics-led approach might be ‘superior when asking descriptive questions about a population, case study logic is probably more effective when asking how or why questions about processes unknown before the start of the study’.

The ongoing platformisation of Kampala’s boda sector is a good example of what Small is talking about here. Although there have been several studies into various aspects of the industry – including associational life (Doherty, 2017; Raynor, 2014), road safety and riding behaviours (Kwagala et al., 2022; Muni et al., 2020; Siya et al., 2019), contributions towards urban mobility (Evans et al., 2018), and links with high-level politics (Goodfellow, 2015; Möller and Doevenspeck, 2023) – by contrast there has been little examination of its recent digital turn (Martin et al., 2023: 9). Despite one or two pieces of exploratory research into the *early* nature of digital boda work in Kampala (Doherty, 2022; Inoue, 2019), as well as a number of narrowly scoped ‘impact reports’ connected to institutional backers of the digital economy (Gachoka and Winiecki, 2020; Holl et al., 2021; Nesbitt-Ahmed and Fraser, 2017), much remains unknown about how the relationships between platformisation, informality, livelihoods and decent work have formed and developed over time, thus making this particular research problem ideally suited to the kind of flexible, open-ended and iterative approach that ‘case study logic’ allows (Small, 2009: 25; Yin, 1994).

At the same time, there has and continues to be a great deal of criticism directed towards the case study framework. In his influential contribution to the qualitative methods literature, Flyvberg (2006: 301) outlines a sequence of myths that underpin 'the mistaken view that the case study is hardly a methodology in its own right, but is best seen as subordinate to investigations of larger samples'. In this problematic 'conventional wisdom', which is perhaps particularly pronounced within certain areas of comparative political science and quantitative sociology rather than characteristic of the social sciences as a whole (Small, 2009), case studies are: mostly (or only) useful for generating hypotheses that can then be taken forward by more advanced research designs; inherently biased by the researcher's own preconceived notions about what they might expect to find; and incapable of producing generalisable findings that carry any value beyond the tight confines of the specific unit being studied. The widely influential work of King, Keohane and Verba (1994) – or 'KKV' – represents arguably the paragon of this thinking.

As Flyvberg and many others have convincingly demonstrated, these kinds of charges emerge from a fundamental misunderstanding of the logic underlying many case study approaches and an application of research standards that are simply not relevant (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Small, 2009). Research that attempts to test whether a given theory holds among broad populations, for example, often demands strict adherence to randomised sampling techniques, calculation of a minimum sample size to be met and unwavering delivery of standardised questions to those selected in order for it to meet the crucial threshold of 'external validity' – that is, whether the findings of the study can be reliably generalised, through statistical inference, to a population at large. This is not, however, what most qualitative case study research sets out to achieve (Maxwell, 1992). With a dominant focus on asking 'how' and 'why' questions rather than 'how often' and 'how many' (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007: 26-27), case studies are better suited to examining the nature of how different constructs, mechanisms or processes relate to one another. As such, sampling tends to follow a 'theoretical' approach that prioritises the selection of cases, units and respondents on the basis that they are 'particularly suitable for illuminating and extending' those relationships (*ibid.*: 27), rather than an exclusively 'statistical' approach that would be more concerned with 'increasing the *n*' as much as possible through randomised means. Or as Thomas (2005: 859) succinctly puts it, in case studies 'increasing the number of cases or observations is not nearly as important as carefully selecting' them.

Likewise with questions of causality. While a large-*n* study comprised of hundreds or even thousands of data points might seek to establish whether a causal relationship appears to exist, regardless of the specificities of local context, between known variables, this is not what an in-depth study of one or two spatial units, carried out over several months through repeated

social interactions and observations, is designed to do. For example, in their quantitative study of gig work payment structures and health outcomes among gig workers, Davis and Hoyt (2020: 6, 7) report a ‘statistically significant association’ between piece-rate pay and worse health problems but stop short of stating the ‘underlying reasons’ behind this, instead recommending this as an avenue for future research. It is this particular line of enquiry, exploring what kinds of processes and mechanisms (Yeung, 2019) might connect payment structures with health outcomes, to which the case study is far better suited.

What matters to in-depth case study research is that, at the most fundamental level, whatever knowledge is generated must be context-dependent. As Yin (1994: 13) explains in his classic text on the topic, ‘you would use the case study method because you deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions – believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study’. Regardless of whether the study at hand focuses on a single unit or multiple units, it is essential that the phenomenon being examined is situated *in relation to* its surrounding environment and approached with a ‘sense of process’ (Lave and March, 1975: 40). In doing so, the case study generates empirical insights that are unavoidably rooted in a particular time and place, prioritising ‘context-dependent knowledge’ over ‘predictive theories and universals’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 223-224).

Does this commitment to context prohibit the translation of research findings to other settings? Yes and no. Because I am not directly observing similar moto-taxi phenomena in, say, Kenya or South Africa, I cannot claim that my insights are *empirically* generalisable to riders and platforms in those places. That is, I cannot conclude that because x has happened in Kampala, it has also happened or will happen in Nairobi, simply because there are also boda riders and platforms there.

On the other hand, by striving to understand how and why x appears to have happened in Kampala, I *can* contribute towards the development of concepts and theory that may, in some instances, speak to similar processes occurring elsewhere. This is not only because the Ugandan boda industry has thus far remained relatively under-studied as far as broader questions of digital inclusion, ‘plat-formalisation’ and in/decent digital work are concerned, thus rendering it a potentially ideal candidate for mining fresh theoretical insights (Eisenhardt, 2021; Rivard, 2021). Crucially, it is also because it is a *good case* of those things (Lund, 2014). As subsequent chapters will make clear, the platform economy ‘landed’ in Kampala’s boda sector – a long-running site of precarious informal work and fragmented, dysfunctional governance ‘from above’ – with ambitious promises of what inclusion within this alternative economic system would deliver, spanning not just improvements in riders’ livelihoods and safety standards but in more effective regulation of the workforce as a whole. Described at the time

as providing a welcome ‘boost’ to the public sector that would ‘pave the way for future reforms’ (Paulat, 2014), the beginnings of the sector’s digital turn brought with it a sense of impending transformation that enthused riders and commuters alike (Lule, 2018; Rosen, 2017; Russon, 2019), and that many hoped would lead to sustained changes in how riders went about their work. But what also makes it an especially good case for the study of inclusion is that these assumed changes have now had several years to play out; beyond the initial hype that can lead to inflated expectations and premature conclusions, and after the city’s boda platforms have begun their processes of ‘mutation’ (Stehlin et al., 2020: 1251).

Thus, rather than using my findings as a basis for making direct empirical observations about other times and places, the intention here is to instead use them as basis for developing theory on the articulations, dynamics and meanings of inclusion. ‘Theory building’ refers here to an inductive process through which propositions emerging from one’s specific body of case data are then used to nuance, refine and strengthen wider theories that may also apply to other settings, and where the goal is to develop ‘fresh theory that bridges well from rich qualitative evidence to mainstream deductive research’ (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007: 30 see also Helmke and Levitsky, 2004: 733-4). By ‘shuttling between’ emerging patterns grounded within the data and the larger theoretical questions addressed by the case (Lund, 2014: 231), this approach helps to ensure that data originating far from the historical centres of theoretical knowledge production do not simply remain a unique series of Southern ‘particularities’, but instead form the foundation for a ‘theory *from*’ such peripheries (Cirolia et al., 2023: 1994). In doing so, the hope is that it becomes possible to use this approach to ‘destabilize the universalizing tendencies’ of dominant Eurocentric theory – for example, that platformisation informalises and degrades labour in cities like London whilst formalising and upgrading it in cities like Kampala – and ‘supplement them with new conceptions’ grounded elsewhere (*ibid.*: 1994).

## **II THE QUALITATIVE CORE**

Case studies provide an overarching framework for one’s research design but they do not stipulate the choice of method (Hartley, 2004). In fact, many proponents of the approach actively encourage the use of multiple types of evidence in order to understand the phenomenon at hand as holistically as possible (Baskarada, 2014; Flyvberg, 2006; Yin, 2009). Implemented over the course of a disjointed 15-month period between November 2020 and February 2022, in this project I draw on four methods of data collection in particular: in-depth semi-structured interviews, in-person observations, retrieval and review of key media



coverage, and a small-scale survey. The first three of these comprise what we might think of this study's 'qualitative core', which I discuss here in this section, while the 'boda survey' forms the focus of Section III below.

### *i*      ***Semi-structured interviews***

First up is the semi-structured interview, which for this project is also the central pillar of data collection. The kinds of questions explored through this research demand intricate investigation and close attention to detail, concerning as they do complex matters of livelihood building (Levine, 2013), subjective emotions and attitudes regarding one's working environment, practices and relationships (Monteith and Giesbert, 2017), and affairs both political and politicised which some may feel uncomfortable talking openly about, particularly in the presence of an outsider (Lata, 2021). These require the kind of sensitive, responsive handling that semi-structured interviewing can provide, so long as it is approached in a way that enables flexible and interactive engagements with participants (Fujii, 2018; Lamont and Swidler, 2014). The semi-structured, open-ended interview is also a good fit with efforts to build theory from case study research (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2012); it dovetails well not only with the iterative approach of theoretical sampling, allowing for multiple and constant adaptations to be made to lines of enquiry as one's understanding of the issues develops (Small, 2009), but also with the particularities of each individual involved as a participant. Where something arises within the course of the interview that seems worth probing, then the semi-structured interview accommodates the necessary tangents.

For a study concerned so strongly with wanting to 'cover contextual conditions' (Yin, 1994: 13), it is perhaps ironic that my first experiences of interviewing as part of it were carried out from afar – but it was also a necessity. When I arrived in Kampala towards the end of January 2020 to begin fieldwork, my initial yet ultimately short-lived plan was to remain there for the rest of the year carrying out data collection. Less than two months later, the global spread of COVID-19 had led multiple countries to implement lockdowns in a bid to prevent further escalation of the virus, and a racialised sense of impending catastrophe on the African continent had been forecast (Chigudu, 2020; Meagher, 2022b). By April 3<sup>rd</sup>, I was back in the UK.

Although I had been unable to gather much solid data during this initial period, these two months at the beginning of 2020 turned out to be pivotal to finally getting the ball rolling later that year. This was because, by the time of my abrupt and unanticipated return to the UK, I had been fortunate enough to meet and formalise an affiliation with researchers at Makerere

University's Urban Action Lab (UAL), including with one man who later became my main point of contact at the university: Hakim Sseviiri.

As lockdowns and travel restrictions stretched out through the first year of the pandemic, circumstances necessitated a rethink of how to go about getting some of this research done. To that end, I started to explore the possibility of 'remote' interviewing via the team at UAL and before long had carefully talked things through with Hakim, designed an interview guide, set the sampling criteria, developed written protocols for carrying out the interviews safely, redrafted informed consent statements, and acquired the necessary institutional approvals. On the basis of this preparation, in November 2020 Hakim and a small team of colleagues organised and conducted a total of 26 interviews with boda riders working both digitally and non-digitally, and across varied terrains of economic geography (including busy commercial hotspots, popular boda hangout points, and quieter neighbourhood areas). These were all carried out in Luganda – the main working language amongst Kampala's residents – and on a (masked) face-to-face basis, before being manually transcribed in English and shared with me via secure online means. The resulting transcripts proved to be not only invaluable sources of qualitative data in and of themselves, but were also useful for teasing out early themes and developing angles that could be taken up in subsequent phases of 'in-person' data collection.

Once restrictions finally eased and I was able to make it back to Uganda in September 2021, the first priority was more interviewing. To make sure I was exploring my research questions through multiple entry points and from alternative perspectives, I used a variety of strategies to arrange these. In some cases I worked with Hakim and his colleagues at UAL, namely Lillian Asingura and Disan Byarugaba, to move about town and approach riders for interview. In others I arranged directly, taking advantage of a rider's good English to get around the limits imposed by my poor Luganda and conduct a one-on-one interview without the aid of translation.<sup>9</sup> In these situations I would use the brief exchanges enabled by riding with boda workers to, should circumstances allow, gently open up the possibility of further engagement, but from time-to-time snowball sampling also came into it. In addition to these channels, many interviews were also carried out with the support of Geoffrey Ndhogezi, a Kampala-based boda rider who had previously been involved in research of his own and of others.<sup>10</sup> With a decade's

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<sup>9</sup> During the long period of pandemic-related disruption, I undertook three months of distanced language training in Luganda with a native speaker named Simon. While this proved helpful in navigating everyday situations and establishing good personal relations, my level was far, far below what was required to successfully carry out a one-on-one interview.

<sup>10</sup> Together with Tom Courtright, a transport researcher based in East Africa, Geoffrey is the co-founder of the *Lubyanza Research Group*, which monitors ongoing trends and developments in Kampala's boda industry. I remain grateful to Tom for the initial connection.

worth of experience as a commercial rider in Kampala, Geoffrey is very much an ‘insider’ of the boda industry possessing deep, situated knowledge of the work. Over the course of several months, his contribution to this project – in terms of facilitating and translating interviews, talking informally with me about all things boda-related between appointments, and supporting in various ways the process of research design – proved absolutely critical.

Between October 2021 and February 2022, we carried out a further 51 interviews through this mixture of approaches, bringing the total number of interviews with boda riders via both ‘remote’ and ‘in-person’ methods to 77 (see Appendix 1 for the full list of rider interviewees and Appendix 2 for the interview guide), as well as two focus group discussions: one with digital riders, the other with former digital riders who had since stopped using the apps, with between six to eight ‘discussants’ in each. As with the earlier remote interviews, interviewees in this later phase were selected in a way that enabled us to explore the question of digital inclusion from both ‘included’ (i.e. digital rider) and ‘excluded’ (i.e. analogue or ex-digital rider) perspectives, whilst also taking care to ensure a good spread of urban working locations was captured within the sample: from the densely packed central business district (CBD) and high-end commercial sites, to bustling transport hubs away from the city centre and quieter neighbourhood spots.

Despite the compressed nature of this period of in-person data collection, by the end of my time in Kampala I had more or less reached a point where ‘enough’ saturation had occurred (Saunders et al., 2018). The same sorts of themes and patterns had been starting to repeat themselves, and with each additional interview the extent of significant new learnings had begun to thin out. In line with the iterative approach of theoretical (rather than statistical) sampling (Eisenhardt, 2021; Small, 2009), I felt I was nearing an appropriate level of ‘conceptual depth’ (Nelson, 2017), whereby a ‘sufficient depth of understanding ha[d] been achieved in relation to emergent theoretical categories’ (Saunders et al., 2018: 1901) – such as how inclusion in the new platform economy was being experienced by riders themselves, the extent to which some were pushing back against the terms of such inclusion, and what kinds of issues platformisation was posing to the workforce in a wider sense.

Across the same period, I also carried out 34 semi-structured interviews with what I will henceforth refer to as ‘key informants’; that is, individuals possessing ‘insider’ knowledge about specific processes or phenomena, whose views, whilst neither more important nor necessarily specialist than others in the community (Lokot, 2021), are vital for examining different dimensions of one’s research question (e.g. the regulation of platform companies or the politics of urban planning). Key informants for this project primarily included platform company staff, government officials and planners, local councillors, heads of boda boda

workers' associations, legal experts, investigative journalists and academics, and one high-ranking security official, now retired (see Appendix 3 for full breakdown).<sup>11</sup> Interview guides for these encounters were developed and refined on a case-by-case basis, with a view to better understanding particular aspects of the industry or more clearly establishing how certain historical processes had unfolded.

## **ii Observations**

In addition to interviews with riders and key informants, in this project I also drew on observations of boda riders and their work.<sup>12</sup> While COVID-19 restrictions initially prevented this kind of data from being generated, with a return to in-person fieldwork it became possible to experience some of the textures of boda boda transport from a first-hand perspective as I moved through the city on an almost daily basis between September 2021 and February 2022, taking fieldnotes when and where I could. Though I had previously taken moto-taxi trips during earlier visits to Uganda, on this occasion I attended much more closely to the detail of the experience: the riding behaviours of the riders I was paying as they traversed potholed infrastructure; the passing remarks or chiding comments that riders exchanged with one another whilst stopped at a red light; or what happens when the engine cuts out mid-ride and fails to turn on again.

During this six-month period, these hundreds of daily trips and commutes also produced small windows for additional conversation with riders, more fleeting and spontaneous than the interviews described previously but in their own way useful for finding the 'pulse of the street' (Tadros, 2014: 7). How had their experience under SafeBoda been going lately? What was Uber up to these days? How about those latest proposals by government to ban bodas from the city centre?

Building up answers to topical questions like these, even when the exchanges that gave rise to them were brief and informal, eventually became part of the triangulation process. And by being placed quite naturally in the 'mobile habitats' of the workers I was interested in engaging, the various 'go-alongs' I had the virtue of experiencing with boda riders helped immensely in

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<sup>11</sup> In addition to these 34, Hakimu and his colleagues also interviewed one motorcycle fleet owner in November 2020. I treat that as a key informant interview, bringing the total to 35.

<sup>12</sup> I have avoided using the more conventional phrasing of 'participant observation' here because, in contrast to some anthropologists researching related issues within Africa's informal transport sector (Agbibo, 2022; Ference, 2016), I did not actively participate at any point in the work of boda riding (most likely much to the relief of LSE's health and safety team).

'facilitating access to their experiences and practices as they unfold[ed] in real time and space', thus providing a useful phenomenological 'counterbalance [to] some of the narrative and interactional dynamics that restrict interview situations' (Kusenbach, 2003: 478). At the same time, however, it should be noted that the 'experiences and practices' I gained access to through these journeys represented only a *partial* slice of riders' working lives, and in no way can they be considered a substitute for, or equivalent to, the kind of in-depth qualitative data generated through focused interviewing.

### ***iii Selective review of media coverage***

The third and final method of qualitative data collection involved a selective review of key news coverage concerning the main issues of interest, with an emphasis on some of the most well-established Ugandan media outlets (e.g. New Vision, The Independent, The Monitor, The Observer) but also extending to a newer wave of online-only tech news websites (e.g. Disrupt Africa, TechCrunch, Techjaja). Beyond this, throughout the duration of this project I also tried to keep informed of current reporting on both the Ugandan boda industry and the platform companies operating within it, regardless of where it was being published.

As my phrasing suggests, this was not in any sense an exhaustive or systematic review of secondary data sources. Given both the demands of the other methods mentioned in this chapter as well as the initial uncertainties that often accompany a theory building approach to case study research, neither did it set out to be. Rather, the aim here was to draw on relevant media coverage to provide crucial context as and when needed.

Sometimes this was to help understand a particular event better, such as the downfall of a powerful workers' association towards the end of the 2010s. Sometimes it was to examine how the media themselves had framed certain stories, such as the arrival of digital ride-hailing in the capital back in 2013/14. And sometimes it was part of an effort to triangulate different data sources, such as why a high-profile rider registration exercise carried out in 2013 came to a crashing end soon after implementation.

Thus, although relatively *ad hoc* in application, this selective retrieval and review played an important complementary role within the broader approach to data collection.

### III THE BODA SURVEY

Once a degree of ‘conceptual depth’ (Nelson, 2017) had been reached through these various interviews and qualitative entry points, I turned to implementing a small-scale survey of boda riders in Kampala. Why?

Although the issues under study here call for openness and flexibility in how they are approached at least initially, within the study of informality survey data can provide an ideal complement to the rich detail of qualitative testimonies (Charman et al., 2017; Holland and Hummel, 2022). Surveys enable a more systematic comparison of numeric data across a larger cross-section of respondents, which in turn supports the process of: i) detecting patterns at a slightly more general (if not fully representative) level; and ii) examining how key variables of interest might differ between particular sub-groups. Moreover, by taking a ‘sequential’ approach to survey design and implementation, using insights from earlier qualitative work to establish themes, refine concepts and get the precise wording right, it becomes possible to improve the interconnectedness of the different methods being used whilst ‘resolv[ing] specific questions that emerge in the process of data collection’ (Small, 2011: 68), thus improving the ‘argumentative strength’ of one’s subsequent conclusions (*ibid.*: 68; Flyvberg, 2011: 314).

For this study, the use of a sequential approach to survey design and implementation applied not just to the general lines of enquiry and specific types of questions that ended up in the fixed questionnaire (see Appendix 4 for an overview of modules), with earlier interviews both clarifying which issues needed investigating at a larger scale and helping to refine ways of asking about complex constructs (e.g. expenditure, regulation), but also to sampling decisions. Of particular note here is the composition of the sample. While the original intention behind the survey was to examine various dimensions of the *digital* boda experience, it soon became apparent through interviewing and spending time in the city that turnover and exit were defining issues of the industry’s digital trajectory, with riders in Kampala leaving the apps at a tremendous rate. This naturally led to new questions: what had caused this to happen at such scale, for example, and how did these riders feel about the platform companies now?

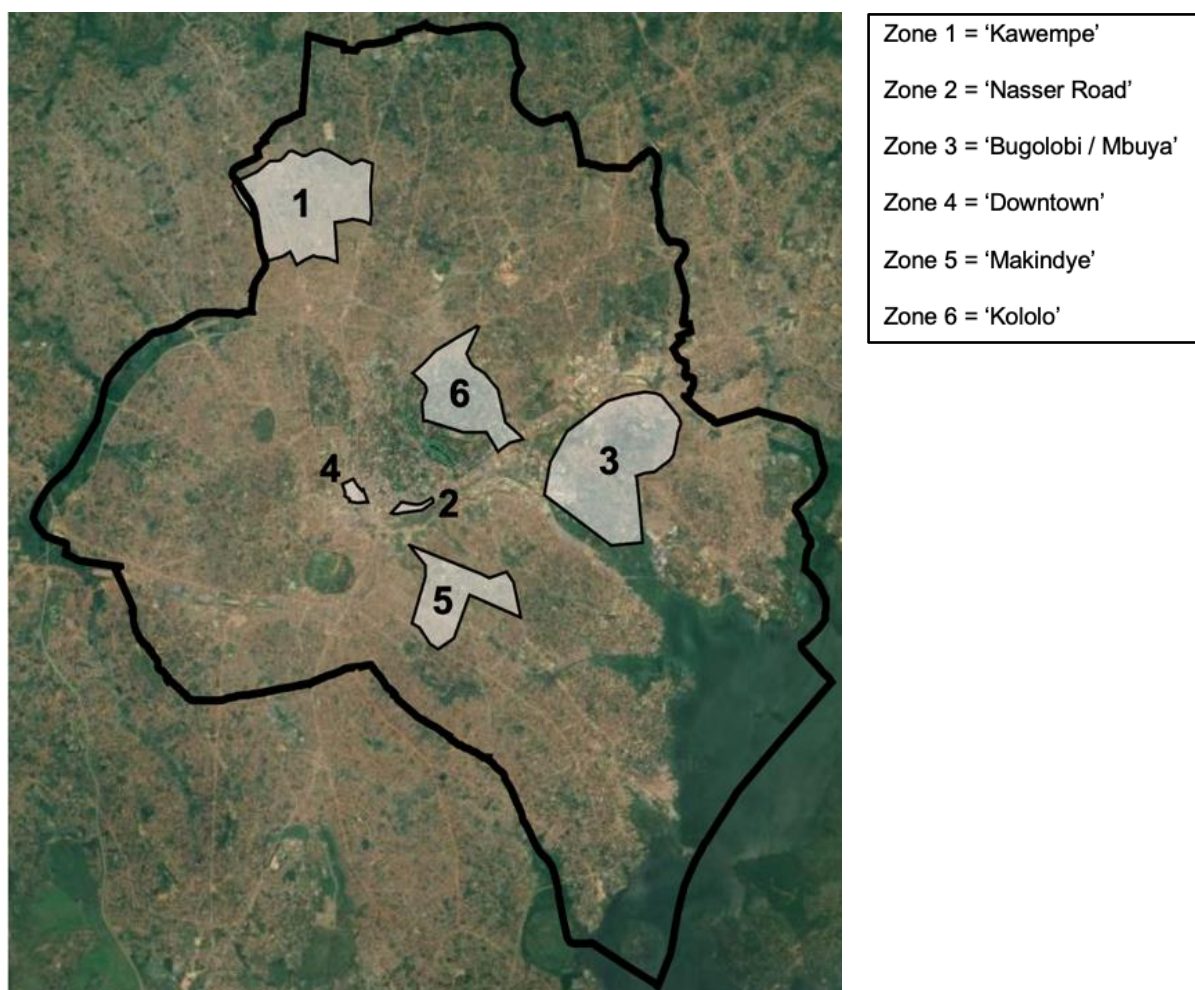
On the basis of this, the sampling strategy was reconsidered in order to capture a relatively even balance of both i) riders who were *currently* working digitally through one or more of the ride-hailing apps; and ii) riders who had *previously* worked through one of the apps but no longer did, having dropped off for one reason or another. In contrast to the original idea of only surveying current digital riders, this revised approach actually hit three birds with one stone. First, it captured one of the crucial dynamics or ‘big stories’ of the industry’s trajectory, thus allowing the survey data to speak directly to issues around digital disaffection and exit. Second, by constructing a mixed sample of current *and* former digital riders, it opened up the

possibility to examine key comparisons between the two: how, for example, did the operating costs of riders currently working exclusively through traditional or 'analogue' means match up to those working through the apps? This in turn provided a nice opportunity to test the kinds of claims and discourses used by ride-hailing companies to legitimise their position within the industry, speaking as they often do in terms of livelihood improvement (see Chapter 7). And then third, at the same time as enabling this comparison, the design also retains a 'full' sample of respondents who could credibly comment on experiences of inclusion within the platform economy – one of the original priorities of the survey. This would not have been possible had the sampling strategy exclusively aimed for digital vs. analogue comparison, as respondents' previous working histories would not have been factored in so systematically. Thus, through the use of a sequential approach to survey design, it became possible to construct a sample that could achieve multiple analytical objectives at once.

Sampling for the survey was carried out using a multi-stage strategy, drawing on both purposive techniques to ensure theoretical relevance and randomised techniques to minimise selection bias at a scale appropriate to the study design. In simple terms, this involved three steps.

In the first, six 'zones' were mapped out within the official boundaries of the City of Kampala. Rather than only sample from within areas of high population density or where the highest levels of boda activity were concentrated, these six zones were designed to capture key 'within-case' variations in the city's economic geography. In this way the sample would not be skewed towards one particular type of working locality, but instead provide a more accurate cross-section of the diverse neighbourhoods worked by boda riders in Kampala (see Figure 2 and Table 1 below). Zones were selected in consultation with members of the research team, and their initial boundaries established in line with a 'natural' approach to delineating survey clusters rather than in correspondence with official administrative divisions (see Hagen-Zanker et al., 2023).

Figure 2. Survey zones within the City of Kampala boundary



Source: Map generated in Google Earth using original zone boundaries and official City of Kampala boundary

Table 1. Descriptive overview of the six survey zones

Zone	Division	Area	Description	Sample size	Current / former digital split
1 ('Kawempe')	Kawempe	5.26 km <sup>2</sup>	Mixed commercial / residential use; generally low to lower-mid income; busy transport routes + links	n = 61 (16.5% of overall sample)	52% / 48%
2 ('Nasser Road')	Central	0.14 km <sup>2</sup>	High density commercial centre within CBD; low residential use	n = 63 (17%)	49% / 51%
3 ('Bugolobi / Mbuya')	Nakawa	6.28 km <sup>2</sup>	Mixed commercial / residential use; range of income strata	n = 61 (16.5%)	54% / 46%
4 ('Downtown')	Central	0.18 km <sup>2</sup>	High density commercial centre within CBD; low residential use	n = 59 (16%)	47% / 53%
5 ('Makindye')	Makindye	2.52 km <sup>2</sup>	Mixed commercial / residential use; range of income strata	n = 61 (16.5%)	48% / 52%
6 ('Kololo')	Central	3.01 km <sup>2</sup>	Mid- to high-income residential area adjacent to CBD popular amongst foreign workers / residents; malls, cinemas, golf course	n = 65 (17.5%)	52 / 48%



In the second step, specific sites where boda riders routinely gather for work – known as ‘stages’ (see Chapter 5)<sup>13</sup> – were randomly selected within each of the six zones. To do this I drew on Muhib et al.’s (2001) logic of ‘venue-based time-space’ sampling, which meant visiting the zones between three to six weeks in advance of survey implementation and systematically mapping each stage or ‘stage-like’ collective using a basic GPS application (see Appendix 5 for more detail on this approach as well as notes on how to define a stage within the context of a survey sampling strategy). We<sup>14</sup> aimed to map out approximately 100 stages in each zone, meaning that in cases where the mapping exercises returned either too few or too many, the initial (‘draft’) zone boundaries were then re-established to create a better fit. Sometimes they were expanded, sometimes the opposite. As Figure 2 above shows, the distribution of 100 stages can look very different depending on where within the city one chooses to look (see also graphics in Appendix 5).

In the third step, survey enumerators were individually assigned their own lists of randomly selected stages and tasked with interviewing two riders at each: one current digital rider, one former. To do this, randomised selection techniques were attempted but in the majority of cases practical realities – e.g. the constant comings-and-goings of boda riders, the need to handle social encounters carefully upon approaching the stage, and the time-consuming and impersonal nature of administering the randomised technique – meant that randomisation at this level was simply not possible. So instead, eligible riders were selected on a convenience basis, guided simply by who was around when we visited and whether they would be willing to participate. Though certainly a limitation of the approach, this was both necessary given the project constraints and perhaps less problematic than it might sound: in many cases there were only one or two eligible riders to begin with (which itself illustrates something about the scale of digital ‘transformation’ relative to the long-running analogue / traditional method).

Between 31 January and 16 February 2022, a small team of eight experienced enumerators administered the survey across the six zones, spending normally two days as a group in each before moving on to the next (but with no surveying on Sundays). The team consisted of post-graduate students and junior researchers based at Makerere University, each of whom had prior experience with similar projects and surveys in Kampala, as well as Geoffrey (introduced above). In the week preceding data collection, we carried out a classroom-based training at the university, field tested the survey instrument and sampling approach, and made various refinements as necessary. All surveys were administered using the computer-assisted

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<sup>13</sup> A boda stage can be thought of as a taxi stand, and generally speaking the same sets of riders work from the same stage each day.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey was an indispensable part of this exercise.

personal interview (CAPI) method in order to replicate the approach that team members were most familiar and comfortable with, and also to take advantage of the various advantages that tablet- or smartphone-based surveying brings to data collection, management and security (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2023).

By the end of implementation the team had surveyed a total of 370 individual respondents, with close-to-equal shares drawn from each of the six zones.<sup>15</sup> As Table 2 below shows, the overall sample contained a balance of 50.5% *current* digital riders and 49.5% *former* digital riders; although just to re-emphasise, this was the result of a purposive and strategic research design choice to balance the sample in such a way rather than a representation of actual distribution. Meanwhile, reflecting the general composition of the workforce and other studies that have carried out similar exercises, 99.7% of those surveyed – that is, all but one respondent – was male (Siya et al., 2019; Spooner et al., 2020).

Table 2. Basic characteristics of survey sample population

Gender split	99.7% male
Current method of work	50.5% digital; 49.5% analogue
Age (range)	20 – 61
Age (mean average)	33.5
Years in boda industry (range)	< 1 – 30
Years in boda industry (mean average)	7.3

Source: survey data (n = 370)

What we thus have here is a careful, qualitatively grounded attempt to systematically collect data from a varied cross-section of boda riders working, both digitally and ‘no-longer-digitally’, within the City of Kampala; one which, despite not being representative of the wider workforce, constitutes an effective complement to an otherwise purely qualitative study of economic informality (Holland and Hummel, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Final zone sample sizes ranged from 59 to 65 (16% to 18% of the overall sample).

#### IV NOTES ON ANALYSIS

What, then, did I do with all this data once I 'had' it? In this short penultimate section, I briefly discuss how I approached the analysis of my data, beginning with the qualitative core before turning to the more numerical data that emerged through the boda survey.

Whilst not claiming to be a formal or 'classical' grounded theory study (Nathaniel et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2015), I nevertheless drew on some of the basic principles of grounded theory to structure my approach to qualitative data analysis – and also, therefore, to data collection. What this meant from the outset was that analysis of the interview data began and developed iteratively as the fieldwork advanced. Not only was this necessary for the kind of purposive, theory-driven sampling strategy described above, helping to steer subsequent data collection in productive directions and towards appropriate respondents, but it also proved valuable in making sense of interview material whilst it was still fresh, before a more systematic process of coding took place (see below). Through a process of 'constant comparison' between new and pre-existing pieces of data (Boeije, 2002; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), I began to detect early themes, patterns and consistencies as the data 'came in', which were written up and constantly revisited in a word document containing 'early thinking and insights'. Though I was careful not to allow this document to over-determine or drive the development of findings, it nonetheless proved useful in refining research avenues and lines of questioning as data collection progressed.

The majority of interviews for this project were not audio-recorded but captured in the form of written interview notes and verbatim quotes which I made during, and on occasion also immediately after, the interview itself. These were all later typed up into separate Word documents, ideally shortly after the interview had been carried out. In some cases interviews were recorded using a digital audio device, which was the preferred choice of some of my interlocutors. As these interviews were all carried out in Luganda, they were translated and transcribed in full by an experienced research assistant familiar with such work.

All typed-up and transcribed interviews were then loaded into NVivo, a software programme that supports qualitative data analysis, where I created two 'projects': one for interviews with boda riders, and another for those with key informants. Though both sets of interviews spoke to the same overarching research questions, the former dealt directly with lived experiences of boda work whereas the latter contained more targeted insights from a diverse range of individuals into specific related phenomena (e.g. the policy process, government perspectives on planning and regulation, ride-hailing company strategies, etc.). For this reason, it made sense to treat their analysis at this level separately, before later bringing themes and findings together through the write-up of the resulting narrative.

Once loaded into NVivo I went about coding the ‘raw’ corpus of qualitative material using an inductive approach, which involved carrying out repeated ‘line-by-line’ readings of the data (Williams and Moser, 2019) in order to gradually, iteratively establish coherent themes that connected with my research questions (Saldaña, 2009). Whilst being careful to acknowledge my own heavy footprint on the data in front of me – a reflection of both the fundamentally relational, two-way nature of the exchange that gives rise to interview data (Fujii, 2018) as well as the impossibility of *not* being ‘already primed by conceptual and theoretical impulses’ derived from earlier scholarly pursuits (Lund, 2014: 231) – by approaching theme development as an open and inductive process I tried as much as possible to subordinate my own preconceptions and frameworks to what was contained (or ‘grounded’) there within the data, and to allow patterns to emerge from close readings (and re-readings) of it (Charmaz, 2014; Nathaniel et al., 2019). Due to the diverse nature and provenance of the key informant interviews it made far less sense to follow the same process, and with this I instead referred back to the material as and when needed.

For the survey data, because I developed a ‘digital survey’ that could be administered by enumerators using electronic tablets, I was able to export data directly into Excel, thus bypassing the potentially messy exercise of manual data entry (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2023). After taking care of any necessary cleaning tasks, I then constructed a number of new variables of interest from the raw data, including things like total weekly expenditure and gross and net figures for weekly income. Rather than create a comprehensive suite of descriptive statistics for everything in the survey, I drew on this data selectively as the iterative process of analysis required it, including for the purposes of triangulation with the qualitative data. And although I occasionally used some basic statistical techniques like T-tests to examine degrees of statistical significance – for example, when comparing rates of association membership between digital and non-digital boda riders – I avoided anything more sophisticated, such as regression analysis, as I felt this would contribute relatively little to the overall analysis given: i) the kinds of claims I was setting out to make (see Section I); and ii) the nature of my survey data, which was not generated with such techniques actively in mind.

## **V COVID-19, ETHICS AND LIMITATIONS**

Transparency of process is central to ensuring rigour in one’s research, and to that end I close this chapter with a series of reflections on: i) how the COVID-19 pandemic shaped the design

and implementation of this project; ii) the kinds of ethical considerations I contended with throughout; and iii) the limitations of the study and its resulting contributions.

## *i*      **COVID-19**

As would have become clear in Section II above, the timing of this research was heavily impacted by the pandemic. While this ultimately reduced the amount of time I was able to spend in Kampala, the disruption brought new dynamics to the boda sector's digital trajectory that in themselves eventually formed part of the research focus. As one example, lockdown provided a pretext for renewed political efforts to formally regulate the industry in Kampala (see Taylor, 2020), which initially included a proposal (later dropped) that all riders must register with either one of the officially 'gazetted' boda stages across the city or a ride-hailing app. This provided a way of exploring riders' attitudes towards the integration of ride-hailing and sectoral governance in concrete terms that were highly relevant to both their working lives and the politics of the sector at the present moment. Certain new dynamics emerged within the workforce itself too, such as the arrival of new entrants into the industry as one of the world's longest lockdowns took its toll on wider sectors of the economy (Mwesigwa, 2021; 2022), as well as a more concerted shift towards courier activity and delivery work as passenger-ferrying was placed temporarily on hold. These opened up specific lines of enquiry that, following a partial rethink of the project's focus, could then be explored through some of the earlier phases of interviewing in particular.

The pandemic also surfaced questions about method, and specifically the place of 'remote' forms of data collection. With restrictions on travel and direct contact between people, many researchers were forced to rethink ways of doing fieldwork and to consider alternative methods that would keep the data rolling in (see Lupton, 2021 for an extensive bibliography of remote methods literature, compiled via crowdsourcing during the pandemic). Uncertainties about how long restrictions would last, combined with broader framings of the pandemic as representing a 'critical juncture' in how systems of various sorts might operate differently (Green, 2020), gave rise to an emerging view within the social sciences that being physically present was not just logistically challenging given the circumstances but perhaps even unnecessary for the purposes of data collection. As one academic argued, 'reaching the field no longer requires entering it in a physical sense', urging instead a reconsideration of the 'ways we understand "fieldwork" within a post-pandemic world' and offering practical and ideological reasons for 'why digital methods are more favourable than in-person approaches' (Howlett, 2022: 398-9).

Though there are real concerns about researchers travelling places to carry out interviews and surveys when it may be genuinely unsafe to do so, or in situations where such activity would impose unjustifiable and insensitive burdens on those being engaged, it is far from clear whether withdrawing altogether from the ‘powerful disciplinary force’ of ‘the field’ is the answer (Geertz, in Flyvberg, 2006: 235). As far as my own experience with this project goes, multiple insights into the (changing) nature of boda work were likely only possible by virtue of being there in person, from witnessing the rhythms of job allocation at a boda stage as I stood there interviewing one of its members to realising that despite donning ride-hailing attire, many riders in fact no longer worked through the apps. It also remains unclear to me whether I would have reached the same depth of understanding of how informality and platformisation really ‘work’ in Kampala’s boda industry (Markusen, 1999; Yeung, 2019) had I relied solely on ‘distanced methods’ (Mwambari et al., 2022), which strip out possibilities for ‘contexting’ one’s data against both their sites of production and wider social, cultural and political backdrops (*ibid.*: 972).

## **ii Ethics**

There is a related ethical concern here around the extent to which withdrawal from the field risks reinforcing some of the more problematic aspects of researchers based in the global North doing research in / on the South. Discussions about the decolonisation of development studies, which found renewed vigour during the pandemic following George Floyd’s murder in May 2020 and the subsequent global amplification of the Black Lives Matter movement, have highlighted the often extractive and unequal relations that exist within many research ‘collaborations’ or ‘partnerships’, and drawn attention to the appropriation of researchers from the South as ‘data mules’ (Aboderin et al., 2023; Bilgen et al., 2021; Gunasekara, 2020). While it is clear that more ‘transformative’ research norms are needed in this respect (Aboderin et al., 2023), there is a danger that in moving towards remote forms of data collection via a ‘third party’ this existing division of labour is simply entrenched even further.

In terms of some of the more specific ethical dimensions affecting this project, there are a number of issues to briefly address. Indeed, although the research received full ethics approval from the LSE, the Research Ethics Committee based at Makerere University’s School of Social Sciences and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology, as Fujii (2012) points out there is another side to ethical research conduct beyond the ‘procedural’ formalities imposed by bureaucratic clearance frameworks. This takes the form of ongoing consideration of ethical behaviour throughout the research process, notably including *after* clearance has been obtained. Foremost here was ensuring that, within the context of COVID-

19, data collection posed no significant additional health risks to all those involved – that is, above and beyond what people would be routinely exposed to if my study had never taken place. There were both material and subjective aspects to this. Whereas on the former various steps were taken to minimise any potential risk of viral transmission (e.g. conducting interviews outdoors where possible, using face masks, avoiding physical contact), on the latter an emphasis was placed on making sure both interlocutors and research participants actually felt comfortable and willing to engage. Where there was any doubt about this, the guiding principle was to suspend the activity.

For research participants, this was conveyed to them as part of the informed consent process, alongside information about the purpose and objectives of the research, the nature of the interview itself, who I was / we were, and their rights as participants (including voluntary participation, withdrawal at any time and without explanation, anonymity, and data confidentiality). Rather than asking for written consent in the form of a signature, as is often the ‘default norm in human research’ as institutionalised under ethics review boards (Wynn and Israel, 2018: 796), we used a more contextually appropriate system of verbal consent to establish willingness to participate. This was done to minimise both physical contact in light of the pandemic as well as the formal-bureaucratic elements of the interview, which can deepen pre-existing power imbalances between (western) researchers and (non-western) research participants, place the latter in positions of unease and uncertainty about what their signature is ultimately being used for (especially if they may have reasons for wanting to stay under the radar, such as not having a legal operating permit), and raise (further) suspicions among groups who may already hold hostility towards figures of perceived authority (Coomber, 2002; Kamalipour and Peimani, 2024; Wynn and Israel, 2018).

Care was taken throughout the research process to ensure that both participants and members of the research team were fairly remunerated for their contributions. While there are ongoing debates around whether paying participants introduces new, unwanted biases into data collection (Gelinias et al., 2018; Head, 2009), from an ethical perspective I could not justify *not* paying unwaged boda riders for their time and foregone work / income. I therefore approached this less as a strategic method to incentivise people’s participation in the study, and more as part of a broader moral obligation to (try to) ameliorate the extractive and potentially exploitative nature of the research (Różyńska, 2022). Following deliberations with the research team, I decided to pay riders an amount that would be roughly equivalent to one good hour’s worth of work – the length of a typical interview – assuming that this working hour would have been spent actively earning rather than waiting (which is obviously not always the case). The same principle was extended to those taking part in the survey. For key informants, on the other hand, I approached decisions around remuneration on a case-by-case basis.

Many of these interactions took place over breakfast, lunch or a cup of tea, and in such situations I would always offer to pay as a token of appreciation for their time. Sometimes, where interviews were carried out over a WhatsApp call, I would offer to reimburse their data charges via a mobile transfer. In situations where there was no food or drink to cover, I offered a small payment at the end of the interview as a token of appreciation, with just a few exceptions where I deemed it inappropriate or even potentially insulting to do so. On several occasions, these offers were politely yet firmly declined.

A number of different Ugandan researchers were engaged in this research, and as with participants I was careful to make sure their contributions were fairly acknowledged. Payments were calculated on the basis of open, two-way discussions at the outset and managed broadly in line with existing practices that they themselves laid out. In an effort to avoid the risk of 'data mule-ification' (Gunasekara, 2020: 505), we held collaborative discussions about the design of research instruments and sampling approaches, as well as debrief sessions in which we would collectively reflect on the data collection process, and I tried to the best of my abilities to fit around their existing work schedules rather than impose myself as any kind of priority. It was also agreed early on that rather than simply helping to generate data, one of the most valuable potential outcomes of junior researchers' engagement in the project would be involvement in a written output. This formed an objective of the study, which we were able to realise in the months following fieldwork through a publication in *Urban Forum* called 'Motorcycle taxis, extended lockdown and inequality at work in Kampala, Uganda' (see Mallett et al., 2023).

### **iii      *Limitations***

Finally, in terms of limitations there are a number of points that readers should bear in mind as they move their way through the following pages. The first concerns my own positionality as a white, British researcher in my 30s, navigating a social context in which the relative levels of wealth, privilege and opportunity I possess by virtue of where in the world I was born (see Milanovic, 2015) would have been readily apparent to most of those I encountered. On occasion this was accompanied by understandable enquiries about what I was up to in Kampala and why I wanted to speak with boda riders: was I designing a new app? Had I been working with government on their latest planning proposals or vying for a contract? The kinds of racial and power dynamics present here, bound up from the start in the seemingly simple question – who was I? – are neither trivial nor inconsequential, shaping as they most usually do the willingness of people with rather different positionalities to engage meaningfully in the



research process and conditioning their responses in all sorts of possible ways (Bergen and Labonté, 2020).

To mitigate (if not entirely overcome) these unavoidable realities of doing development research, I took a number of steps. The most significant and, I think, effective of these was to work closely with Geoffrey and the team at Makerere in conducting interviews, which helped considerably to allay riders' uncertainties and suspicions about what I was up to in their city. The process of obtaining informed consent, verbal rather than written, was also important, providing as it did the opportunity to situate and explain the research whilst opening up space for riders to ask *me* questions. And there were various minor details about how I conducted myself more generally which I tried to be mindful of, including in relation to: the way I dressed; the things I did and didn't carry with me; how I got around the city and arrived for interviews; the choices we collaboratively made with riders about interview settings; and my unintentionally humorous yet often appreciated (and potentially even disarming) attempts to speak Luganda.

Partly as an additional effort to remove formality from the interview dynamics, I had also decided early on not to record any of the interviews I was personally involved in. With hindsight I am unsure whether this actually affected things all that much, especially given the ease with which conversations can be recorded using a smartphone and the increasing ubiquity of such devices as mundane, everyday objects; but one clear implication is that much of my qualitative data is comprised of the notes I was able to take during and immediately after interviews rather than transcriptions of the full conversation. It must also be pointed out that many (though not all) interviews were carried out with translation support – a necessary practice but one that can mediate quite strongly both the dynamics of an interview and the meanings behind interviewees' words and responses (Temple and Young, 2004). I tried to address this by outlining expectations for clear and accurate translation wherever possible (whilst trying to avoid frequent, unnatural interruptions to proceedings), by sometimes probing a translation further (if, for example, it seemed far shorter than the interviewee's original response), and by jointly reflecting on interviews once they had been completed, particularly when something seemed new, surprising or unclear.

Obviously, in more substantive terms there are limits too to what this study is able to say about the research questions at hand. As with all pieces of social science research, my data, findings and claims are all heavily and unavoidably shaped by the choices I have made regarding method, the timeframe in which this study was carried out, and decisions about what to factor in and what to leave out. Where possible throughout this thesis, I highlight these as necessary.

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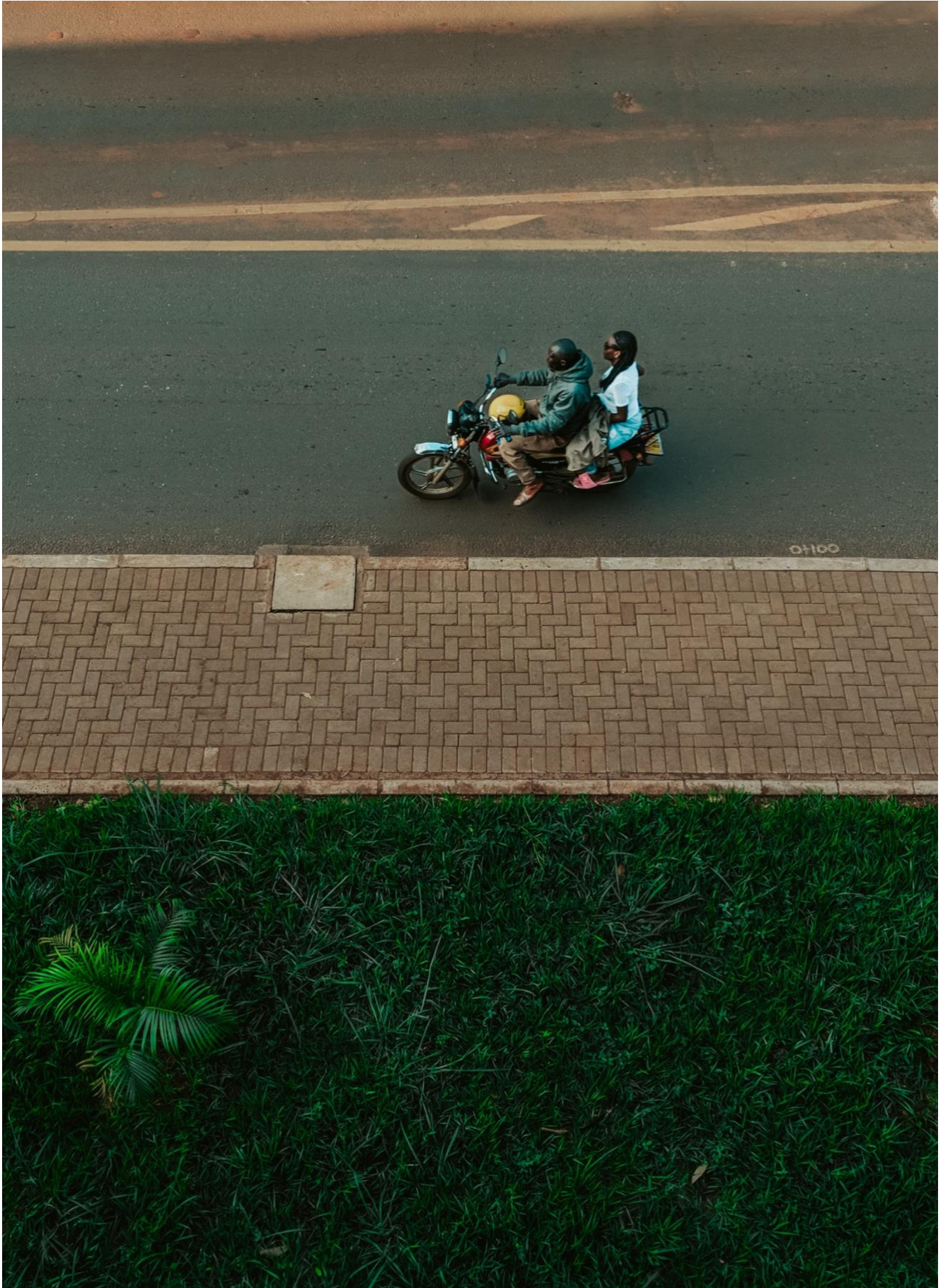
## **Conclusion**

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Researching informality poses a range of epistemological, methodological and ethical challenges to those seeking to better understand it (Lombard and Horn, 2024). In this chapter I have outlined what I did in this project to overcome these, starting with a discussion of my overarching framework and choice of research methods before moving on to the more practical issues of fieldwork, ethics and limitations.

Case studies offer a particularly generative way of examining systems of informal work (Kamalipour and Peimani, 2024: 246-7); they privilege depth of understanding over pursuit of vague universals, and are able to accommodate the patience, iteration and attention to hidden detail that the study of informality so often demands. They also permit – encourage, even (Flyvberg, 2006) – the use of multiple methods and sources of evidence in researching one’s questions, which is extremely valuable not only for the general purposes of triangulation and internal validity (Meijer et al., 2002) but also for the more specific task of prising apart the many nuances, complexities and layers of the urban informal economy (Charman et al., 2017; Holland and Hummel, 2022).

It is often claimed that the case study has little to say beyond the particular confines of the case at hand, but this is a normative criticism that tends to assume the point of research is to generalise to wider populations. Case study research does not do this; nor does it aspire to. Instead, by taking abstract processes and making them concrete, case studies provide a situated framework for engaging with wider theory – and for generating new evidence that can be used ‘beyond the confines’ to refine or unsettle it.



Source and copyright: William Kane Olwit

# **PART I**

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## **SITUATING KAMPALA'S MOTO-TAXIS**

## Chapter 4

### How a ‘rogue’ sector came to be

There is a vastness to Kampala’s transport sector that can be hard to get one’s head around. Across the Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area (GKMA) – a 1,000 square kilometre area covering the City of Kampala, several peripheral towns and three surrounding districts, and which contributes almost two-thirds of Uganda’s non-agricultural GDP (National Planning Authority, 2019) – it is estimated that as many as 600,000 Kampalans make their living by helping to move people and things from A to B (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2020). This is equivalent to 15% of the GKMA’s day-time population, which sits somewhere around 4 million people before halving down to 2 million at night (National Planning Authority, 2019). It means that around 1 in 7 people across the metropolitan area is involved, whether through driving or loading or repairing, in transport work.<sup>16</sup> Statistically, every other household has someone working in or around the system.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond walking – that is, the most used means of getting around among the city’s low-income residents<sup>18</sup> – motorcycle taxis (*boda bodas*) are one of the four main transport modes in

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<sup>16</sup> The 600,000 estimate provided by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2020) includes a range of workers who *directly* earn their living from the sector, including not just drivers but also stage callers, ticket touts, luggage loaders and mechanics.

<sup>17</sup> The average household size in Kampala is 3.8 (KCCA, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Recent analysis suggests that as much as 50% of workers in Kampala access the city centre by walking to and from home each day (Oketch, 2021).

Kampala alongside buses, 12-14 seater minibus-taxis (matatus) and special hire vehicles (O'Brien and Evans, 2017). The city bristles with them. With between 30 and 40% of all public transport trips within the GKMA estimated to be made using a boda boda (Musisi, 2016; Transitec, 2020), the noise from their engines provides a near-constant soundtrack to life here.

And yet despite their ubiquity on the capital's streets, no one really seems to know just how many exist. A few years ago, Wanume et al. (2019) suggested that the number of commercial riders operating in Kampala alone stood at approximately 100,000, citing the municipal government's own records on the matter. Around the same time, Evans et al. (2018) placed the figure at 145,000 – markedly higher, but still less than half of what others have since gone on to suggest. Doherty (2022: 242), for instance, talks about 'estimates ranging from 50,000 to 300,000', while a recent article in the *Saturday Vision* (2022), a popular Ugandan newspaper, inches the number up to a staggering 400,000.

Though the kinds of wildly divergent and perhaps hyperbolic figures mentioned certainly give a *feel* for the scale we are dealing with here, what these ambiguous estimates perhaps reflect most of all is the depth of the formal regulatory challenge surrounding Kampala's bodas. Despite multiple attempts to register the capital's riders, authorities continue to lack even the most basic numerical information about the industry – a problem that both reflects and partly explains its present-day characterisation as a 'rogue' sector with an untameable workforce (Goodfellow, 2015: 127).

How did things get to this point?

By way of an introduction to Kampala's bodas, this chapter presents a brief history of the industry by looking at key aspects of its trajectory over recent decades. Drawing on a mixture of academic and policy literature, news coverage and original primary data, it is structured around two core themes: expansion and politics. I address the former in **Section I** by discussing how the sector's rapid growth, especially since the 1990s, coincided with wider neoliberal economic reforms and a deepening crisis of mass formal unemployment. Meanwhile, **Section II** takes up the latter, examining how the 'rise and rise' of the industry gave way to not just particular forms of 'boda politics', as elite actors sought to create and capture political value from an expanding workforce of riders, but crucially to a *perspective* on politics that has proven remarkably influential in framing how the sector is seen and understood more generally.

## I BACKGROUND NOTES ON SECTORAL ORIGINS AND GROWTH

While the specific number of boda riders currently in circulation remains largely unknown, there is more certainty around the sector's remarkable growth in recent years. What began as a small-scale logistics operation in the Uganda-Kenya borderlands during the 1960s, involving the use of pedal-bicycles to get people and goods from 'border to border' (Howe, 2003), has evolved into something far bigger and more significant than anyone in those early years might have suspected. At the core of this expansion are two key drivers that are also, in a broader sense, common to the growth of moto-taxi work across the African continent more generally (Bishop and Courtright, 2022; Diaz Olvera et al., 2020; Ehebrecht et al., 2018; Ezeibe et al., 2017; Kumar, 2011): i) trade liberalisation and public disinvestment on the one hand; ii) informalisation and unemployment on the other.

### *i 'Enabling environments'*

From low-key, borderland origins, it did not take long for the commercial use of bicycles to transport people and things to spread across the country. But it was not until the 1990s that the fully motorised boda boda industry first came into being, when a single local firm started importing second-hand and reconditioned motorcycles from Japan before offering them to Kampala-based riders on credit (Howe, 2003; Kibirige, 2021). The company in question was founded, run and named after a successful Ugandan businessman popularly known as BMK (full name: Dr. Haji Muwanga Bulaimu Kibirige). BMK, a friend to President Museveni from their earlier 'struggle days (1981-86)' (The Independent, 2021a), is widely credited as a pioneer who almost single-handedly kickstarted the formation of Uganda's boda industry as it is known today. Following his passing in 2021, commemorative news articles talked about how the 'boda boda industry that employs millions of young men in the region owes its life to BMK' (*ibid.*), and that by investing early in bodas 'he went where nobody ventured before' (Jjuuko, 2021) – 'although', the article continues, 'we shouldn't blame him for the lack of regulation that is crippling Kampala [today]' (*ibid.*).

While BMK laid the foundations, things really took off following the country's shift to a more liberalised economy under structural adjustment programming. As Howe (2003: 162-163) notes in one of the earliest academic studies of the Ugandan 'boda boda phenomenon', a relaxation of government restrictions on used vehicle imports during the 1990s contributed to a 14-fold increase in the number of motorcycles on the roads, rising from around 4,000 in 1989 to nearly 62,000 in 2000. This rapid rate of growth was more than double that of the nearest motorised vehicle, four-wheel drives, reflecting both the substantial demand for relatively

cheap used motorcycles across the country and the economic opportunities that import businesses and entrepreneurs, following in BMK's footsteps, saw in the industry's growth.

A decade later, figures from a national register revealed a 34% growth rate in the number of motorcycles being registered each year and, as of 2008, put the overall number in circulation at 236,452 (MoWT, in Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2020). Though the sector's expansion during these years was countrywide, with boda-related jobs and services spreading through towns, villages and road networks across multiple regions, it was Kampala that emerged as the clear epicentre of the industry.<sup>19</sup> By this time (2008), it was estimated that around half of all registered motorcycles in the country – just under 120,000 – were likely operating within the GKMA, with a similar split accompanying the 50,000 or so matatus registered nationally (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2020: 3).

As the volume of vehicles steadily increased on Ugandan roads, the main source of imported motorcycles shifted from east to south Asia. While the earlier BMK days saw a dependence on second-hand Japanese units, with the relaxation of trade and market entry restrictions cheap motorcycles from India began to dominate from the 2000s onwards, reflecting a more generalised pattern in the changing geography of two-wheeled imports to Africa around this period (Nasasira, 2015). Of particular note is the Bajaj Boxer, a relatively low-powered but agile, fuel efficient and easily serviceable motorcycle, and which recent estimates suggest may account for more than 90% of all motorcycles currently in operation in Uganda (Park et al., 2021; Tumwesigwe et al., 2016). According to Evans et al. (2018: 679), it is the 'overwhelmingly preferred motorbike' amongst Kampala's riders due to 'a longer wheel base to improve the ride, handling and stability, and large diameter drum brakes at front and rear to ensure effective braking on rough surfaces' – important factors in a city with sloping, congested and potholed roads, especially during the bimodal rainy season when routine flooding makes road use challenging.

Despite recent government initiatives to instil a 'Build Uganda Buy Uganda' spirit across various strategic sectors of production and consumption (Behuria, 2021), the import of motorcycles continues today at a relentless pace. In 2022 alone, for example, nearly \$115 million worth of motorcycles were imported into Uganda, making this the country's fourth most

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<sup>19</sup> The relative primacy of Kampala within Uganda's boda industry reflects the disproportionate contribution that the capital make towards the national economy: while the GKMA is home to around 10% of the country's population, it generates more than one-third of total GDP and around two-thirds of non-agricultural GDP (National Planning Authority, 2019; World Bank Group, 2018).



imported product (OEC, 2024).<sup>20</sup> However, while such practices bring in a certain amount of tax revenue each year – import tariffs on motorcycles are currently set around the 14-15% mark, meaning the government raises between \$130 and \$210 from each import (The Monitor, 2020) – at the same time they limit the industry’s potential contributions to the Ugandan economy by squeezing out domestic manufacturing possibilities (Calabrese et al., 2019).

Such practices also feed into what many are increasingly seeing as a major challenge posed by the sector: an over-supply of bikes on the roads. In attempting to tackle this problem, a senior government official called Andrew Serunjogi recently requested that the Ministry of Works and Transport (MoWT) place a ban on new motorcycle imports into the country, remarking how the ‘city is choking’ and that ‘bringing sanity’ to the industry should be more important than making money (The Independent, 2022). In putting forward this plea, he explained that whilst drawing up new plans to regulate the sector he and his fellow colleagues were ‘shocked’ to learn that 500 motorcycles were being cleared to be on the roads every day. In approximate terms, this suggests that a staggering 130,000 new motorcycles are coming into circulation each year, on top of the many thousands already there.

But this frantic expansion is not just about imports. As Goodfellow and Mukwaya (2021) show in their political economy analysis of Kampala’s transport system, the rise of the boda boda and the matatu can only be properly understood in relation to the failure, or rather dismantling, of publicly provided alternatives (see also Spooner and Mwanika, 2018). In the decades immediately following Independence in 1962, strong central planning ensured that regulated bus transport, having already been prioritised under British rule, continued to form the heart of Kampala’s planned mobility system. The period of economic turmoil that followed Idi Amin’s ascent to power in the early 1970s marked the beginning of the end for the Uganda Transport Company (UTC), which had up until this point held an exclusive franchise for bus services in the capital. Before long, routes and services were being contracted out to private operators and, without adequate budget being allocated to spare parts and vehicle maintenance, the publicly run bus system began to break down.

By the end of the decade, commuter taxis in the form of reconditioned Japanese minibuses had come to dominate. Owned and run by private individuals rather than the state, these second-hand Nissan and Toyota matatus soon ‘became the basic means of public transport in Kampala, right up to the present day’ (Goodfellow and Mukwaya, 2021: 10). In the years that followed the beginnings of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) era in 1986, a

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<sup>20</sup> Nigeria is currently the largest motorcycle importer in Africa in terms of value (at \$523 million). Neighbouring Kenya and Tanzania – both significantly larger economies than Uganda – imported \$126 million and \$80.6 million, respectively.

combination of economic liberalisation, neoliberal restructuring and rapid urban growth ‘turbo-charged these trends’ (*ibid.*: vi; see also Wiegratz et al., 2018), leading not just to a deepening of the matatu’s presence in the capital’s transport system but also to the rise of the boda. As four-wheeled commuter taxis organised under the banner of the Uganda Taxi Operators and Drivers Association (UTODA), beating away several private sector attempts to revive larger bus networks throughout the 1990s and 2000s but ultimately collapsing under the weight of its own disruptive potential (Goodfellow, 2017), motorcycle taxis emerged as a means of ‘unparalleled agility’ on streets that were becoming increasingly congested (Goodfellow and Mukwaya, 2021: vi). In the absence of effective urban planning and against a backdrop of crumbling public transport infrastructure, it was not long until they became the ‘fastest growing vehicle category’ in Kampala (*ibid.*: 12), ultimately leading to the clearance rate of 500 new motorcycles-per-day described above by Andrew Serunjogi.

And yet, this still remains only a partial picture. While infrastructural collapse helps to explain where the *demand* for moto-taxi transport emerges from, particularly in a context of rapid urbanisation where increasing numbers of urban dwellers are in need of mobility, the preceding discussion does not fully account for where the *supply* of it originates. For that, we must turn to the Ugandan labour market.

## ***ii A city in need of work***

With one of the fastest growing populations on the continent (World Bank, 2020), it has been estimated that in the current decade Uganda needs to create 650,000 new jobs each year to match the rate at which young working-age people are entering the labour market, or just under 1,800 per day (SET, 2018). But despite years of good economic growth since the 1990s, with real GDP increasing at an annual average of 6.5% between 1990 and 2018 (Calabrese et al., 2019), the country has not been producing enough work to go around for some time – at least not within the formal economy (Guloba et al., 2021).

The technical explanation for Uganda’s ‘jobless growth’ is that the national economy has so far failed to transform into one dominated by modern-industrial rather than traditional-agrarian modes of production (*ibid.*), thus preventing new, higher value jobs from being created and capping the economic productivity of Ugandan labour. From a political economy perspective, the reasons are rooted in the nature of Uganda’s elite-level politics, which have fundamentally worked against sustained commitments to structural transformation and broad-based job creation. In his analysis of the country’s manufacturing sector, Frederick Golooba-Mutebi (2020: 1) argues that Uganda’s ‘dominant-party and clientelist’ national political structure is ‘inconducive to the pursuit and attainment of the government’s ambitions of structural

transformation'. Though a stated aim, progress towards an industrialised economy has been constrained in various ways by 'the organisation and practice of politics' under the current administration (*ibid.*: 1), with the ruling regime's need to constantly win elections and retain power – 'arguably the highest priority for the [still incumbent] NRM government' (*ibid.*: v) – greatly undermining the extent to which it has been able to deliver on sustained implementation over the long run (see also Bukenya and Hickey, 2019; Hickey et al., 2021). At the same time, a continued belief in the powers of a liberalised economy and a strong, entrepreneurial private sector to create jobs at scale has hamstrung more concerted efforts on the part of the state to drive progress towards productive, decent work (Van Waeyenberge and Bargawi, 2011; 2018), thus further compounding the earlier effects of 'mass retrenchments' within the public sector under structural adjustment (Spooner and Mwanika, 2018: 151).

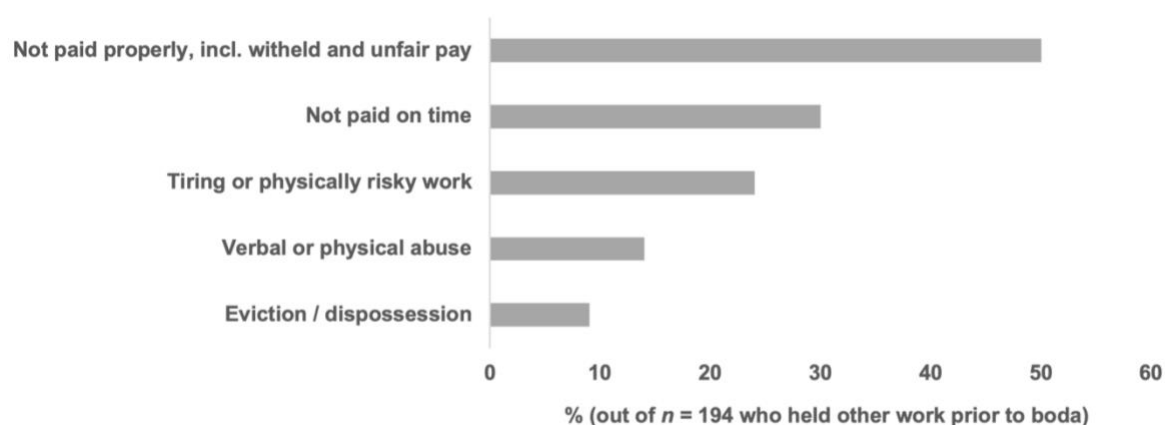
Against this backdrop of uneven economic development and constrained possibilities for formal employment, a palpable, broadly shared sense of frustration with the wider labour market was one of the most consistent themes to come out of data collection for this study. Many of those interviewed framed their participation in the sector as an outcome of necessity rather than choice, far more connected to limited alternatives than to aspirations for either a 'boda boda lifestyle' (Branch, 2013: 3163) or a de Soto-ian future of plucky entrepreneurialism (de Soto, 1989). Just over 44% of those surveyed said a major motivation for becoming a rider was the absence of other opportunities, while the most popular reason – the ability to earn money immediately, reported by 65% of the sample – speaks to both the importance of fast cash in Kampala's modern-day economy ('what I earn is what I eat'<sup>21</sup>) as well as the perceived failure of other forms of work to pay quickly or reliably.

Linked to this is the consistency with which riders experienced difficulties in their former occupations prior to joining the boda workforce: of the 280 (out of 370) survey respondents who had held other work beforehand, 69% ( $n = 194$ ) reported facing problems or some form of mistreatment (see Figure 3). Within that group of 194, 50% had experienced problems with getting paid properly ( $n = 97$ ), 30% late payment ( $n = 58$ ), and 14% some form of verbal or physical abuse ( $n = 28$ ). Moreover, 24% described the work as physically tiring and / or risky, with several falling sick, whilst 9% experienced eviction from their sites of work or dispossession of their means of production at the hands of state institutions, most notably including the central government body responsible since 2011 for overseeing the administration of the city, the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA).

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 6 November 2020 [see interview 15 in Appendix 1]

Figure 3. Breakdown of workplace problems in riders' former occupations



Source: survey data ( $n = 194$ )

Problems like these are common features of work across the wider economy, affecting formal and informal sectors alike, and are indicative of a range of labour abuses in the workplace that have to some extent become normalised despite the existence of legislation (Danish Trade Union Development Agency, 2022; Kamara et al., 2019; Mallett and Atim, 2014; Sender and Cramer, 2022). The director of one Kampala-based labour organisation explained why this was the case to me during an interview, citing three major factors.<sup>22</sup> First, a huge supply of cheap labour means that although provisions for workers are set out in the Employment Act of 2006 (amended in 2020), when violations by employers occur they are seldom reported by those on the receiving end, for fear of what might happen to their jobs should they speak out. When they are, legal mediations are time-consuming and even in instances where claims are successful, pay-outs tend to be very little.

Second, outsourcing is widespread. As the director explained, 'Uganda casualises work a lot. A lot of agencies are used [...] So the issue is informalised work in formal space'. In some sectors such as construction there is '100% outsourcing. For example, it might start with Roko [one of the top five construction firms in Uganda] but contracts go down to small companies'. This 'makes things unclear', she explained, and cuts workers off from possible avenues for redress.

Third, politically there is limited energy to enforce legal frameworks and protect labour rights. Talking about recent revisions to national minimum wage legislation, the director finished by expressing frustration with the President's insistence that having already done the work, those

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with executive director of labour rights platform, 10 February 2022 [see key informant interview **K29** in Appendix 3]

involved should instead go away and ‘do more research’. For her, the signal this sent was clear: ‘Things have been happening [in terms of labour legislation], but nothing concrete. What is more important to our government is, “how do I stay in power?”’.

There is a murkiness around the extent to which the current NRM government actively facilitated the growth of the country’s boda industry, particularly during its early years. Citing an interview with a former Resident District Commissioner, Goodfellow (2015: 134) argues that the ‘government initially cultivated the sector as a means of alleviating poverty and unemployment, allocating funds to credit schemes for motorcycle purchase and persuading banks to provide loans to prospective boda-boda drivers’ (see also Kumar, 2011: 18). Other accounts, however, suggest a less active role by government. When asked whether there had previously been any active support, one long-time observer of the politics of the sector ambiguously replied: ‘Yes and no’.<sup>23</sup> Although no official policy had ever been in place, he explained, years ago President Museveni pushed the idea of ‘tapping any opportunity you see to make money’ to the wider public. ‘It was known as *kulembeeka*. It was about finding opportunities and taking advantage of them [...] So people saw this in bodas and started acquiring. It was the same thing with vendors, seeing spaces and filling them’. It was only later, he went on to tell me, that the industry ‘became a politicised tool. There was one presidential advisor on political affairs. He used State House funds to buy bodas for youth [...] And many politicians also took advantage. They saw money coming from State House and realised they could also invest’. Another analyst of the sector broadly agreed with this perspective, explaining: ‘the government has facilitated only as much as it gains politically’.<sup>24</sup> For the most part, he said, the industry was ‘self-built’.

As for boda riders themselves, many would tend to side with these latter interpretations. A common theme to come out of my interviews with them concerned the absence of official government from people’s working lives, at least in any supportive sense, with riders often interpreting their own boda livelihood as something they had to carve out for themselves. One rider based in Nakawa Division, for example, reasoned that ‘the government cannot give us other jobs, because they don’t have any other jobs! Since that is the case, let us continue with the one we built ourselves’,<sup>25</sup> while another summed it up more bluntly: ‘It is neither the opposition nor the government which gave me a job’.<sup>26</sup> Such words echo the ‘sense of ownership over the industry’ that Doherty (2022: 248) detected in his ethnographic research

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with academic, 24 February 2022 [K02]

<sup>24</sup> Interview with academic, 27 October 2021 and 17 February 2022 [K03]

<sup>25</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 2 December 2021 [62]

<sup>26</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 5 November 2020 [12]

with Kampala's boda riders, which for him 'stemmed from the idea that it was something that they had built themselves without government involvement, NGO meddling, or outside investment'.

Regardless of the exact degree of government involvement, in a context of expanding labour supply and constrained labour demand, the Ugandan boda industry has played an important role in absorbing vast numbers of an otherwise surplus working-age population. While politicians have on occasion tried to claim this as a form of job creation driven or at least enabled by the state, a framing contested by both riders and observers of the industry alike,<sup>27</sup> there is little doubt that the sector has operated as a safety net for hundreds of thousands of Ugandans caught out by a heady combination of regime survival politics and neoliberal economic policy (Wiegratz et al. 2018).

Today, despite the lack of official data making accurate workforce estimates almost impossible to obtain, Uganda's boda industry is widely understood to have become the country's second largest source of male employment after agriculture (Amone, 2021; Inoue, 2019; Kigambo, 2017; Nasasira, 2015; Turyahikayo and Ayesigye, 2017), as well as an extraordinarily significant site of economic activity more broadly. Two decades ago, for example, Howe (2003) calculated that when taking into account the average number of dependents attached to each rider, around 1.6 million Ugandans likely received some degree of 'livelihood support' from the sector. That was 7% of the national population at the time. Using a similar approach, Evans et al. (2018: 680) have more recently suggested that as many as 750,000 people across the GKMA, or about 20-25% of this urban (daytime) population, could 'directly depend' on the industry for income.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, regardless of whether the precise number of boda riders operating in Kampala today sits closer to the lower or upper end of 'estimates ranging from 50,000 to 300,000' (Doherty, 2022: 242), one thing that *is* clear is that the sector has over the years come to represent a vital source of livelihoods and survival. And it is partly because of this that, as the workforce has continued to expand, it has become a crucial site of Ugandan politics too.

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with journalist, 3 December 2021 [K15]

<sup>28</sup> Their estimate includes 'related industry workers' such as mechanics and other maintenance providers – the authors put this figure at around 40,000 workers – and also assumes that each of these individuals supports a wife and one child.

## II BODA POLITICS: A CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Over the past decade or so, there are two key perspectives regarding the politics of Kampala's boda sector to have emerged from existing academic writing and news coverage: the 'unstructured and unregulated' perspective, and the 'vote bank' perspective. Let us look at these in sequence.

### *i Unstructured and unregulated*

In the first, the city's riders are presented as an essentially ungovernable teeming mass of unruly labour; a workforce too big and ill-disciplined to be brought under any kind of serious control. Echoing a long line of thinking that emphasises the disordered nature of urban informal economies (Banks et al., 2020), scholars talk of how 'Kampala's *unregulated army* of motorcycle taxis dodge and weave through the congested streets' (O'Brien and Evans, 2017: 81, emphasis added), unbound by 'regulation and oversight' and as a result providing 'fragmented, unscheduled service across the city' (Tun et al., 2021: 18). Articles in the Ugandan and regional media routinely decry the chaos that Kampala's bodas bring to the streets, while commentators and pundits urge the authorities to 'restore sanity' to the capital by organising the sector once and for all, through whatever means necessary (Buwembo, 2020; KFM, 2015; Muhumuza, 2024).

Seen through this lens, the city's moto-taxis are understood to operate within a regulatory vacuum and without organisational form. Despite the fact the labour of boda riders is excluded from legal and social protection by the Ugandan state – that is, the widely accepted basis of what constitutes informal work (Chen, 2012) – for most observers of the industry it is this idea of unstructured, unencumbered operation that instead defines their informality. Within the academic literature, for example, boda riders tend to be viewed as informal either because the popular emergence and adoption of their services was unplanned by the state, or because their continued commercial operation remains untaxed, unlicensed and / or otherwise unregulated by the state in a way that is often not specified (Evans et al., 2018; Kwagala et al., 2022; Manwaring and Wani, 2021; Pietrus, 2015; Raynor, 2014; Wamala-Larsson, 2022). Within the media, meanwhile, there is a widespread sense that riders occupy a space of presumed lawlessness where rules do not apply and anything goes, leading to them being frequently singled out as representing an uncontrollable 'epidemic' (Khisa, 2022; Nalubwama, 2022).

In many ways, it is precisely this projection of chaos and disorder within Kampala's boda sector that paves the way for new experiments in urban reform. As Tun et al. (2021: 18) point out,

the ‘absence of regulations’ is ‘seen by mobility companies and some investors as an inspiration for change’ and an opportunity ‘to test potentially disruptive ideas’, while ride-hailing executives have described their engagements in the city as an attempt to ‘bring some structure into an unregulated environment’ (Wright, in Russon, 2019).

## **ii      *The ‘vote bank’ perspective***

The second theme, connected in certain ways to the first, concerns representations of collective labour agency. It emphasises the way in which bodas *en masse* have typically been able to wield sufficient influence to shape state policy in their favour, drawing on their substantial (if officially unknown) numbers to fend off any measure that might negatively burden work and livelihoods within the sector. In this conventional and widely held view, Kampala’s boda riders exert a degree of ‘control’ over urban politics that is strong enough to limit government’s attempts to enforce new regulations. As one transport union official put it to me: ‘Boda bodas control our politics. It’s boda politics!’<sup>29</sup> Underlining both the political value that actors across the political spectrum see within the sector, as well as the perceived importance of keeping as many riders as possible ‘on side’, he went on: ‘You cannot win in Kampala without the boda bodas’. It was a view that I encountered repeatedly throughout my time in the city.

This second theme reflects and puts forward what might be referred to as a ‘vote bank’ perspective on the politics of Kampala’s boda sector. Recalling Solomon Benjamin’s (2008) research into contested processes of urban planning in India, this is a form of ‘actually existing urbanism’ whereby the urban poor ‘use their numerical superiority and their consequent importance in municipal elections, to gain the backing of municipal officials in making claims on urban land, infrastructure, and services’ (Shatkin, 2011: 85). The key distinction here being that rather than leverage supportive or protective actions from municipal officials, in Kampala boda riders have often sought intervention from President Museveni himself.

Within the academic literature, the core foundations of this vote bank perspective lie in the seminal work of Tom Goodfellow and Kristof Titeca (Goodfellow, 2015; Goodfellow and Titeca, 2012; Titeca, 2014). Having both separately and collaboratively analysed the politics of Kampala’s informal economy, the research put out by these two scholars paints an intriguing picture of how urban policy takes shape (or not) in places where technical and overly normative explanations of state capacity, planning and effectiveness do not hold up particularly well. Their core argument is that rather than symbolising state failure in any

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with transport union official, 11 November 2021 [K07]



straightforward sense, the fact that boda riders have long been able to avoid the extractive and disciplinary tendencies of municipal authority should instead be understood as a direct result of their political value to the ruling NRM regime, particularly within the historically opposition-dominated context of Uganda's capital city.

Although not an isolated episode, a failed 'boda tax' around the turn of the millennium is often used as the prime empirical basis for this argument. First tabled in 2002/03 by the (now defunct) Kampala City Council (KCC), it was hoped that enforcing a motorcycle taxi license would present an effective way of generating revenue from the burgeoning sector – around 700,000 Ugandan shillings (UGX), or just over \$300,000, annually at the time (Makara, in Goodfellow and Titeca, 2012: 267). Following vocal complaints about this proposed tax from the boda community, the issue became heavily politicised in the run-up to the 2006 elections. NRM politicians seized upon riders' discourse of harassment to brand the tax 'as "exploitation of the poor" and a deliberate move by the opposition in KCC to frustrate boda boda drivers' (Goodfellow and Titeca, 2012: 268). Things escalated further once their protest was taken to Museveni, and after appeals for personal intervention a Presidential Directive was soon issued that instructed KCC to halt proceedings. By mid-2004, the licensing tax was no more.

The central proposition here is that such acts of 'Presidential intervention' occur because the particular social group in question 'matters'. In the context of the ruling regime's long-running battle to extend control over Kampala, the city's boda riders have found themselves incorporated into the urban politics of regime survival as a result of 'their sheer numbers, their centrality in the urban economy and their youth – which links to an underlying threat of potential of violence' (*ibid.*: 268). Through the 'disruptive potential' the sector is perceived to possess (see Kelsall and vom Hau, 2020), a certain leverage is gained. At certain times, this leverage can then be strategically exercised to induce actions among those in power which subvert formal institutions and insulate client groups from regulatory 'burdens' like taxation and legal compliance. By enacting such processes of 'forbearance' (Holland, 2016), politicians for their part hope to win the approval and support of key constituencies in the form of votes and mobilisation at key moments, which helps explain why groups with numerical significance and considerable social reach, just like Kampala's boda workforce, may be especially likely to find themselves included within this highly selective form of distributive politics (Muwanga et al., 2020).

By thus 'mattering' to the ruling elite's political calculations, in this view the Kampalan boda industry has come to assume the status of a 'rogue sector' (Goodfellow, 2015: 127) that finds itself to be 'untouchable' by the politics of formal regulation (Mamdani, in Ford, 2019). In such a framing, the city's riders are by and large positioned as beneficiaries of the governance

arrangement into which they have become incorporated, whereby the urban informal economy's entanglement with the NRM's politics of regime survival generates and sustains a lifeline for thousands of fortunate 'recipients'. Though there are aspects of the resulting work which are far from desirable, the core emphasis here is placed on the notion that this particular configuration of boda politics *enables* livelihoods whilst giving riders a 'free ride' in the capital (Khisra, 2018).

At the same time, this influential framing both puts forward and rests upon the idea that contained within the boda workforce is a considerable level of collective power and agency. To some extent this is seen to derive from the 'numerical superiority' of the group (Shatkin, 2011: 85), constituting as it increasingly has a sizeable bloc of potential urban support during election periods. But so too does it reflect something relevant about the internal composition of the workforce. While other sectors of the Ugandan urban informal economy like shopkeeping, street vending and catering / hospitality are also noteworthy for the sheer numbers involved (World Bank Group, 2018), in this reading the bargaining power that boda riders are understood to possess also stems, unlike those other sectors, from their presumed capacity for violence and disruption. As summarised by Reuss (2018: 52, emphasis added), 'these urban youth [working in Kampala's boda sector] constitute both an important form of political capital *as well as* a potential threat'. Indeed, the youth factor carries particular weight here, linking popular framings of the dynamics surrounding Uganda's moto-taxis to well-established if heavily critiqued themes within various literatures on conflict, development and governance concerning both young urban men's tendencies towards violence, and the supposedly inherent dangers of unemployment (Cramer, 2010; Izzzi, 2020).

### ***iii Towards an alternative perspective?***

Though only sketched out in basic terms here, these ideas of Presidential intervention and boda vote bank politics have proven quite influential in shaping broader theoretical understandings not just of informal moto-taxi work across the African continent (Bishop et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2022; Cirolia et al., 2020; Ehebrecht et al., 2018; Lambright, 2014), but also of the politics of the urban informal economy more generally (Auerbach et al., 2018; Oosterom et al., 2016; Post et al., 2017). And yet, back within the concrete context of Kampala's boda sector, developments in the capital over the past 10-15 years or so suggest there are limits to just how far they can still take us. One reform exercise in particular, high-profile but ultimately short-lived, helps to illustrate why.

In 2011, the democratically elected Kampala City Council was replaced with the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA). Described by Gore and Muwanga (2014: 2203) as a 'national

government takeover of Kampala' executed as part of 'a well-planned effort to reclaim a powerful economic and political space that ha[d] been out of its control since coming to power in 1986', the KCCA was a new corporate entity whose leading team of 10 directors were all directly appointed by the President (Goodfellow, 2017: 1576). With a clear mandate for urban renewal rooted in powerful narratives of Kampala's decline under the opposition-dominated KCC (Lindell et al., 2019; Young, 2017), one of KCCA's first major projects was to attempt an overhaul of the city's boda industry. According to Doherty (2017: 201), whose fieldwork coincided with the rollout of mass registration exercises between October and November 2013, having all commercial riders submit an application form was 'the first step in streamlining, and would allow the government to build a database, know the numbers, and better enforce current and future regulations'.

'In theory', Muwanga et al. (2020: 29) write, 'the capacity to control the [boda] sector should have improved since 2011 under the KCCA'. The re-centralisation of municipal state power was understood to have opened up new roads to reform less troubled by the requirements and effects of democratic politics, while the new Authority's Executive Director, Jennifer Musisi, held a fearsome reputation for driving change. Known as an 'iron lady' with close personal links to Museveni, there was little doubt at the time that Musisi's reform of the industry would succeed; in the words of one journalist I interviewed, 'Everyone thought it would be a given'.<sup>30</sup>

And yet it was not to be. In the end, as Doherty (2022: 247) later wrote, the campaign 'ultimately registered only 50,000 drivers' while 'the rest of the proposals to streamline the industry were quietly abandoned' after just 17 days. In the years that have since passed, the 2013 registration attempt has come to be widely regarded as yet another failure by government to extend formal control over the capital's bodas, reflected not only in subsequent media narratives (Chimp Reports, 2022; Habati, 2022; The Monitor, 2020) but in several of my interviews with both riders and key informants alike.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, as we will go on to see in Chapter 6, it was also to become just one in a long line of failed KCCA attempts to implement similar 'streamlining' initiatives, from further registration exercises to repeated efforts to evacuate riders from the city centre.

Why did things play out like this? In a vote bank reading, one might expect to have found another act of Presidential intervention at the roots of 2013's regulatory failure, derailing the municipality's plans in a renewed attempt to undermine the opposition. But as has by now

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with journalist, 8 December 2021 [K17]

<sup>31</sup> Interviews with: former digital rider, 13 October 2021 [33]; analogue rider, 25 November 2021 [59]; analogue rider, 27 November 2021 [60]; academic, 28 October 2021 [K04]; journalist, 8 December 2021 [K17]

been widely accepted, the very creation of KCCA was in the first instance a strategic effort by the ruling regime to complicate the landscape of opposition politics and reclaim control over the capital (Fichtmüller, 2017; Gore and Muwanga, 2014; Lindell et al., 2019; Muwanga et al., 2020). Moreover, the Authority itself was headed up by a team of technical bureaucrats *directly appointed* by Museveni, thus theoretically reducing the ability of informal labour collectives to leverage favourable intervention through appeals to different party-political actors (Young, 2018). Clearly, there must have been other political dynamics at play that the vote bank perspective alone is unable to capture.

What's more, as Samuel Shearer has recently pointed out, this is a perspective on the politics of street economies that offers 'little insight into how the street economy actually works, or its place in the broader metropolis that it inhabits and co-constitutes' (Shearer, 2020: 354). What are the institutions, for example, that help regulate work within the city's boda sector in the absence of effective reform 'from above', and which enable its continued reproduction over time? What kinds of working conditions are riders dealing with on a day-to-day basis? And how are these daily realities shaped by the various ways in which (different parts of) the Ugandan state go about 'handling' (Kamete, 2013) the sector politically?

Having provided in this chapter an introductory overview of Kampala's boda sector, the remainder of Part I focuses on addressing these important questions. We turn first in Chapter 5 to an analysis of what Shearer (*ibid.*: 354) calls the 'logics' of the street economy, laying out the analogue systems of work and livelihoods that pre-date the arrival of the platform economy, before moving beyond the vote bank in Chapter 6 to unpack and dissect the varied nature of 'state-boda' relations. In doing so, I put forward an alternative perspective on 'boda politics' that not only helps to situate KCCA's continued struggle to extend formal control over the industry, but also makes clearer links with riders' working lives.

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## **Conclusion**

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From humble beginnings as a low-key form of 'border-to-border' transportation in the 1960s, Uganda's boda industry has come to be widely regarded as a 'rogue sector' in serious need of a regulatory overhaul (Goodfellow, 2015). Fuelled by a heady combination of trade liberalisation, public infrastructure decline, a shortage of formal sector jobs amid a steadily increasing supply of labour (particularly in urban areas), and an overarching national politics of regime survival that constrains possibilities for structural economic transformation, the size of the country's boda industry has exploded over recent decades. Today the sector is widely

regarded to be the largest source of work for Ugandan men outside of agriculture, while in Kampala alone it has been estimated that there could be anywhere between 100,000 and 400,000 commercial boda riders currently in operation out of a day-time population of roughly 4 million people.

As a result of its rapid expansion, the boda sector has become increasingly important not only to the livelihoods and survival of many thousands of workers cut off from alternatives in the wider economy, but also to the shape of Ugandan, and particularly Kampalan, politics. In one of the most popular readings of this relationship, the capital's boda workforce is seen to hold enough clout, both in terms of its numerical size as well as its perceived capacity for violence and mobilisation, to fend off any formal government attempt at regulation. More precisely, it is understood that by gaining the favour of high-level elites looking for vital sources of urban support, including the President himself, Kampala's boda riders stand to benefit from a political practice known as forbearance – the intentional nonenforcement of legislation deemed disruptive to the interests of select (and politically strategic) voting constituencies (Holland, 2016).

While this 'vote bank' perspective on the politics of Kampala's boda sector has generated valuable theoretical insights into the politics of informal work more generally, challenging dominant ideas about the form and function of urban state capacity in postcolonial contexts (Cirolia and Harber, 2022; Guma, 2016; Lindell, 2019; Siame and Watson, 2022), it is also one that struggles to fully capture or explain more recent political developments in the city. As many subsequent attempts at formal regulation have continued to fail – despite, that is, the introduction of various new strategies to 'control the capital', including a recentralisation of municipal state power (Muwanga et al., 2020) – there is an increasing need for what we might think of as an alternative perspective on Kampala's boda politics. A perspective that, in addition to paying closer attention to the multiple and shifting ways in which different parts of the Ugandan state have engaged with the sector in recent years (Kamete, 2013; Lindell, 2019), more thoroughly draws out the connections between the politics of this particular street economy on the one hand, and the 'logics' of economic life within it on the other (Shearer, 2020).

## Chapter 5

### **Work and livelihoods in analogue perspective**

To understand what happens when global changes in the nature of work ‘touch down’ in specific concrete settings, it is important to start with at least some sense of what things were like to begin with (Chen et al., 2020; Nguyen and Turner, 2023; Peters, 2020; Qadri, 2021). And yet, it has recently been suggested that ‘the great majority of literature to date’ on digital labour in the global South ‘has under-represented prior context, especially the systems that pre-exist and compete with platforms’ (Gomez-Morantes et al., 2022: 997). In this and the following chapter, I address this limitation of the existing literature by offering a fresh, detailed look at the systems of ‘boda work’ and ‘boda politics’ that pre-date the arrival of moto-taxi platforms on Kampala’s streets, and in doing so lay down a crucial foundation for the analysis subsequently presented in Part II of this thesis.

Drawing primarily on interviews and surveys with riders, in this chapter I start this exercise by examining boda work and livelihoods from what I call an ‘analogue perspective’, developing a picture of the pre-platform landscape in three steps. In **Section I**, I provide a short socio-economic profile of the workforce, covering some basic characteristics such as educational and geographical backgrounds, average working hours and earnings, and the extent to which riders consider boda work to represent a ‘good job’. **Section II** then looks in greater detail at the nature of boda work by outlining five core working conditions that, since the early days of the industry in Kampala, have come to both define and constrain riders’ everyday experiences

of boda work. Finally, in **Section III** I explore three specific types of informal institution that, in the absence of effective formal state regulation and protection ‘from above’, have long structured economic life within the sector – albeit with limits as to how far they have been able to bind an ever-expanding workforce into a unified collective.

## I A SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE

Writing about Uganda’s ‘boda boda phenomenon’ more than two decades ago, late transport specialist John Howe (2003) paints a relatively uniform picture of the sector at the turn of the millennium. Drawing on survey data from the Kampala-Jinja region, he found a workforce largely made up of unemployed young men and high school dropouts who engaged in boda riding as a short-term, ‘transient occupation’; the majority of riders held only some level of primary education and had worked in the industry for less than two years, while just 10% had been operating for five years or more (*ibid.*: 169-70). For Howe, it was clear that the expansion of two-wheeled transport in Uganda had ‘mainly benefited poorly educated male breadwinners who have few other employment opportunities’ (*ibid.*: 175).

In the 20 years since this early analysis was published, there have been some notable changes in both the nature of boda work and the composition of its labour force. Although riding continues to be widely framed, and indeed stigmatised, as an unproductive and demeaning occupation taken up only by those without alternatives – in the words of one interviewee, ‘riders are seen as useless people’, as ‘bayaaye’<sup>32</sup> – the reality today is that the sector absorbs a much broader cross-section of society than has historically been the case.<sup>33</sup> In contrast to Howe’s respondents, roughly half of all riders in our survey ( $n = 370$ ) held at least some level of secondary education (49%), while 9% had experienced one form of higher education or another (even if they had not fully completed it) (see Figure 4). Five respondents held a university degree which, although equating to just over 1% of the sample, was nevertheless still marginally higher than the number of those who had never been formally educated at all ( $n = 4$ ). These figures speak to both recent media coverage highlighting the presence of university graduates in the sector (The Monitor, 2021), as well as comments made

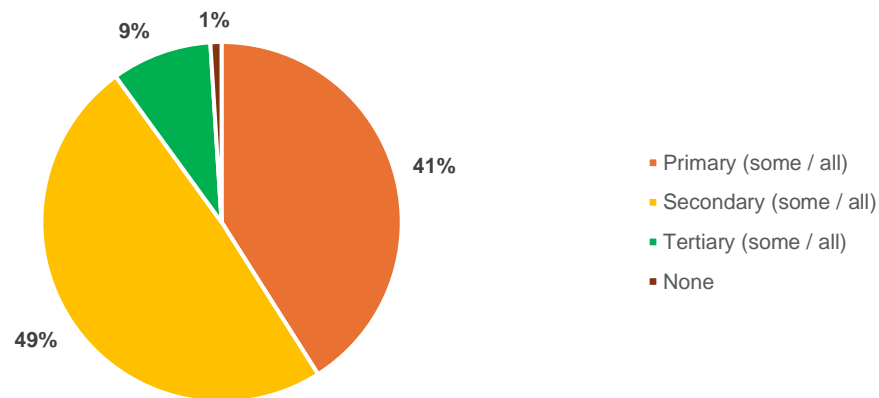
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<sup>32</sup> Interview with analogue rider with stage in Kawempe Division, 29, 25 November 2021 [59]. The Luganda word *bayaaye* refers to a class of untrustworthy tricksters or thieves, and is commonly associated with un- and under-employed young male urban dwellers hustling for a living in the ‘black market’ (or *magendo*) economy (Taylor and Namagembe, 2020).

<sup>33</sup> See Ismail (2016) for discussion of a similar trajectory in Sierra Leone.

by interviewees themselves about the changing nature of the workforce in Kampala. According to one rider, ‘Even those educated are joining us. On our stage we have about four riders with degrees, but the bodas are not theirs!’.<sup>34</sup> Mirroring this, at least four of those interviewed during the qualitative phase of data collection reported holding a university degree.

Figure 4. Educational attainment among survey respondents



Source: survey data (n = 370)

As the sector’s labour demographics have broadened in this respect, leading to a generally more educated workforce, so has some of the transience of the occupation dissipated. Relative to Howe’s (2003) two-year average duration, riders in our survey had been operating on average for more than seven years, with more than one-quarter of the sample (27%) having spent over a decade in the sector (the longest reported duration was 30 years). These findings are broadly in line with survey data presented by Evans et al. (2018: 684), who suggest that the relatively long durations now found within the sector ‘question received wisdom that boda driving is [still] a transitory occupation’.

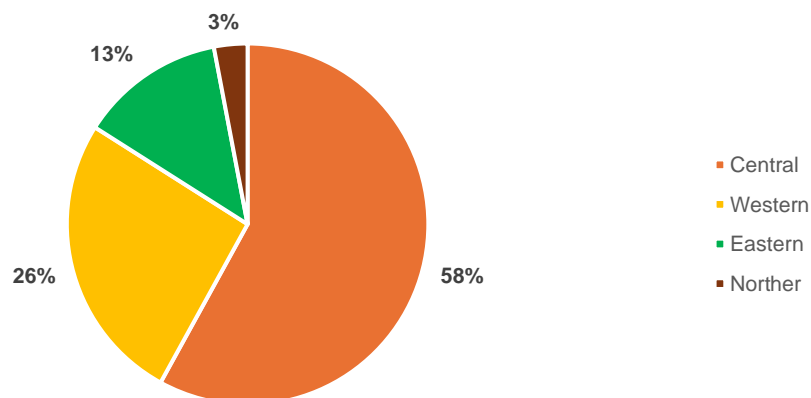
In terms of geographical background, Kampala’s boda industry draws in people from across the entire country but with some unevenness. As Figure 5 shows, the survey captured respondents from all four major regions of Uganda as well as from just over half (76) of the country’s 146 districts, the number of which has increased dramatically over the past two decades, up from 56 in 2002 (see Green, 2010 on the politics behind this). At the same time, however, the spread is far from balanced. Although interviewed riders tended to be fairly insistent that they saw no observable segmentation within the industry along ethnic lines or in

<sup>34</sup> Interview with digital rider, 4 November 2020 [11]



terms of geographical origin, Central region makes up as much as 59% of the overall sample, whilst those hailing from the East and particularly the North of the country are dwarfed in comparison, representing just 13% and 2.7% of the sample, respectively. Proximity is likely a factor here – Kampala is, after all, situated within Central region – but it is also possible that economic status plays into it as well. According to recent analysis by the IBRD / World Bank (2022), the poverty rate in Central region (15%) is nearly three times lower than that found in the Eastern (42%) and Northern (40%) regions, and it also bears considering that life in Kampala is relatively expensive compared to other parts of the country (Economic Research Institute, 2024). As one rider named Chris explained, boda riding is ‘a job that can accommodate everyone. The only challenge is capital’.<sup>35</sup>

Figure 5. Region of origin among survey respondents



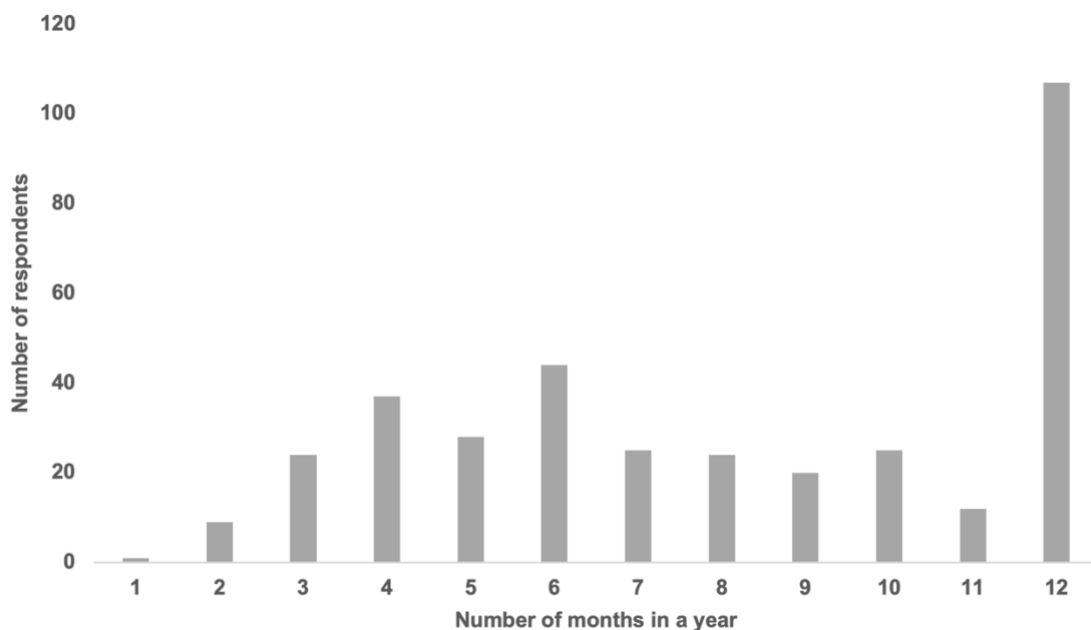
Source: survey data ( $n = 370$ )

Internal migration is the lifeblood of Kampala’s boda industry, ensuring a constant replenishment of labour and new riders in need of motorcycles. While it is also the case that many of those who are born and grow up in the capital turn to riding there too, with 12% of the survey sample falling into this category – almost, as it happens, the exact same share as reported by Evans et al. (2018) – for the most part it is individuals coming from outside the city that make up the bulk of the workforce. With an average current age of 33.6, riders who were born or grew up elsewhere had been in Kampala for just over 11 years on average, suggesting a pattern of labour migration to Kampala at a relatively young age in the hope of finding, in Chris’ words again, the ‘greener pastures’ of big city life.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with former digital rider, 5 October 2021 [28]

As mentioned briefly in Chapter 4, the majority of those surveyed ( $n = 280 / 76\%$ ) held other forms of paid work prior to entering the boda sector. For the most part this involved participation in either agriculture, construction, own-account work, casual labour or working as an employee for someone else. As far as riders' *present* livelihoods are concerned, other forms of work often continue to be part of the picture: 35% of those surveyed reported earning income from some other means in the past year. Though some of this group did so whilst working 'full time' in the boda sector for the whole 12 months, in many cases riders split their time throughout the year between boda work and something else. Indeed, as Figure 6 below illustrates, the majority of surveyed riders ( $n = 263 / 71\%$ ) took at least one month off from boda work during the past year – though it should be pointed out that the presence of COVID-19 restrictions within the industry at the time is likely responsible for at least some of this suspended activity.

Figure 6. Number of months in a year working as a boda rider



Source: survey data ( $n = 370$ )

Working weeks and days are long (see Table 3). On average, riders do boda work just over six days per week and put in 11-hour shifts. 41% ( $n = 152$ ) of the sample reported taking no days off at all, including over weekends, whilst 62% ( $n = 270$ ) reported routinely working 12 hours or more on a typical day. A considerable amount of this work goes unpaid, as the rhythms of the working day are uneven and long stretches of unremunerated downtime can

be spent waiting between jobs. Riders usually talk of there being busy, hectic periods during the pre-work morning and post-work early evening rush hours – roughly, from 6 – 9 a.m. and 4 – 7 p.m. – with occasional bursts around lunchtime depending on one’s working location.

Table 3. Key characteristics of boda work among survey respondents

No. of years in the sector	Months per year doing boda work	Days per week doing boda work	Hours per day doing boda work	Gross weekly income (UGX)	Net weekly income (UGX)
7.3	7.7	6.3	11.3	339,681	102,534

Conversion rate as of April 2024: \$1 = UGX 3,829

Source: survey data (all values represent mean averages) (*n* = 370)

Finally, although essentially synonymous in the Ugandan context with ideas of socially stigmatised ‘dirty work’ (Doherty, 2017; see also Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2022), boda riding actually pays far better than many comparable occupations, with surveyed riders earning on average around UGX 340,000 per week in *gross income* – just over \$90.<sup>36</sup> Interviewees would often talk about how these earnings were superior to many other forms of informal economic activity, such as street vending, farming or working for someone else off-the-books, and favourable too even when compared with certain jobs in the formal sector (see also UBoS, 2021). Some riders I met also described returning to the world of boda work following lucrative stretches of wage labour abroad,<sup>37</sup> which not only further questions the idea of riding as a temporary and linear stepping stone towards a more permanent upgrade, but also highlights the relative dependability of the work as something that people can come back to once they have secured an initial foothold in it.

At the same time, however, focusing on gross earnings alone conceals both the substantial costs that boda riding involves as well as the broader nature of riders’ experiences of the work. On the former issue, a huge share of what riders earn is consumed by what they must pay just to stay operational. Expenses run on average to around UGX 237,000 (approx. \$63) per week, equating to 70% of riders’ gross income and leaving behind a ‘take-home’ weekly average of just over UGX 100,000 (approx. \$27) – now less than \$5-a-day. Though still significantly higher than the national minimum wage, which since 2017 has been set at the

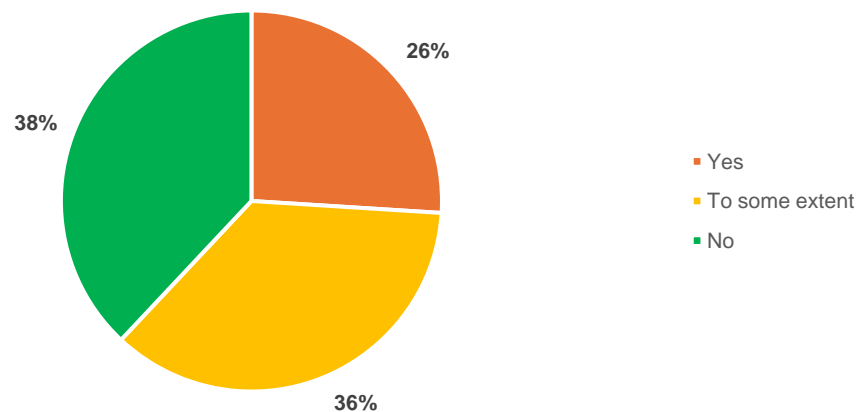
<sup>36</sup> Currency exchange value accurate as of April 2024 (source: oanda.com)

<sup>37</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 25 November 2021 [59]

equivalent of UGX 30,000 (approx. \$8) per week (Mayambala, 2024), this is an income that sits well below recent estimates of what ought to constitute a Ugandan living wage, which for those with at least one or two dependents within the household starts at just over \$40 per earner per week (NewForesight, 2022).<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, 22% of survey respondents stated that their earnings from the work were 'not enough to get by' while nearly half (47%) said it only provided 'enough to cover basic needs'. By contrast, around one-third (31%) felt the work provided 'enough to make a better life'.

On the latter issue, although riders generally value the immediacy of daily returns that boda work enables, many do not hold it in high regard. In line with the context-specific and subjective dimensions of what a 'good job' entails (Monteith and Giesbert, 2017), in the survey we asked respondents first to define on their own terms what they believed to constitute such a thing, before then asking about the extent to which they felt boda riding aligned with that. As Figure 7 below illustrates, just one-quarter (26%) of the sample agreed that riding met their definition of a 'good job', compared with 36% who answered 'to some extent but not completely' and 38% who said no.

Figure 7. Survey perceptions of boda work as a 'good job'



Source: survey data ( $n = 370$ )

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<sup>38</sup> This is a heavily caveated estimate that is based on analysis from peri-urban settings in Mbale, a city in the country's comparatively poor Eastern region. It is likely that, should they exist (which, as with most cities and regions within Uganda, they do not), estimates of a Kampala living wage would be considerably higher.

## **II WORKING CONDITIONS**

What is it about boda work that leads relatively few riders to think of it as a good job, despite it paying better than many other occupations within the urban informal economy? Drawing on data from riders about the challenges they face at work and analysis of the underlying reasons behind them, in this section I examine five core working conditions that have increasingly come to shape the everyday experience of boda riding in Kampala as the industry has expanded over time: i) high operating costs; ii) repressive policing; iii) oversupplied labour; iv) dangerous work; and v) limited collective power.

### ***i High operating costs***

Though boda work is praised by riders for its ability to generate quick returns, it also takes a great deal out of their pockets. For an occupation that is routinely described as having little to contribute towards the wider economy (Galukande et al., 2009; Nasasira, 2015; Wanume et al., 2019), the sheer volume of payments required just to enter and stay operational within the sector is remarkable. As noted above, while surveyed riders generated an average of UGX 340,000 per week through their work (approx. \$92), around 70% of that is then immediately absorbed by operating costs.

Ranging from one-off or infrequent expenses such as the price of membership within the industry's well-established 'stage system' (see Section III) and official operating licenses, to costs that must be factored in on a much more regular basis, including fuel, motorcycle maintenance and of course access to the motorcycle itself (also see Section III), these numerous costs have a dramatic effect on riders' livelihoods. They mean that in order to make money from their work, or at least to break even, riders must secure and complete a certain minimum number of jobs every day they engage in boda work (which for those in the survey was an average of 6.3 days per week). They also mean that when a rider fails to cover these costs, they may not make enough to eat that evening – a basic reality of unwaged piece-rate employment that interviewees alluded to time and again, and which underlines a crucial aspect of what it means to live and work precariously (Kalleberg, 2009; Munck et al., 2020).

### ***ii Repressive policing***

In an episode that recalls the story of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi a decade or so earlier (Gardner, 2011), on 2 July 2020 a Ugandan man called Hussein Walugembe set fire to himself in a locked room at Masaka Central Police Station, some 85 miles from Kampala.

In its coverage of this appalling event, the BBC (2020) reported that having lent his motorcycle to a friend, only for them to be caught breaking strict lockdown rules by transporting a passenger at a time when only cargo was permitted, Walugembe attempted to retrieve the impounded bike. After a \$40 bribe was allegedly demanded by officers in exchange for the motorcycle’s release, and following a series of frustrated visits to the station, the 29-year-old reportedly then ‘locked himself into a room at the station and set himself alight using petrol concealed in a water bottle’. He later died of his injuries.

The story of Hussein Walugembe may involve a rare and extreme outcome, but its core features – apprehension, dispossession, extraction – are well known and routinely experienced by Kampala’s boda riders. When asked to identify the three biggest challenges or problems they faced at work, a striking 78% of riders in the survey sample included ‘being stopped and charged by officers’ in their response. In fact, this proved to be the most commonly cited challenge by a significant margin, as Table 4 below illustrates (see also Spooner et al., 2020).

*Table 4. Top five problems at work among survey respondents*

<b>Problem at work</b>	<b>Share of survey sample</b>
Being stopped and charged by officers	78%
Road accidents	43%
Risk of theft or assault	36%
High price of fuel	33%
Behaviour of other road users (not bodas)	14%

Source: survey data (*n* = 370)

Encounters with the police and other street-level law enforcers, most notably KCCA officers, came up in almost all interviews, usually without prompting. Indeed, such was the frequency and ease with which these experiences were spoken about, it was almost as though getting caught and fined was simply considered part of the job; ‘not episodic’, following Agbibo, (2022: 123), ‘but a feature of the landscape itself’, much like having to pay for fuel every day or deal with the aggressive behaviours of other road users. Riders would talk about how law enforcers treat ‘bodas like their farm’ or ‘garden’, asking rhetorically as if imitating an officer in that position: ‘which banana shall I take now?’.<sup>39</sup> Others mentioned the ‘fear’ or ‘riding on tension’ that comes with knowing arrests are a constant, everyday possibility as they go about

<sup>39</sup> Interview with digital rider, 29 October 2021 [50]

their labours; something always just around the corner, at the next intersection or crossroads.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to shaping riders' everyday experiences of boda work, repressive policing can also be the reason why some riders end up leaving the industry. Daniel represented one such case.<sup>41</sup> In the four or so years he worked as a rider, quitting in 2019 just before the onset of the pandemic, Daniel claimed his motorcycle was impounded four times by the police and could not even recall the number of occasions he had been stopped and charged on the street. Whenever such episodes would happen, it would cost him UGX 200,000 (approx. \$53) to reclaim the bike from a station and about UGX 50,000 (approx. \$13) if he was dealing with an officer on the street, meaning his run-ins with the forces set him back at least UGX 800,000 during his time in the sector; just shy of \$215. Although these aggregate numbers are at the upper end of what I heard during my time in Kampala, the individual charges by themselves are representative of what riders typically reported – as we will see in greater detail in Chapter 6 when we examine the more fine-grained dynamics of this particular 'state-boda' relation.

### ***iii***      ***Oversupply***

In his critique of the 'myth of the global safety net', Jan Breman (2009) exposes the flawed thinking that goes into policy framings of the informal economy as an endlessly absorptive sponge for the victims of economic crises. There is an 'unduly optimistic notion', he says, that 'the informal sector is able to accommodate any number of newcomers. Even if the city is already flooded [...] the prevalent notion is "no problem", more can enter [...] and find a ready supply of customers willing to buy their services' (*ibid.*: 15).

Within the context of Kampala's boda sector, the limits of its 'absorptive' powers have become increasingly evident as more and more job seekers have found survival in the industry under protracted conditions of jobless growth (see Chapter 4). In the absence of effective 'formal state' controls on the number of people entering and a series of 'informal state' interests (Khisra, 2013) working in favour of its constant replenishment (see Chapter 6), the capital has become ever more saturated with riders and motorcycles. Indeed, 'low barriers to entry' was cited by 50% of all those surveyed as a key reason for taking up boda work in the first place –

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<sup>40</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 10 November 2021 [54]; digital rider, 17 January 2022 [70]

<sup>41</sup> Interview with former rider, 4 November 2021 [51]

despite, that is, the high capital costs described previously, which almost certainly exclude those on the lowest incomes.<sup>42</sup>

Issues around labour oversupply were routinely commented on by riders during interviews. As one illustrative but by no means isolated example, Ronald told me that when he first joined the industry back in 2011/12, 'business was very good and permanent' because 'bodas were few'.<sup>43</sup> Gesturing around the neighbourhood he still worked a decade on, he recalled how he and a small group of fellow riders 'almost had a monopoly' on the area back then, making it relatively easy to set trip prices with customers without having other riders constantly 'undercutting you'. Now that was no longer the case, he said, estimating a five-fold increase in the number of riders working locally: 'Now, there is always someone who's hungry'.

In the absence of official rider registration records, it is almost impossible to know for sure how much Kampala's boda workforce has grown by over the past 10-20 years. But it is clear from both interviewees' accounts and press reports during this period that it has become one of the defining issues facing the industry today (Kigambo, 2017; Kiruga, 2019; Muchira, 2016; The Monitor, 2013). It has also become one of the most problematic, driving a further series of pernicious dynamics that intensify competition, splinter internal relations, depress prices and ultimately contribute to dangerous working conditions – all characteristic of the 'extraordinary struggles' that tend to accompany oversupplied labour in the urban informal economy (Theodore, 2022: 34; see also Basole, 2015; Rizzo, 2011; Sanyal, 1991).

#### ***iv Dangerous work, limited (formal) protection***

Travel by boda may be one of the quickest and most convenient ways to get around the Ugandan capital but it is also the most dangerous, with motorcycles reportedly involved in up to 80% of all road crash deaths registered in Kampala in 2023 (Nasasira, 2024). While Ugandan media often focuses on the impacts of this 'silent killer' (Nakiyimba, 2012) on passengers and pedestrians, the same dangers also apply, if not even more so, to riders themselves. As Table 4 above shows, road accidents constitute one of the biggest problems of boda work according to survey respondents, second only to getting stopped by officers, and most of the riders I talked with had crashed fairly seriously on more than one occasion.

There are a number of factors at play here. Kampala's notoriously congested roads cost the city's economy an estimated \$1.5 million each day and mean that vehicles of all shapes, sizes

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with former digital rider, 5 October 2021 [28]

<sup>43</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 5 October 2021 [27]



and powers are in near-constant close proximity to one another (Kumar, 2011; Manwaring and Wani, 2021). Bad road infrastructure exacerbates this problem, creating pinch points throughout the city and potholes the size of ‘craters’ (Mwenda, 2023), whilst the interventions of traffic police officers can also play their part (Hamza et al., 2023). But the driving behaviour of road users, including boda riders, matters too: running red lights, driving on the wrong side of the road and blitzing through intersections are all common sights involving these so-called ‘killer machines’ in the capital (Naturinda and Kamoga, 2023).

A popular way of accounting for behaviours like these is to highlight riders’ lack of training, licensing, discipline and even regard for human life (Buwembo, 2023; Clarke, 2021; Khisa, 2018; Naturinda and Kamoga, 2023). And yet, research from Uganda as well as the wider East Africa region has consistently shown that crashes involving boda riders are strongly associated with economic stress and the kinds of practices that emanate directly from this, such as speeding, working long hours and having to compete fiercely for passengers (Francis et al., 2023; Kitara and Ikoona, 2022; Kitara and Karlsson, 2020; Raga et al., 2023; Siya et al., 2019). As one senior figure at the Ministry for Works and Transport put it to me when talking about the high accident rate, ‘They are just trying to make money at the end of the day’.<sup>44</sup>

Like informal transport workers in other contexts, boda riders are compelled to speed by the raw economics of their work (Agbiboa, 2019; Behrens et al., 2021; O’Neill, 2021; Rizzo, 2011). As outlined above, each day riders must secure and complete enough jobs so they can make enough money to cover their basic expenses and, ideally, generate some profit at the end of it all. Given both the scale of operating costs involved in the work and the forces of oversupplied labour increasingly threatening to erode returns, this is no small deal – and can sometimes give way to the kinds of reckless, unsafe and potentially lethal riding behaviour that have come to tarnish the industry, as riders cut literal and metaphorical corners in quick pursuit of the next job. Strategies to increase the margins on individual jobs exacerbate this problem further, with overloaded bikes limiting riders’ speed, agility and balance in fast-moving traffic (Doherty, 2017: 199), while the use of dilapidated and increasingly unroadworthy motorcycles adds in an additional risk, enabling those on the lowest incomes to participate in the industry as riders but in the process increasing their vulnerability on the roads (Tumwesigye et al., 2016).

Beyond crashes, there is a ‘slower’ form of structural violence at play here too in the form of disproportionate exposure to environmental harm (Davies, 2022; Nixon, 2011). Securing a livelihood through boda work means years of enduring ‘high levels of air pollution throughout

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with senior official, Ministry of Works and Transport, 15 February 2022 [K33]

much of the working day' (Brown et al., 2022: 2), whilst the addition of every new rider into the labour pool exacerbates this problem further. Alongside conversations about broken legs and battered bodies, interviewees would occasionally touch upon what Davies (2022: 409) terms the 'gradual brutalities' of working long stretches in the industry, with the importance of getting out before growing old a common refrain. It also bears mentioning at this point that motorcycle theft, robbery and physical assault are common features of boda work too, with more than one-third of those surveyed identifying this as a major problem and a swathe of recent media coverage highlighting motorcycle theft and related gang activity as a growing national epidemic (Kamusiime, 2022; Omollo, 2024; Wokorach, 2022).

What compounds the problem of dangerous work is the absence of formal support offered to informal workers in the sector. Without full incorporation into the regulatory labour frameworks of the state (see Chapter 6), boda riders lack rights, benefits and protections. When something goes wrong – and as interviewees were abundantly clear to point out, something *always* does – most have no option but to seek out assistance from personal networks or simply fend for themselves. As one rider put it: 'This boda...we count this as a job but there is no easy back-up. If I have an accident, it is my problem'. The fact that many riders do not hold any form of official insurance, despite being legally required to take out at least a third-party policy, underlines this point even further (Namara, 2019).

#### **v      *Limited collective bargaining power***

On the surface, Kampala's colossal workforce of youthful and apparently unruly boda riders appears brimming with what some scholars refer to as 'disruptive potential': the ability to challenge existing conditions through, amongst other things, strike action, civil disobedience or disorder (Kelsall and vom Hau, 2020: 12). But scratch beneath it and a less convincing state of affairs soon begins to reveal itself.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there are different types of collective power that groups of workers can hold, lack, develop or lose (Schmalz et al., 2018; Silver, 2003; Wright, 2000). On the one hand, for example, it could be argued that because Kampala's boda riders theoretically possess the capacity to disrupt important sites and processes of economic activity, they hold a degree of *structural workplace* power. That is: as a result of their considerable logistical significance in terms of how the urban economy operates, riders occupy a strategic location within larger production processes (Silver, 2003), meaning their actions hold the potential to slow the circulation of both people and things right down. This affords them a particular kind of power to effect change through highly visible and far-reaching acts of disruptive resistance.

At the same time, however, they are relatively powerless in certain other respects, including in their capacity to mobilise both *structural marketplace* and *associational* power. On the first of these, the sector's labour surplus effectively suppresses riders' bargaining position (Rizzo and Atzeni, 2020). With intense competition for work, relatively easy access into the industry, and numbers increasing by the day, there is an aspect of 'disposability' to individual riders' place within the labour market (Doherty, 2017) that complicates their ability to act collectively, while the recurring economic demands of boda work lock riders into a near-constant search for survival income that further undermines prospects for making the most of their 'disruptive potential'.

On the second issue, despite a remarkable increase in the number of boda workers' associations in Kampala over the past 15 years (Mukwaya et al., 2022: 42), there are some fundamental weaknesses in the associational power of the workforce that 'interrupts' the translation of any sense of collective identity into concerted and sustained collective action (Li, 2019). The resulting lack of effective political voice to bring about changes in riders' working conditions is something we open up in Section III below, before tracing the state-centred origins of this particular constraint in Chapter 6.

### **III INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS OF ANALOGUE WORK**

Though often criticised by Ugandan politicians and the media as an unregulated source of urban chaos, Kampala's boda industry has long been structured in a way that generates a basic framework of order and stability. This framework is formed mostly of informal institutions whose origins lie beyond the state, but which play what Helmke and Levitsky (2004) would call a *substitutive* role in regulating the workforce, creating grounded and widely agreed-upon systems of social legibility, economic distribution and conflict resolution in a contentious political context that has often rendered formal government institutions ineffective.

In creating this framework, these informal institutions not only help to moderate some of the worst aspects of an oversupplied, intensely competitive and dangerous economic environment, but also provide crucial mechanisms for mobilising around the kinds of problematic working conditions outlined in Section II. At the same time, however, there are limits to just how far these capacities to moderate and mobilise stretch – as we will soon go on to see.

In this final section we look at three 'analogue' institutions of boda work in particular, each of which constitutes an important element of the 'pre-platform' landscape of the industry. These

are: i) the boda stage; ii) rental-based models of motorcycle access; and iii) informal workers' associations.

### *i The boda stage*

Present in moto-taxi sectors across the African continent (Diaz Olvera et al., 2016; Doherty et al., 2021; Ibrahim and Bize, 2018; Rollason, 2020), for boda riders in Uganda the stage has long represented both the primary means of accessing work and the most basic form of organisation within the industry. It refers to a fixed territorial base, typically situated in locations strategically chosen to maximise exposure to passengers and delivery jobs, from which a group of riders operates throughout the day, as though working from an office. In the words of one interviewee: 'Our office is our stage. We meet there every day'.<sup>45</sup>

The streets around markets, arcades, shopping malls and educational facilities are all popular sites for a stage, as are those near obvious clusters of commercial activity, transport intersections, and high-density residential neighbourhoods. In the very busiest parts of the capital, they can be concentrated so tightly that it can be hard, especially as an outsider, to easily separate one from another. By contrast, in quieter or more remote areas where there are fewer people to serve, stages are noticeably fewer and farther between. Their distribution is an almost perfect illustration of how variations in urban land use shape possibilities for and patterns of informal economic activity (Jelili and Adedibu, 2006).

Stages tend to take a fairly standardised form, with some variations here and there (see also Appendix 5). They are typically comprised of somewhere between 10 and 25 riders who gather at the stage most days, meaning 'members' of the same stage come to know each other well over time through repeated encounters and interactions. There are no rules about how often riders must visit their stage or how long they must spend there, but the general idea is that the stage functions as a site of familiarity – both to riders who see and work alongside the same faces over time, as well as to potential customers who live, work or travel nearby. According to data from survey respondents, the average number of riders *registered* at their stage was 23, while the average number of riders who were physically *present* on a typical day was 18.

To become a registered member of a stage, a boda rider must buy their way in and this does not come cheap. In order to moderate competition and optimise the internal allocation of jobs that come their way, most stages place a cap on the number of riders they are willing to take on; a practice that has long helped to regulate the entrance of new riders into the workforce,

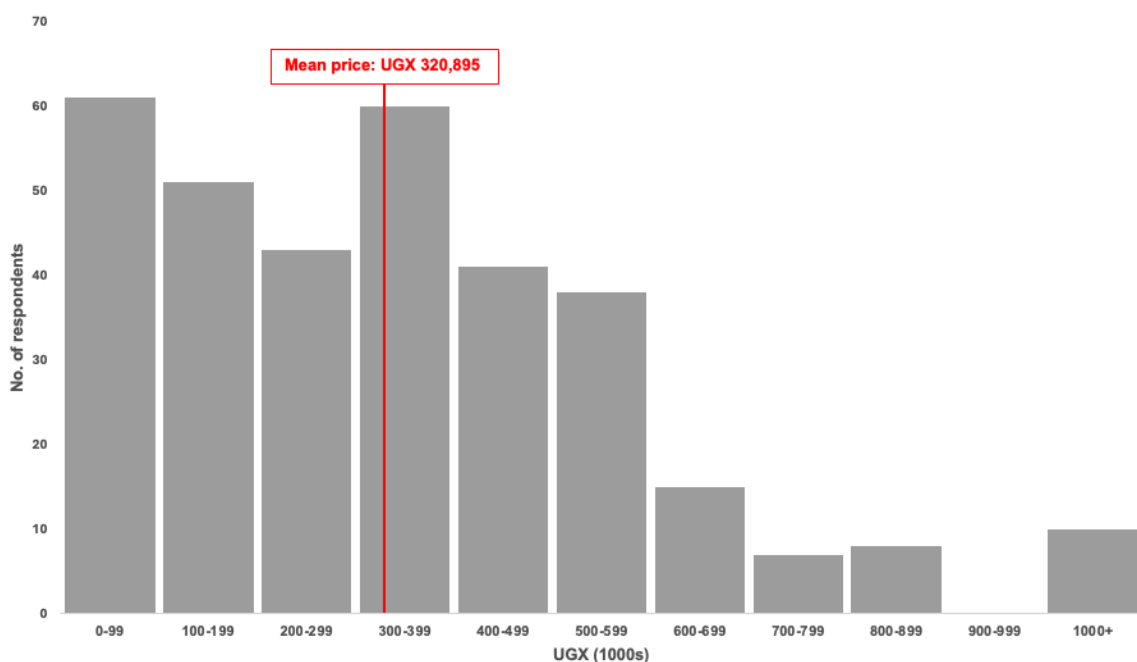
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<sup>45</sup> Interview with former digital rider, 5 October 2021 [28]

albeit with mixed effectiveness as the mounting pressures of oversupply increasingly stress the system. As a result, spaces normally open up only once an existing member wishes to leave, who then effectively sells their membership to a newcomer. The stage itself typically takes a commission on this 'sale' of around 10%.

As Figure 8 below illustrates, riders in our survey paid on average around UGX 320,000 for their current stage, which is roughly \$85. While this is enough to place membership temporarily beyond reach for many new entrants to the sector, meaning they must first work outside of the stage system until they can afford to buy their way in, it is still only a fraction of what some stage memberships sell for. Though prices are shaped in part by the negotiating tactics of buyers and sellers, they are fundamentally determined by the economic value of the site in question: some stages are simply far more lucrative than others in terms of the levels of business they are exposed to. Those in the busiest spots around the city routinely sell membership for in excess of UGX 1 million (approx. \$267), whilst just under one-quarter of those in the survey who held a stage membership ( $n = 346$ ) paid UGX 500,000 (approx. \$133) or more for it.

Figure 8. Boda stage prices among survey respondents



Source: survey data ( $n = 334$ )

The boda stage treads a curious line between the formal and the informal. Although there are no formally state-legislated rules that stipulate how a new stage must be set up, for example, in practice this process tends to be accompanied not just by negotiations with and payments

to a landowner, but also by a certain amount of engagement with the LC1 office – the most localised level of government authority. This is less an official requirement and more in line with local moral codes about what is expected of good, responsible boda riders hoping to embed themselves within the community (see also Doherty, 2022). Sometimes a simple notification to the LC1 chair is all that is required,<sup>46</sup> while in other cases a record containing essential details like stage name, location and an overview of members is put together, before being submitted to the LC1 office.<sup>47</sup> Beyond this, however, my interviews with LC1 chairs suggested that local government involvement in and knowledge of local bodas' affairs tended to be limited to the basics. As one chairman in Central Division told me, aside from being made aware of their presence, 'We have not had a hand in the establishment of stages...[There are] no regulations around stages [and] that has been the norm, nationwide'.<sup>48</sup> When I asked whether his office had ever intervened in their operations, either of its own accord or upon request, he explained that while 'they have lots of conflicts between themselves', in most cases these are handled directly by the relevant stage leadership without the need for escalation to or mediation by the LC.<sup>49</sup>

Despite there again being no official requirement in this regard, stage leadership represents another way in which the stage helps to bring order and organisation to the sector as a whole. Stages are not simply groupings of loosely arranged individual riders, but are instead hierarchically organised through the existence of a 'stage committee'. Tasked with protecting and promoting the collective interests of the stage, members of the committee take on specific positions that come with particular roles and responsibilities, ranging from a chair and vice-chair who provide overall leadership, to a defence officer who enforces discipline both within the stage as well as the immediate surrounding territory. All committee positions are allocated via a democratic vote among members, around which there is often a degree of public visibility and ceremony. Where some of the larger and more organised stages are concerned, representatives from KCCA, local government and / or the security forces may even be present on election day (Ndhogezi, 2022) – not purely of their own volition but because, by incorporating 'symbols' of the formal state into proceedings (Lund, 2006), riders actively take

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with LC1 Chairman, Kaggo, Nakawa Division, 4 February 2022 [K24]

<sup>47</sup> Interviews with: LC1 Chairman, Kisowera, Kawempe Division, 5 February 2022 [K25]; LC1 Chairman / LC3 Councillor, Nakivubo, Central Division, 8 February 2022 [K27]

<sup>48</sup> Interview with LC1 Chairman, Nkrumah, Central Division, 7 February 2022 [K26]

<sup>49</sup> Also interviews with: LC1 Chairman, Kaggo, Nakawa Division, 4 February 2022 [K24]; LC1 Chairman, Kisowera, Kawempe Division, 5 February 2022 [K25]; LC1 Chairman, Old Kamwokya, Central Division, 12 February 2022 [K31].

it upon themselves to ‘authenticate’ both the legitimacy of the stage’s electoral process and the authority of the subsequent leadership.<sup>50</sup>

Through informal yet highly organised methods, the analogue institution of the boda stage performs a number of vital functions.

First, *at a social level it helps to establish mutually beneficial relations between riders and their surrounding communities*. For passengers and customers, the fixed nature of a stage binds a tiny fraction of the city’s burgeoning boda workforce to a particular place, helping local workers and residents to develop trust in a set of familiar faces whilst allowing riders to take on repeat jobs, day after day (see also Doherty, 2022).<sup>51</sup> The source of this trust can to some extent be located in the powerful idea, routinely discussed by interviewees, that what the stage does is make riders *known* to others by generating a kind of ‘grounded’ or ‘local’ legibility (Brewer and Dourish, 2008). In becoming a member of a stage, riders gain both the identity of a rightful participant within the industry – that is, one who respects the order of things and plays by the rules (see also below) – and an ‘address’, as it was often referred to.<sup>52</sup> This is in turn understood to help instil discipline throughout the workforce, establishing as it does a degree of accountability and indeed traceability should any wrongdoings be committed. Just over 40% of riders surveyed for this study framed the importance of having a stage in these terms (trust and identity), making it the fourth most popular reason behind getting customers (70%), providing support in case of a problem (66%), and enabling rest (51%)

An important aspect of stages’ embeddedness in particular neighbourhoods is that their riders often become a local set of ‘eyes and ears’ on the street (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2018). During interviews with the LC1 chairs, some talked about how they held stages partly responsible for providing safety and security in the area, with one stating:

If I hear there is a lot of snatching in certain areas, I look where the nearest stage is. I go there and ask about it. I say, this is in your area. You must deal with this, or I will close you down.<sup>53</sup>

Another mentioned how stages ‘help in community security by keeping out other bodas’ who might prove disruptive, and that ‘they help local vendors’ too by keeping an eye on theft or

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with LC1 Chairman, Old Kamwokya, Central Division, 12 February 2022 [K31]

<sup>51</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 12 October 2021 [30]; analogue rider, 13 October 2021 [31]

<sup>52</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 12 October 2021 [30]; former digital rider, 13 October 2021 [33]; analogue rider, 15 October 2021 [42]

<sup>53</sup> Interview with LC1 Chairman, Kabalagala, Makindye Division, 14 February 2022 [K32]

other kinds of suspicious activity.<sup>54</sup> By contrast, in parts of the city where boda stages are being removed or prohibited to make way for new expressways and luxury real estate projects, the social void that follows can bring with it new forms of urban vulnerability: in the absence of ‘eyes’ or ‘community support’, one close observer of the industry explained to me, these ‘dead spaces [...] are not areas you want to hang around’.<sup>55</sup> Recognition of these contributions flips the script on conventional discourses of boda criminality and disorder; rather than making Kampala’s streets more dangerous places to be, as the general thrust of local news coverage might have one believe, in this reading it is the routine, staged presence of ‘known’ boda riders that helps produce liveable urban neighbourhoods (Streule et al., 2020).

Second, *from an economic perspective the boda stage has long held in place a widely accepted structure to the way in which jobs and incomes are distributed throughout the workforce.* According to stage norms, apart from in atypical circumstances boda riders should only pick up passengers and cargo from the stage at which they operate. After completing a job, whether dropping a passenger or delivering an item, riders are then expected to return to their stage and wait until something else arises. Should they fortuitously encounter a customer requiring boda services as they make their way back to the stage, then taking that job is generally considered acceptable. But spending extended periods of time lingering on the streets, opportunistically waiting for something to come up, has long been considered a flagrant violation of proper or ‘legitimate’ boda behaviour.

Although many new entrants to the sector are initially forced to engage in this practice as they earn their stage membership fee whilst taking some time to figure out how things work – often the hard way, as riders’ early experiences of boda work in the capital frequently attest to<sup>56</sup> – those who continue to operate outside the stage system once they have found their feet are fiercely stigmatised within the workforce. Known locally as *lubyanza*, these ‘stage-less’ riders are often accused of having something to hide by not affiliating with the ‘rightful’ majority through the stage system and, whether rightly or wrongly, are generally considered much more likely to engage in criminal activity, thereby ‘tarnishing the good name’ of boda riders as a collective whole as one rider put it to me, or ‘spoiling the sector’ in the words of another.<sup>57</sup>

The widespread demonisation of *lubyanza* riding transmits a powerful signal that this way of operating is unacceptable, to the extent that those participating in such activity can expect to find themselves punished accordingly. As fundamentally territorial organisations, stages

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with LC1 Chairman, Old Kamwokya, Central Division, 12 February 2022 [K31]

<sup>55</sup> Interview with academic, 27 October 2021 [K03]

<sup>56</sup> Participants in focus groups with current and former digital riders, 9 December 2021

<sup>57</sup> Interviews with: former digital rider, 5 October 2021 [28]; analogue rider, 12 October 2021 [30]



fiercely monitor and control their immediate sphere of operation. Potential customers entering that sphere are considered the rightful priority of the stage in question, and when unknown riders from elsewhere swoop in to offer lower prices then problems almost always follow. Riders not playing by the rules will be confronted, questioned and, should they be considered guilty, either submit to a penalty fine or have their motorcycle impounded at the stage for the remainder of the day as a form of retribution.<sup>58</sup> While this can happen to staged riders working in others' territory, *lubyanza* are generally far less likely to escape punishment as their 'illegitimate' working practices render such transgressions much less forgivable,<sup>59</sup> thus forming an important, social regulated deterrent to such activity that helps to cap the number of riders operating outside the stage system.

The third vital function performed by the boda stage, closely linked to the second, concerns *the moderating effects it brings to an intensely competitive, structurally violent labour market and the precarious forms of work it creates* (see Section II). Just as stage norms deter riders' participation in atomistic forms of *lubyanza* work that cannot help but splinter the labour force, so too do they render boda work tolerable in a more general sense by socially regulating its worst dangers and excesses. Part of what this involves is stabilising relations between riders through capping competition, managing disputes and enabling reciprocal systems of monetary support to emerge. For Doherty (2022: 245), Kampala's stages 'form the basis for solidarity and camaraderie among drivers and for the resolution of routine disagreements and tensions between drivers'. By 'mediat[ing] competition insofar as drivers within a stage generally refuse to undercut one another on prices', he suggests, 'stages mitigate some of the more competitive and atomizing aspects of the industry, ensuring that it does not devolve into an overly individualizing, hostile, or aggressive form of work' (*ibid.*: 245). This mediating effect is then further strengthened by the close relations that staged riders often develop with one another through a series of mutual involvements and socio-economic obligations (see also Calkins and Zoanni, 2023), as well as by the bonds of solidarity that are formed through the simple yet powerful act of 'waiting together' on a routine, extended basis (Ibrahim and Bize, 2018).

At a more tangible level, the stage is also a physical base that enables much-needed opportunities for rest and recuperation in a job that demands constant vigilance when out on the busy roads, acting as a kind of infrastructure of stillness in an industry notorious for its speed, mobility and riskiness. As noted above, ability to rest was considered the third most

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 4 November 2021 [52]

<sup>59</sup> Interviews with: digital rider, 13 October 2021 [35]; digital rider, 15 October 2021 [43]; digital rider, 10 November 2021 [53]

popular reason among survey respondents for having a stage, with just over half the sample responding this way. Or as one former *lubyanza* rider put it, '[that] lifestyle of riding without a stage is the worst one, because you get tired easily and you don't have a resting place and [...] you don't have an address'.<sup>60</sup>

As a result of these various functions or contributions, the boda stage has come to represent not only an important 'formation that produces stability and manages precarity for workers' (Ibrahim and Bize, 2018: 87), but also a core organisational unit within the industry that provides a building block for broader collective structures (Mukwaya et al., 2022). And yet, for all its institutional functionality, the stage is not something to be understood as an unqualified celebration of 'generative' informality from below (Myers, 2011; Williams and Round, 2008). Indeed, although sometimes depicted as one-dimensional institutions of support and solidarity (Calkins and Zoanni, 2023; Doherty, 2022), in reality stages are far more complicated and ambiguous than the existing academic literature suggests.

It is not always the case, for example, that stages produce consistently harmonious relations amongst their members. As interviewees pointed out to me on a number of occasions, bitter disagreements can and do arise within the same stage, especially when mutual obligations are not met by certain members or when stage leaders attempt to defraud the collective.<sup>61</sup> It is also possible for stages to become sites of accumulation for relatively wealthy riders, thus reinforcing patterns of pre-existing inequality within the workforce. Sometimes, for example, boda riders use the stage system to engage in speculative economic practices, knowing that the price of membership has been trending consistently upwards for the past two decades or so as the supply of boda labour has increased within the finite space of the city. One rider I interviewed talked to me in detail about the economics of his two stage memberships, explaining how the one he bought back in 2013 for UGX 100,000 (approx. \$27) would likely sell for four times that today, whilst the second he purchased in 2020 near the construction site of a major commercial development – first and foremost, he clarified, as an investment strategy – would probably make him UGX 300,000 (approx. \$80) in profit if he were to sell now.<sup>62</sup> 'This is business', he summed up by saying. Other riders may hold multiple stage memberships because it allows them to work different parts of the city, jumping between different operational bases in an effort to capture more of the urban economy's ebb and flow. There are again no set rules around this, but one's capacity to engage in such practices is

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<sup>60</sup> Participant in focus group with former digital riders, 9 December 2021

<sup>61</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 12 October 2021 [29]; analogue rider, 13 October 2021 [32]; analogue rider, 15 November 2021 [55]; analogue rider, 2 December 2021 [62]

<sup>62</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 10 October 2021 [54]

clearly constrained by access to capital, thus ruling it out for those who are merely surviving – i.e. the majority – rather than accumulating. Reflecting this, the possession of multiple stage memberships was limited to just under one-fifth of survey respondents.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, while the stage helps riders manage the precarity of their work, there is nonetheless a certain precarity to the institution itself. As Ibrahim and Bize (2018: 73) have pointed out in their research across the border in Nairobi, the kinds of bonds produced by waiting together, valuable though they may be, are often ‘highly vulnerable to disintegration’. There is no guarantee of permanence or stability. Likewise, the stage’s particular form of togetherness ‘does not give rise to the same political possibilities’ as those that might accompany broader or higher-level forms of collective organisation (*ibid.*: 76; see also below), thus raising questions of the institution’s ability to withstand threats to its existence – whether as a result of expulsive forms of urban planning (see Chapter 6) or, as Ibrahim and Bize go on to suggest, the arrival of digital ride-hailing in East Africa (*ibid.*: 87).

## **ii      *The kibalawa system***

For many years the way in which riders have accessed a motorcycle for boda work has been dominated by something called the *kibalawa* system. In this institutionalised yet formally unregulated model, individuals looking to participate in the sector pay the owner of a motorcycle a fixed daily rate in exchange for access to the vehicle, typically but not always in the absence of a written contract. That owner may often be someone already known to the rider, either directly or indirectly, and it is also quite common for experienced or relatively well-off riders to rent out bikes of their own to fellow stage members, particularly those who are new to the sector or city.<sup>64</sup>

In the standard version of the *kibalawa* model, the motorcycle owner – commonly referred to as a ‘boss’ or *mugagga* – is paid UGX 10,000 (approx. \$2.65) by the renter *each day* in exchange for access and use. This arrangement typically holds Monday through to Saturday, with Sunday normally then gifted to the rider by the *mugagga* as a free day. Though an apparent ‘perk’ of the system that seems to tilt in the renter’s favour, the catch here is that Sundays are by far the quietest day of the week for boda work, thus minimising the potential economic benefits of the deal. As far as operating costs are concerned, owners tend to cover major repairs and vehicle licensing while renters are responsible for routine maintenance such

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<sup>63</sup> Most of these ( $n = 56$ ) held two stages, with a further  $n = 7$  holding three and  $n = 1$  rider holding as many as five.

<sup>64</sup> Interviews with: digital rider, 4 November 2021 [9]; analogue rider, 10 November 2021 [54]

as oil changes, the substantial costs of fuelling, and of course any ‘fines’ incurred at the hands of law enforcers (one exception being if the motorcycle ends up getting impounded, in which case a renter may mysteriously vanish whilst leaving the owner no choice but to remedy the situation themselves).<sup>65</sup>

Crucially, although *kibaluwa* arrangements open up access to boda work for a large pool of riders, they do not constitute an employment relationship and renters have no formally protected rights under them. Interviewees would often comment that the only thing that really matters in this system is that their *mugagga* is paid regularly and on time. When riders fail to do this access is easily revoked, though consequences are ultimately at the owner’s discretion. While the personalised nature of this arrangement can create much-needed room for manoeuvre when something goes wrong and earnings dry up – as happened to vast numbers during the COVID-19 pandemic – it also, by leaving renters exposed to the potentially capricious behaviours of those upon whom their livelihoods ultimately depend, imbues the work with a level of precarity that the state provides no protection against (Ettliger, 2021). As one rider neatly explained, ‘If you’re working for someone, you are not secure’.<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, the structure of the *kibaluwa* model, which because of the oversupply of labour within the sector is largely non-negotiable (see Section II), places the renting rider at a permanent and distinct economic disadvantage relative to the *mugagga*. Even with the usual ‘free Sunday’ arrangement in place, owners are effectively guaranteed to receive UGX 60,000 (approx. \$16) in rental income from each rider each week. This is a fixed amount that renters are expected to deliver regardless of whether they have been actively earning or not. In the words of one interviewee, ‘The bosses that hire their motorcycles to the boda boda guys, they are not easy people because they assume that someone should not [...] even get sick. They need their money on a daily basis regardless of the problems you go through’.<sup>67</sup>

On the other hand, what renting riders make from one day to the next is unpredictable, determined by the vagaries of the market and various other factors beyond their control, such as whether they find themselves on the wrong side of a police officer that day (or indeed whether they do end up falling sick). Put simply, whereas the *mugagga* knows each morning exactly how much money they will receive from this arrangement, the rider has only uncertainty. It is thus an institution that despite enabling livelihoods for many, ultimately serves

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<sup>65</sup> Interviews with: former rider, 4 November 2021 [51]; digital rider, 17 January 2022 [71]

<sup>66</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 7 November 2020 [19]

<sup>67</sup> Interview with digital rider, 13 October 2021 [35]

to protect the position and economic interests of a rentier class whilst also forming part of what makes informal boda work so precarious (see also Rizzo, 2011).

Who, then, are these bosses? As already mentioned, boda riders themselves often get involved in renting out if they have the capital to do so. Just as it is possible to hold multiple memberships at different stages, so do riders sometimes come to own multiple motorcycles – as was the case for 10% ( $n = 37$ ) of the survey sample, with the vast majority of these owning two. In such circumstances riders may work one commercially themselves whilst renting the other out to a fellow rider, which Wamala-Larsson (2022: 131) describes as an ‘internal form of investment in which bodaboda veterans assume the role of investors and lease out bodabodas for new entrants’. The crucial point here is that these circuits of economic exchange, which enable participation in the labour market on the one hand whilst supporting practices of accumulation on the other, take place *amongst* riders and *within* the workforce. Calkins and Zoanni (2023: 387-88) take this a step further, suggesting that when one member of a boda stage provides another with motorcycle access, it demonstrates that a rider’s ‘growth and progress [...] hinge on collaborating with other people, be they patrons or colleagues, who provide ideas and forms of support’. We should not forget, however, that in exchange for these ‘ideas’ and ‘support’, they are also being paid.

Beyond riders, the relatively sure prospect of motorcycle-based rental income draws a broad cross-section of wider actors into the industry’s rentier class. According to one informant I interviewed who worked on labour rights, it has long been common for members of the city’s growing middle class to generate side-income this way: ‘I know many Ugandans in corporate owning two, three, five bodas, and it’s how they make money. These are ordinary people’. ‘Even for those with good jobs’, she went on, ‘owning bodas [or] having pigs is vital just to make ends meet’.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, such activity is considered to be especially important as the Ugandan cost of living crisis deepens (Wamala and Angurini, 2023), and in a context where, as one economic analyst put it to me, licit opportunities for private investment are often limited.<sup>69</sup>

In addition to these ‘ordinary people’, there is a longstanding and widespread belief that politicians have been major players in the rental game. Reflecting evidence from other African contexts that shows how informal transport systems are often instrumentalised by political actors as a key revenue source (Diaz Olvera et al., 2020; Ehebrecht et al., 2018; Kumar, 2011; Meagher, 2013b; Roitman, 2006), including within Uganda’s own matatu sector (Goodfellow, 2017; Spooner et al., 2020), it was put to me by a wide variety of interviewees and on multiple

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with executive director of labour rights platform, 10 February 2022 [K29]

<sup>69</sup> Interview with lawyer and commentator on economic affairs, 10 February 2022 [K30]

occasions that the same dynamic could also be found throughout Kampala's boda industry. One KCCA official, for example, talked of an understanding shared across their department that 'most bodas' in Kampala were owned by 'certain politicians' who then 'rent[ed] them out' to riders.<sup>70</sup> Others I talked with claimed to know such individuals personally,<sup>71</sup> while boda riders themselves were often quick to cite various high-profile political names involved economically in the sector, from the President's son, Muhoozi Kainerugaba, to leader of the opposition, Bobi Wine. Beyond the level of rumour, however, obtaining clear evidence of these links is another matter altogether.

### ***iii Informal workers' associations***

Above and beyond the level of the stage, there are boda workers' associations which, in contrast to stages, tend to be officially registered with government. Most boda associations require that members are both already members of an established stage in the city and that they apply for associational membership through that stage, meaning the involvement of stage leadership is also necessary. Applications from *lubyanza* riders tend not to be accepted.

Boda associations serve multiple functions. At one level, they are supposed to support and enhance the welfare of their members. They do this by running savings schemes, facilitating access to motorcycle loans and other forms of credit (often via formal links with traditional financial lenders, such as bricks-and-mortar banks), offering support when a member suffers a major setback such as a family bereavement or serious injury, and promoting social bonds and solidarity among riders, including by putting on sporting events. At another level, they seek to provide collective representation, voice and leadership. This involves attempts to unify riders at a scale beyond what stages can offer, as well as to defend and advocate for the collective interests of boda labour – for example, by pushing back against municipal proposals to rid motorcycles from certain parts of the city, campaigning for the relaxation of boda-related COVID-19 restrictions, or speaking out against harassment from the authorities.<sup>72</sup> Sometimes, when they identify strategic opportunities for influencing, they may attempt to lobby specific political actors who are thought to have potential as useful allies.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Interview with transport planning official, KCCA, 1 December 2021 [K14]

<sup>71</sup> Interviews with: journalist, 3 December 2021 [K15]; academic, 7 December 2021 [K16]

<sup>72</sup> Interviews with: general secretary of boda association, 4 November 2021 [K06]; boda association chairman, 14 December 2021 [K19]; boda association leader, 3 February 2022 [K23]

<sup>73</sup> Interview with general secretary of boda association, 4 November 2021 [K06]

Such associations have been operating in the Ugandan capital since the early to mid-2000s, when two groups, Bonnie Mobile Shields (BOMOSH) and Kampala Union of Boda Boda Cyclists Association (KUBOCA), were formed (Mukwaya et al., 2022). Both of these have since ceased to operate, alongside multiple others that have come and gone in the subsequent years. Today, Mukwaya et al. (2022) estimate there to be as many as 84 boda associations operating in Kampala alone. Of these, 45% are registered at the Divisional level, meaning they operate within the administrative-geographical confines of one of city's five official Divisions (Central, Kawempe, Makindye, Nakawa, Rubaga), about 30% are registered at the city-wide or metropolitan level and thus cut across all five Divisions, and the remainder are registered as national organisations. In terms of their size, the majority (around 70%) have fewer than 1,000 members while just a few boast in excess of 10,000.

Despite the rapid increase in these groups over the last two decades or so, the associational landscape in Kampala has for years been compromised by problems of inter-group rivalry, fragmentation and appropriation by the political elite (see Chapter 6 for more on the dynamics of 'associational capture') that deprive these bodies of the capacity to provide a genuine voice for boda workers (Meagher, 2014). According to the analysis by Mukwaya et al. (2022: 46), there is 'little or no coordination, cooperation or integration between these groups even though they purport to represent boda riders with apparently similar interests and claim to primarily focus on the welfare of their enrolled members'. One academic I interviewed described the capital's associations as a 'bunch of islands',<sup>74</sup> incapable of unifying due to varied political alliances and competing claims to legitimate representation, while most of the association leaders I encountered spoke disparagingly of other groups, openly branding their competitors as fraudulent and self-serving. Although there are occasional attempts to establish single umbrella bodies, often at the request of one state actor or another, these almost always fail to suture over the deepest rifts dividing the landscape.<sup>75</sup> And despite some innovative attempts in recent years to connect boda riders with the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU), Uganda's first-ever labour union that since 1938 has primarily served to represent formal workers (Spooner and Mwanika, 2018; Webster et al., 2021), vast numbers of the workforce remain unaffiliated to any form of collective labour institution beyond the level of the stage, thus severely limiting the strength of associational power held by the workforce.

Reflecting this, just 18% of those surveyed reported being a member of any boda association. When the remaining 82% were asked what prevented them from joining (see Figure 9), most

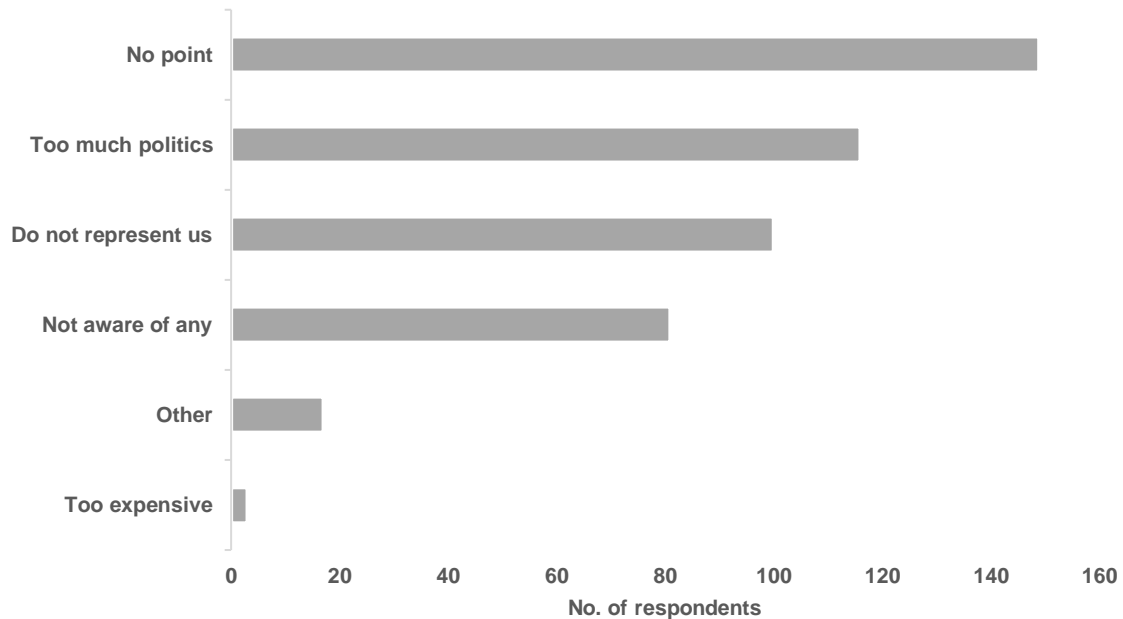
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<sup>74</sup> Interview with academic, 27 October 2021 [K03]

<sup>75</sup> Interviews with: boda association leader, 14 December 2021 and 12 January 2022 [K19]; former SafeBoda rider and employee, 18 January 2022 [K21]; boda association leader, 3 February 2022 [K23]

said there was ‘no point’ ( $n = 149 / 50\%$ ), followed by 39% ( $n = 116$ ) who said there was ‘too much politics’ involved and 33% ( $n = 100$ ) who felt that the organisations ‘do not represent’ workers properly – reasons that all recur time and again in the qualitative data, and which we soon explore the roots of in Chapter 6’s analysis of ‘state-boda’ relations.

Figure 9. Reasons for not joining a boda association among survey respondents



Source: survey data ( $n = 303$ )

## Conclusion

Despite being frequently tarnished as an unruly space of disorganised chaos – giving rise to the ‘unstructured and unregulated’ perspective outlined in Chapter 4 – we have seen in this chapter that Kampala’s boda sector has long been informally regulated by a series of core institutions. Of particular significance here is the boda stage: a physical base of operation that functions simultaneously as a working method, a form of legibility, an economic investment and a place of rest. By instilling particular norms around how jobs and incomes are distributed throughout the workforce, the stage system provides a widely agreed-upon structure to how riders’ labour is conducted that helps to stabilise social and economic order whilst imposing sanctions on those who operate outside of it: known locally as the heavily stigmatised *lubyanza* rider.



At the same time, however, as much as the boda stage helps to manage the precarities of informal work in a context of oversupplied labour, there are limits on what it is able to achieve. It does not, for example, contain the same kinds of political possibilities that accompany larger-scale trade unions or workers' associations which, although present in Kampala and theoretically capable of generating an effective politics of collective action 'from below' (Spooner and Mwanika, 2018), are nonetheless hamstrung by low levels of membership that have their roots in experiences of informal state capture 'from above' (see Chapter 6). Moreover, despite the moderating effects of the stage system there continues to be a range of difficult working conditions that riders routinely encounter as a matter of course, from high operating costs and repressive policing to dangerous work and limited protection – all of which, when taken together, constitute a profound 'decent work deficit' (Kantor et al., 2006) faced by the many thousands of riders working the city each day.

Why are these problematic working conditions the way they are, and what prevents them from being reformed? To understand these key questions, we must take our analysis forwards and upwards to the level of politics – and specifically, to the multiple sites of interaction between sector and state. It is in Chapter 6, the final chapter of Part I of this thesis, that we take these next steps.

## **Chapter 6**

### **The politics of ‘state-boda’ relations**

The longer I spent in Kampala talking to riders, the more it became apparent that the politics of this large and fascinating sector of the urban informal economy were far more ambiguous than I had initially been led to believe. Despite much of the existing literature, as well as a significant amount of national news coverage, adopting the vote bank perspective outlined in Chapter 4, emphasising the way in which Presidential favour had created an unruly and ungovernable workforce impervious to formal state regulation, the politics I encountered could not be compressed into a single ‘type’ or ‘articulation’ – exuding, as it were, an unruliness of its own (Tadros, 2014). By the end of my time in the city, it felt clear that making sense of the contemporary nature of Kampala’s boda politics required a different analytical lens; one that was not only capable of establishing clearer connections with the everyday nature of riders’ work (Shearer, 2020), but of also allowing enough space for the full landscape of ‘state-boda’ power relations and ‘handlings’ (Kamete, 2013) to come into focus.

Turning towards a more open ‘model of politics’ in an effort to clear existing analytical ‘blind spots’ (Han, 2018: 333), this chapter makes the argument that the relationship between Kampala’s boda workers and the Ugandan state might be better understood as comprising an overlapping series of political-economic exclusions and inclusions. In contrast to prevailing theories of Uganda’s ‘boda politics’, which put forward a fairly one-dimensional and transactional view of how riders are engaged with by the political elite, this alternative perspective brings new layers of ambiguity and complexity into the fold. Though inconsistent with the search for ‘neat theory’ and clean conceptual order (Han, 2018; Lindell, 2019), these

ambiguities nevertheless shape and maintain, in concrete ways, the precarious conditions of boda work outlined in Chapter 5, whilst also helping to explain how the workings of what Moses Khisa (2013) calls the Ugandan ‘informal state’ disrupt more formalised initiatives to regulate the sector.

The chapter proceeds in three sections. We begin in **Section I** by looking at *exclusions*, examining the various ways in which riders are disconnected from formal state politics and processes. We then turn in **Section II** to *inclusions*, demonstrating that despite being traditionally excluded in certain respects there are nonetheless multiple points of engagement between sector and state, particularly along informal lines that further compromise the capacity of the formal state to extend control over the workforce. We end in **Section III** by looking at how the interplay between these various layers of exclusion and inclusion works to produce an overarching dynamic of *adverse incorporation* within the sector; one that not only bleeds into the everyday nature of boda work but which also generates, contrary to prevailing notions of elite intervention being used to capture popular support, an increasingly widespread sense of political disaffection amongst Kampala’s boda riders – and an appetite for change.

## **I EXCLUSIONS**

Although Kampala’s boda riders are not *entirely* detached from the official ‘legal-bureaucratic’ workings of the Ugandan state (see Section II), multiple exclusions at this level nonetheless represent a core feature of their politics. There are three basic ways in which this happens, including: i) exclusion from a formal ‘boda tax’, representing the most well-known and notorious aspect of state-boda politics; ii) exclusion from the protective elements of formal labour regulation, something that is much less widely acknowledged or discussed; and iii) exclusion from formal processes of urban planning.

### ***i The ‘boda tax’***

Historically, the clearest marker of riders’ exclusion from wider state structures and processes has been their omission (or ‘protection’) from what is often referred to as a municipal ‘boda tax’. Although it is unnecessary to reiterate the origins of this core framing, which as discussed in Chapter 4 lie in the failure two decades ago of Kampala City Council to push through a new licensing requirement as a result of ‘Presidential intervention’ (Goodfellow, 2015; Goodfellow and Titeca, 2012; Titeca, 2014), it is worth underlining two points here.

First, while it has become routine for commentators and critics to cite this particular exemption as evidence that boda riders are not just unregulated but fiscally disobedient (Kato, 2009; Ngwomoya, 2018), the reality is that the workforce *is* in fact subject to numerous formal state regulations, including those that require payment. We get into these towards the beginning of Section II.

Second, through their work boda riders make a broad range of ‘operating payments’ that, in one way or another, end up providing the state with revenue – even though these may not be considered ‘taxes’ on their productive activity in a conventional sense (Keen, 2008). For example, the vast majority of motorcycles on Ugandan roads are imported into the country, generating a per unit tax revenue of somewhere between \$130 and \$210 via a 14-15% import tariff that ultimately gets passed on to individual riders. Fuel taxes are also significant. According to the survey data, respondents spend on average nearly UGX 17,000 a day on fuel (approx. \$4.50), 35% of which makes its way to government as a result of recent tax increases (Kamurungi, 2021).

Of course, this is to say nothing of the more ‘illicit’ payments that riders routinely make to other state actors, both in the form of unofficial ‘processing fees’ when applying for permits<sup>76</sup> and street-level ‘fines’ at the hands of the police – something we also discuss extensively in Section II.

## ***ii Labour rights***

Just as riders are supposedly ‘freed’ from having to pay a ‘boda tax’, so too are they systematically excluded from formal labour rights and protections. This constitutes the primary legal basis of precarious work within the sector, as riders have no access to any form of state support if and when something goes wrong (which it frequently does). The implications of this are reflected in the survey data: when asked who they could trust to help them out in case of a serious problem, 71% of surveyed riders said a fellow boda rider whilst 42% would rely either upon themselves or a family member. By contrast, just a handful mentioned any part of the state.

As will become even clearer throughout the following two sections, for most riders the Ugandan state is experienced as a punitive, disciplinary and extractive force. In the legislation that surrounds the industry, there is an overwhelming emphasis on measures that attempt to

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<sup>76</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 15 October 2021 [42]; digital rider, 30 November 2021 [61]

govern the conduct of riders and establish a series of operating requirements. Much less apparent are policies designed to support and protect workers.

Part of what this entails is limited involvement in decisions made ‘from above’ that directly and indirectly impact workers’ livelihoods (Evans et al., 2018; Doherty, 2017; 2022), thus undermining the kind of social / policy dialogue that, under certain circumstances, can lead to better working conditions (Kucera and Roncolato, 2008; Rosaldo, 2021). Another aspect is the absence of social protection. Beyond the occasional dispensation made selectively and with political motives in play (Muwanga et al., 2020), there has been next to no talk of extending material income-security support to the sector on a broader and longer-term legislated basis. And despite being one of a number of vulnerable groups identified by the government’s COVID-19 taskforce as eligible to receive lockdown payouts and support, in the end relatively few boda riders actually appeared to benefit from the initiative (Lamwaka et al., 2021).

The result of all this is a policy framework that follows an almost exclusively ‘restrictive’ approach in terms of how the workforce is handled by the formal state, with very little rebalancing in the direction of protective or ‘promotive’ interventions (Chen et al., 2001: 21-22). What this means in practice is that rather than supporting riders with measures that might improve their working conditions, such as subsidising the cost of motorcycle ownership or extending health insurance (see also Mukwaya et al., 2022), policies to date have primarily focused on either ‘containing’ boda work (Chen et al., 2001: 21-22), including through the escalation of official operating requirements, or on trying to ‘eliminate’ it from certain parts of the capital via exclusionary forms of urban planning.

### ***iii Urban planning***

Throughout repeated regimes of urban planning, boda riders have been consistently marginalised by those tasked with reforming the industry (Doherty, 2017; 2022; Evans et al., 2018; Goodfellow and Mukwaya, 2021; Mukwaya et al., 2022; Spooner et al., 2020). Within Kampala, it has taken many years for government ministries and working groups to even consider including representatives of the boda industry as ‘stakeholders’ in planning discussions, and today there is still a sense amongst some officials that not enough progress has been made.<sup>77</sup> While there are some signs of closer integration, most notably in the form

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<sup>77</sup> Interviews with: transport union official, 11 November 2021 [K07]; senior member of the National Planning Board and Paratransit Consultative Forum, 22 November 2021 [K11]; transport planning official, KCCA, 1 December 2021 [K14]; senior official, Ministry of Works and Transport, 15 February 2022 [K33]

of a cross-government ‘consultative forum’ working towards ‘paratransit modernisation’,<sup>78</sup> recent analysis of prospects for reform within the capital’s transport system suggests there is still some way to go (Goodfellow and Mukwaya, 2021).

We saw towards the end of Chapter 5 that despite holding a degree of ‘workplace’ power, the limited ‘marketplace’ and ‘associational’ power held by Kampala’s boda riders prevents them doing much with that. What we now see here is that riders’ systematic exclusion from formal planning processes deprives them of a *fourth* source of power that some scholars suggest is also important for analysing labour’s bargaining potential: institutional power, referring to the ability of a workforce to secure influence in formally institutionalised set-ups, including dialogue procedures with government actors (Schmalz et al., 2018). There are two central implications that arise from this particular ‘weakness’.

In the first instance, the experiences, attitudes and ideas of informal workers are largely left out of consideration. When asked whether their views about the industry had ever been sought, 85% of the survey sample replied that they had not, with many in the remaining 15% cohort having only been asked questions by journalists, ride-hailing companies...or researchers. In a similar vein, interviews with association leaders suggest that government engagements have for the most part been intermittent, thin and occasionally carried out with other vested interests in mind. As one leader in Kawempe Division told me:

I discard the intentions of these meetings. They were calling them ‘consultative’, but really they were being done in the name of ‘accountability’. They call you after taking decisions. You find your input was not taken.<sup>79</sup>

The second and more pressing implication is that, from time to time, proposals are announced which threaten the very existence of boda livelihoods. In their discussion of riders’ ‘invisibility in formal [planning and policy] documents’, Evans et al. (2018: 683) write that the ‘most painful symptom of infrastructural violence identified by drivers [in their research] was not hostile working conditions but the symbolism of attempts by the municipal authorities to erase them from the city’. Citing the lack of engagement already discussed, the authors reference proposals by the Ministry of Works and Transport (2013) to begin ‘phasing out’ bodas in the capital before highlighting that KCCA’s *2014/15 – 2017/18 Strategic Plan* mentions bodas just three times, in relation to accidents, discouraging use and establishing boda-free zones (KCCA, 2014).

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<sup>78</sup> Interview with senior member of the National Planning Board and Paratransit Consultative Forum, 22 November 2021 [K11]

<sup>79</sup> Interview with boda association leader, 3 February 2022 [K23]

It is said that history often repeats itself. Since the 2000s, possibilities of exclusion zones and decongestion exercises have surfaced time and again in central Kampala, where the highest levels of boda-related economic activity are concentrated. In the first part of that decade, plans assembled by the City Council and financed by the World Bank aimed to reduce the number of stages in the city centre from 300 to 83 (Goodfellow and Mukwaya, 2021: 13). Some years later the failed registration of 2013 outlined in Chapter 4 was seen by many as a step towards eventual expulsion, which to some extent became part of the exercise's undoing (Doherty, 2022). Undeterred, 2015 saw another attempt by KCCA to implement a 'boda-free city zoning plan', though this was again 'met with strong resistance, especially from boda drivers, resulting in the vandalism of Boda-Free signs and the plan's temporary abandonment' (Evans et al., 2018: 683). According to the authors, no prior engagement with riders was carried out on this occasion either. Three years later similar rules to demarcate 'free transport zones within the city' were drafted at the same time as a master plan for a bus rapid transit (BRT) and light rail project was being finalised, only to be halted soon after their announcement in 2018 (Taylor, 2020; Tumusiime, 2021).

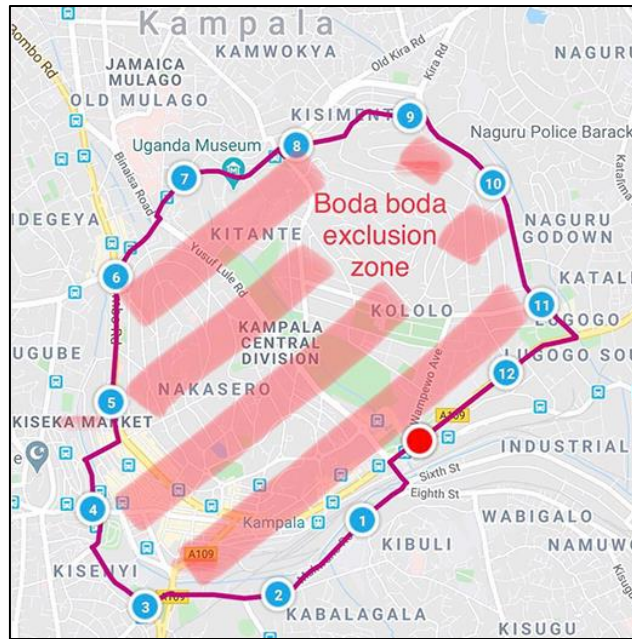
Most recently there has been renewed talk of a boda-free city centre after COVID-19 provided cover for a continuation of 'politics as usual' within Kampala's informal economy (Young, 2020; see also Shatkin et al., 2023). In plans that were seen by some as coming 'too early and too quick for the sector' (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2020: 1; Taylor, 2020), KCCA reiterated its intention to implement the boda free zone in Kampala's lucrative CBD (see Figure 10) – described to me by one association leader as a 'circle that is not big but can do lots of damage'<sup>80</sup> – alongside a programme of stage 'gazetting' that would see the number of 'officially recognised' stages established at 579 (see Figure 11), far below the *de facto* number that had come to exist by this point (for an illustration of this, see graphics in Appendix 5). Once again, however, association leaders claim not to have been meaningfully engaged in these recent proposals,<sup>81</sup> and once again progress against them stalled before ultimately collapsing.

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<sup>80</sup> Interview with boda association leader, 16 November 2021 [K09]

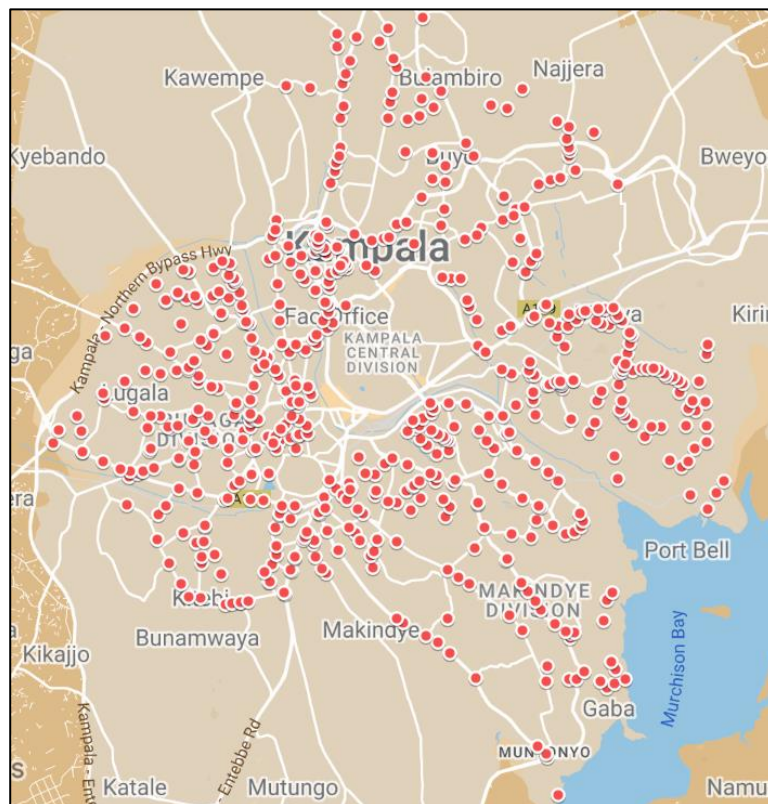
<sup>81</sup> Interviews with: boda association leader, 16 November 2021 [K09]; boda association leader, 12 January 2022 [K19]; boda association leader, 3 February 2022 [K23]

Figure 10. Official image of KCCA's proposed 'boda free zone', July 2020



Source: Original from KCCA, but retrieved from New Vision (2020a)

Figure 11. Map of the 579 stages officially approved by KCCA



Source: Map produced on GoogleMaps using stage coordinates released by KCCA



These various and recurring municipal efforts to erase boda riders from select parts of the capital, which it should be pointed out have continued to be talked about and attempted in the post-pandemic era (Kyama, 2023; Nafula and Sserugo, 2022; Odyek, 2024), should not be read in isolation from the other modes of exclusion described in this section. Rather, they are both connected to and enabled by them. While ‘failure’ to pay a municipal ‘boda tax’ functions as grounds for legitimising their clearance, linked in turn to a misleading assumption that riders do not contribute adequately enough in a financial sense to secure a place in the city, their exclusion from the promotive and protective elements of state labour regulation only further destabilises their position within the urban order (Wamala-Larsson, 2022). As a result, riders are left in a precarious situation of ‘permanent temporariness’ (Yiftachel, 2009) in which their continued right to earn a livelihood requires ‘ongoing defense’ against expulsive tendencies from above (Tucker, 2017), and which sets up their incorporation into more exploitative kinds of relations with the state.

## **II INCLUSIONS**

The long-running exclusion of Kampala’s boda riders from *particular* formal state processes and protections is key to understanding how their livelihoods are structured, but it represents only one dimension of ‘state-boda’ relations. For the other, we must turn to questions of inclusion and a consideration of what these too mean for riders’ work and livelihoods. Five channels of inclusion emerge as particularly important, most (but not all) of which are routed along informal lines: i) road traffic law and operating permits; ii) informal street-level extraction; iii) political campaigning; iv) associational capture; and v) intelligence and information-gathering.

### ***i The rules of the road***

Although it is commonly assumed that boda riders operate within a regulatory vacuum, in reality these informal workers are subject to a wide range of official rules and legislated limits. The 1998 Traffic and Road Safety Act provides the starting point, establishing a legal basis for core requirements around permit holding and safe methods of operation, such as limits on passenger numbers. A series of further parliamentary Amendments to this Act in the years since has resulted in an increasingly complex system of formal regulatory hurdles that riders frequently fall short of. According to document reviews by Martin et al. (2023), for riders in Kampala these include requirements around: helmets; vests with identification numbers;

maximum passenger numbers and loads; minimum passenger age; driving license (referred to as a 'Class A'); commercial operating permit (referred to as a PSV); third party / commercial insurance; parking at designated spaces; and restricted areas of operation.

On top of these written rules, riders are also expected to comply with an expanding range of directives and instructions issued at the highest levels of government, including by the President himself. One investigative journalist I interviewed explained that while these did not carry the same legal basis or weight as legislation that had passed through parliament, they nonetheless formed another 'official' channel through which boda riders could be stopped and charged for failing to comply;<sup>82</sup> a dynamic that some riders interpreted as simply providing officers with additional pretexts to 'harass boda boda riders [and] solicit money from those they arrest'.<sup>83</sup>

In 2018, for example, immediately following the murder of an MP by hooded assailants riding motorcycles, Museveni announced his intention 'to burn the covering of your heads even when driving or on a bike' by placing a ban on hooded tops whilst also insisting that 'helmets must have clear numbers' from now on (in Katungulu, 2018). By the time I visited Kampala in 2021, official attention had shifted from dress codes and helmet IDs to the angle and visibility of riders' registration plates, with police impounding 425 motorcycles deemed non-compliant across a period of just two days in November (The Independent, 2021b). Several riders brought this issue up in interviews, referencing it as the latest in a long list of reasons for why they might be stopped and charged – 'even', as one rider who had recently been arrested for this very reason told me, 'if you have everything they need'.<sup>84</sup>

## ***ii 'The permit is in the wallet': street-level extraction and the informal state***

These rider's words bring us to a second key encounter between the boda workforce and the Ugandan state – financial extraction by street-level authorities. Recall from Chapter 5 that the single biggest challenge reported by riders was harassment from the police, with nearly four-fifths (78%) of all those surveyed identifying this as a major problem. Part of why this is regarded as such is the fact that, upon being stopped by an officer, riders are almost always fined. To some extent this reflects the extensive and escalating series of requirements, sometimes officially legislated but not necessarily so, that riders are expected to comply with. Because the pathway to full compliance can prove confusing, time-consuming and ultimately

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with investigative journalist, 3 December 2021 [K15]

<sup>83</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 12 October 2021 [30]

<sup>84</sup> Interview with digital rider, 13 December 2021 [68]

expensive,<sup>85</sup> most riders fall short and in doing so render themselves vulnerable to financial penalties at the hands of law enforcers stationed at roadsides and intersections. According to one close observer and analyst of Kampala's boda sector, in this way the industry's complicated matrix of official rules and requirements forms a highly effective 'avenue for extortion', generating a vast fleet of officially unroadworthy motorcycles and fine-able informal workers that officers may have little economic interest in seeing reformed (see also Ference, 2021 for a similar dynamic in Nairobi's matatu sector).<sup>86</sup>

Even where riders *do* meet the requirements, or at least do better than most in meeting them, there is still a widespread sense that arrests are inevitable. 'They will always find something', one rider known to his friends as JB told me, '[and] they persist until they have done so'.<sup>87</sup> Providing a run-through of how it works, JB explained that an officer may start by asking for the permit; if you have that, they will move on to ask about helmets, then the bike's number plate, maybe pointing out that it's dirty. 'They do like that. Going from one thing to another until they find something to charge you for'. While fortunate personal connections with officers can sometimes help riders avoid such encounters, for most this is a basic and recurring reality of the work – albeit one that tends to prove most costly towards the beginning of a rider's time in Kampala, when they have still yet to learn where the 'hot parts of town' and 'danger points' are.<sup>88</sup> It is for this reason that so many riders, upwards of 90% according to one recent study (Kwagala et al., 2022), simply do not bother going through the expense and hassle of acquiring the official operating licenses, knowing that doing so will offer them little immunity the next time they get pulled over and that they will ultimately have to pay up anyway. Or as one rider dryly put it when explaining why he lacked the correct licensing, 'the permit is in the wallet'.<sup>89</sup>

Reflecting similar dynamics involving informal transport workers and state law enforcers across the wider region and continent (Agbibo, 2022; Diaz Olvera et al., 2020; Ference, 2021; Omulo, 2021; Roitman, 2006; Rollason, 2020; Sanchez de la Sierra et al., 2024), what emerges clearly here is a picture of a workforce routinely drawn into channels of revenue generation at and through the 'bottom' of the state. But what about the scale of the practice? Few studies exist that share relevant data on this issue, with just one or two exceptions. Spooner et al. (2020), for example, draw on material from 12 in-depth interviews in Kampala to paint a picture of riders' economic livelihoods. Their data suggest that of those who reported

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<sup>85</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 6 November 2020 [17]; analogue rider, 15 October 2021 [42]

<sup>86</sup> Interview with academic, 28 October 2021 [K04]. A similar point was sometimes also made by association leaders [K09] and riders alike [59].

<sup>87</sup> Interview with digital rider, 30 November 2021 [61]

<sup>88</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 14 October 2021 [39]; digital rider, 30 November 2021 [61]

<sup>89</sup> Interview with digital rider, 13 December 2021 [68]

being subject to police fines / bribes (nine out of the 12), the annual amount paid on average came to a remarkable UGX 1.32 million (USD 360), averaging 14% of workers' total annual expenditure.

To provide an original estimate derived from a larger sample, our boda survey asked a series of questions about riders' experiences with law enforcement, eliciting information about both the nature and quantity of payments during their last arrest and using this as a concrete starting point for assessing all such 'expenditure' borne during the 12 months preceding data collection.<sup>90</sup> Appendix 6 provides more detailed background to this approach alongside some additional data about the nature of riders' most recent arrests – including when it took place, reason for being stopped, location of the arrest and identity of the arresting officer – but as far as the amounts themselves are concerned, we find that 91% reported paying a fine the last time they were stopped (which, incidentally, for 44% of the sample was within the month leading up to the survey). While the specific amount varied considerably, ranging from as low as UGX 5,000 (approx. \$1.35) to quite regularly in excess of UGX 100,000 (approx. \$27), on average fined riders paid UGX 49,769 (approx. \$13). Taking into account the average number of times riders were stopped in the past year – that was 4.4 – this works out at an annual expenditure of just under UGX 200,000 (approx. \$54) on police fines per rider, equivalent to about 10 days' worth of net earnings. Though again there are some considerable variations between survey respondents, this average amount is noticeably far lower than the UGX 1.32 million estimated by Spooner et al. (2020).

While riders are often arrested for failing to meet one of the many official operating requirements, they are usually resolved informally. Upon being stopped, riders are typically given one of two choices (or some combination thereof). Either go down the formal route, normally involving on-the-spot confiscation of the motorcycle and a series of costly trips to government offices or courts,<sup>91</sup> or settle through what my interlocutor Geoffrey referred to as the 'express payment system'<sup>92</sup> – an alternative informal process of face-to-face bargaining that tends to be easier, cheaper and minimises the amount of time spent not working. Whenever possible to do so most riders choose the latter, effectively 'compensating' officers for not fully enforcing the law (Dewey, 2018: 578; see also Roitman, 2006). As the words of one focus group participant illustrate:

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<sup>90</sup> As the survey was implemented towards the very beginning of 2022, enumerators used 'last year' (i.e. 2021) to provide respondents with a concrete frame of reference.

<sup>91</sup> It was often commented to me that impounded bikes whose owners failed to retrieve them on time would often be sold off at police auctions, sometimes after expensive parts had first been removed.

<sup>92</sup> This phrase was used by Geoffrey in one of our interviews with an association leader.

It's rare for a boda boda rider to be arrested and pay an official charge. The arresting officer will ask you for any amount and you negotiate accordingly until you agree a certain price [...] If you deal with the arresting officer before the motorcycle reaches the [police] station, the better. The money goes to individual officers' pockets, not government revenues. Riders prefer to bribe officers than paying official fees, because the latter fee is high compared to what is paid to the arresting officer's demand and also to avoid the inconveniences you go through in paying official payments.<sup>93</sup>

In the survey, respondents were asked how much their most recent arrest cost them both 'officially' and 'unofficially'. What we find is that although the average size of the *official* fine paid by riders outweighs the *unofficial* amount by almost double (UGX 68,382 compared to UGX 36,825), because arrests are more routinely settled via informal methods there is far more that ends up being individually pocketed than goes towards the state coffers.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, the majority of those surveyed avoided making any official payment whatsoever during their last arrest, relying completely on the 'express payment system' instead to resolve the situation and get them on their way again.

As a result, of the total amount paid by all surveyed riders during their last arrest – roughly UGX 15mn – just over two-thirds (67%) of this was paid in the form of unofficial fines.<sup>95</sup> Scaling this up over the course of the entire year, the data suggest that *from respondents in our survey alone* officers generated more than UGX 45mn in informal revenue in 2021 (approx. \$ 12,000), while just over UGX 22mn can be classified as official public revenue (approx. \$5,880). The fact that the survey captured just 370 individuals from a city-wide workforce that runs into the hundreds-of-thousands provides an indication of just how pervasive, and how lucrative, this channel of informalised 'inclusion' appears to be from the street-level perspective of the state.

### ***iii Political campaigning***

Over the past 20 years or so, the sight and sound of motorcycles has become a recurring feature of Ugandan elections, from localised contests for the NRM ticket to full-blown Presidential campaigns at the national level, and today represents one of the most visible

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<sup>93</sup> Participant in focus group with current digital riders, 9 December 2021

<sup>94</sup> This is not to suggest that bribes necessarily stay in the pockets of extracting officers. As one expert on the Ugandan police forces explained to me, organizationally officers are normally expected to pay money 'upwards' in order to receive and retain access to lucrative (or 'wet') urban areas of deployment [K16].

<sup>95</sup> There are some interesting parallels here with research by Sanchez de la Sierra et al. (2024) into the nature of fines administered by Kinshasa's traffic police agency.

channels through which boda riders are connected to wider political processes in and around the state (Möller and Doevenspeck, 2023).

The inclusion of riders in political campaigns serves multiple functions. At the most basic level it boosts numbers at gatherings, thereby helping to project an image of popularity around the candidate or party in question whilst bringing a vibrant sense of atmosphere to proceedings.<sup>96</sup> At another, bodas play an important role in mobilising and coordinating others (Kagoro, 2023), spreading word about rallies and making sure people show up. In exchange they can expect remuneration in one form or another which, although typically fairly marginal, for the select few carrying out major coordination work can sometimes run into the millions of shillings, alongside grand promises of further fortunes down the line (*ibid.*: 25-30).

Arguably more important, however, are the performative and symbolic dimensions of boda riders' inclusion in campaign practices (Wilkins and Vokes, 2023), particularly in more politically contested urban areas. In a country where vast numbers of city dwellers make their living through informal street work (Ministry of Lands, Housing & Urban Development, 2022), bodas are an 'emblem' of how popular livelihoods are pursued within the unprotected urban 'hustler economy' (Taylor, 2023), especially when we recall that riding forms the largest source of male work outside agriculture. There are thus powerful optics within the urban context to getting boda riders 'onside'; something well understood by Museveni when, in 2001, he chose to arrive at a packed and widely reported-on Presidential nomination ceremony in Central Kampala on the back of a motorbike.

As a result, politicians and their campaign teams continue to set aside substantial budget lines to pay for riders' fuel on the day or pieces of equipment in a move that can also be read as a 'ritual' demonstration of financial largesse and power (Wilkins and Vokes, 2023).<sup>97</sup> And yet, though certainly relevant to riders' livelihoods in both a transactional, present-day sense (a tank of gas saves on daily expenditure) as well as a more uncertain, future-facing one (working one's way into a successful candidate's patronage networks opens up *possible* access to further rewards and opportunities down the line [Tapscott, 2016]), these practices produce a 'thin' kind of politics that can ultimately prove quite alienating for boda riders (Kagoro, 2023).<sup>98</sup> Those interviewed were almost universally critical of the way most politicians tended to temporarily engage the sector only during election periods, offering small gifts to a relative few that made little material difference and making promises that were never, ever met. Just 14%

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with academic, 7 December 2021 [K16]

<sup>97</sup> Interview with journalist, 3 December 2021 [K15]

<sup>98</sup> See Möller (2024) for parallels here with the transactional and distrustful politics of moto-taxi mobilisation in eastern DRC.

of surveyed riders, for example, actually reported receiving anything in the run-up to the 2021 Presidential election – with the reward amounting in most cases to less than what riders typically pay in police fines each year – whilst the widespread sense of disaffection portrayed below in Section III is testament to the kinds of frustrations that a long history of empty political promises can generate.

#### ***iv Associational capture***

Beyond their inclusion in election campaigns, over the years boda riders have also become connected to elite state actors through the fragmented landscape of associational politics. It was noted in Chapter 5 that today there are as many as 84 separate boda riders' associations in Kampala alone (Mukwaya et al., 2022), but this political dynamic – and importantly, the trade-offs that have accompanied it – are most clearly observed in the case of a single organisation: Boda Boda 2010. As one senior union figure put it to me, 'You can't talk about boda politics and not talk about 2010'.<sup>99</sup>

Formed towards the end of the 2000s, Boda Boda 2010 seemed in its earliest days at least to resemble a workers' association like many others (Muwanga et al., 2020: 29), representing the collective interests of its members, facilitating access to loans and other forms of financial support, and more generally helping to provide a higher level of organisation across the sector than individual stages alone are capable of generating.<sup>100</sup> And yet within the space of just a few years, it had transformed into a violent and formidable client organisation of the 'second most powerful person in the country' at the time (Tapscott, 2021: 84): Inspector General of Police (IGP) and noted 'regime enforcer', Kale Kayihura (Mufumba, 2023).

Part educated at the LSE and boasting an accomplished career in the Ugandan army, under Kayihura's reign the police became for all intents and purposes a political instrument of the NRM (Matsiko, 2018; Mwenda, 2018; Reuss, 2018; Tapscott, 2021). Behind an agenda of crime prevention, Kayihura used the police to mobilise support for government and crush organisation and resistance amongst the opposition; a job he carried out so well that in his 13 years spent at the helm, the official police budget increased from UGX 70 billion to over UGX 400 billion, 'turning it from a sidelined and weak organization into the most visible institution in Uganda's power politics' (Matsiko, 2018).

Bodas were crucial to Kayihura's operations during this period. At one level, this was about the monitoring and surveillance of communities as part of a wider securitisation programme,

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<sup>99</sup> Interview with transport union official, 11 November 2021 [K07]

<sup>100</sup> Interviews with: digital rider, 6 November 2020 [16]; analogue rider, 10 November 2021 [54]

incorporating riders into organised community policing set-ups under the government's official Crime Preventer scheme (see below on 'surveillance work').<sup>101</sup> But at another, through his close relationship with Boda Boda 2010, and particularly its talismanic frontman Abdallah Kitatta, the IGP was able to develop an effective if ruthless way of containing dissent in the capital through more informal means (Matsiko, 2018; Mukwaya et al., 2022; Muwanga et al., 2020). As a unit that proved quick to mobilise and deploy, 2010 was increasingly called upon to sometimes violently assist an 'overwhelmed' police force during protests in Kampala (Matsiko, 2018), soon becoming 'notorious for beating up opposition supporters in order to dispel protests' (Mutyaba, 2022: 174). It has also been alleged that once 2010 had become dominant enough to assert control across Kampala's boda industry, any rider showing support for opposition leaders would be threatened with the loss of their stage membership (The Monitor, 2018).

While Boda Boda 2010 found itself closely incorporated into the 'policing of urban spaces' during an increasingly restive period (Mutyaba, 2018), the relationship in fact proved mutually beneficial or 'symbiotic'.<sup>102</sup> In exchange for carrying out the 'dirty work' of terrorising opposition figures and disrupting counter-movements,<sup>103</sup> 2010 was effectively permitted to act with impunity across the city and within the boda industry itself (Matsiko, 2018; Mukwaya et al., 2022).<sup>104</sup> With backing from some of the ruling elite's very highest echelons and reported funding from State House (Nangonzi and Lubwama, 2013), the association violently enforced a thuggish form of order throughout the workforce that left ordinary riders with little choice but to sign up – for a price – as members. The resulting system of 'involuntary membership' instilled a deep culture of fear among riders, as those found to be operating in Kampala without a 2010-issued ID card could stand to 'lose their job if apprehended' through motorcycle confiscation, face a fine of somewhere between UGX 50–80,000 (approx. \$13 – 20), or even have their 'limbs broken'.<sup>105</sup>

Though these violent and extractive measures produced a level of discipline over the workforce that has not been witnessed in several years, and despite frequently (if somewhat surprisingly) positive depictions of the organisation within the academic literature (Doherty, 2017; Ntramah et al., 2023; Raynor, 2015), at the same time it was clear to many that Boda Boda 2010 acted predatorially towards the very workers it had been claiming to represent (see

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<sup>101</sup> Interview with former high-ranking security official, 22 February 2022 [K35]

<sup>102</sup> Interview with journalist, 8 December 2021 [K17]

<sup>103</sup> Interview with journalist, 3 December 2021 [K15]

<sup>104</sup> Interview with transport union official, 11 November 2021 [K07]

<sup>105</sup> Interviews with: transport union official, 11 November 2021 [K07]; journalist, 8 December 2021 [K17]; analogue rider, 25 November 2021 [59]



Goodfellow, 2017 for analysis of similar dynamics in the capital's matatu sector). Riders I interviewed who worked under 2010's reign often described this period as a fearful and punitive time to be a rider in Kampala,<sup>106</sup> with one relative of a former 2010 leader admitting that despite the organisation's claims to be representing workers, 'when you look sincerely, they [...] were just there to milk riders'.<sup>107</sup> Another interviewee summed it up saying, 'At first they were good people, but afterwards it became political. [And then it went] from political to criminal'.<sup>108</sup>

While Boda Boda 2010 might have proved exceptional in reaching its 'quasi-military' status and sheer level of raw power (Muwanga et al., 2020: 30), its story does have implications for the industry's broader landscape of associational politics. On the one hand, it is symbolic of a wider reality in which associations are frequently appropriated as vehicles for narrowly focused political and economic gains rather than broad-based welfare outcomes for boda riders,<sup>109</sup> leading to a dynamic in which associations are not only ineffective at challenging informal workers' precarity but instead become actively complicit in producing and maintaining it (Rizzo, 2011). This is both about the capture of associations 'from above' by elite state actors seeking to instrumentalise particular sections of the workforce, thus also leading to internal fragmentation (see below), as well as their capture 'from below' (Meagher, 2014) by ersatz boda leaders hoping to secure, in the absence of formal institutional recognition, protective connections with elites and better access to channels of economic distribution. Reflecting this, it is understood that many groups in the capital lie dormant during relatively quiet political periods before being 'reactivated' around major political events (Mukwaya et al., 2022: 35; Fichtmüller, 2017), while a spike in the registration of new associations can sometimes be seen whenever government announces its latest wealth fund or livelihood initiative<sup>110</sup> – a strategy used by the NRM since the 2010s to secure political support from key urban constituencies by selectively handing out cash (Muwanga et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the organisational structure of Boda Boda 2010 and the conflictual nature of its relationships with other associations speak to a feature of the industry that persists to this day. According to Mukwaya et al.'s (2022: 46) in-depth study of the sector, 'inter-association arrangements' are typically 'dominated by competition between [...] associations

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<sup>106</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 3 November 2020 [07]; digital rider, 15 October 2021 [44]

<sup>107</sup> Interview with relative of former Boda Boda 2010 leader, 14 January 2022 [K20]

<sup>108</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 5 October 2021 [27]

<sup>109</sup> Interviews with: academic, 24 February 2022 [K03]; general secretary of boda association, 4 November 2021 [K06]; transport union official, 11 November 2021 [K07]

<sup>110</sup> Interview with academic, 23 September 2021 [K02]. It bears noting here that to be eligible for such funds, intended beneficiaries must usually apply as a registered group rather than as individuals.

following lines of political affiliation to “godfathers”/patrons, rather than on cooperation and collaboration towards collective bargaining and negotiation’. What this means in practice is that the competitive and clientelist nature of associational politics creates divisions among Kampala’s riders that erode possibilities for unified leadership and collective power, and which some observers of the industry (alongside some riders) believe is central to the ruling coalition’s calculative political handling of this vast sector. As one analyst put it to me, because ‘those in power are keen to prevent the creation of one electorate’, these divisions help to ‘keep [the city’s boda associations] from becoming too big. Big enough to really shape things’ (see again Goodfellow, 2017).<sup>111</sup>

Following the dramatic downfall of Kale Kayihura in 2018, Boda Boda 2010’s coercive reign over the industry in Kampala quickly came to an end, but not without creating some lasting legacies. For many riders, the capture of 2010 by state security forces and the brutality with which the organisation came to govern the sector seem to have tarnished their relationship with associations more generally. As pointed out towards the end of Chapter 5, membership levels today are low, with 82% of surveyed riders remaining unaffiliated, and the landscape as a whole is now widely viewed with a profound sense of distrust.

At the same time, however, my research suggests that the collapse of 2010 has left a leadership vacuum that is still yet to be adequately filled. Despite the high number of associations currently registered in Kampala, as well as the presence of some large groups like KAMBE and Century, the rule provided by 2010 is still regarded by some riders today as the strongest form of leadership to have ever existed within the industry – almost one-quarter ( $n = 87$ ) of survey respondents felt this way. Moreover, when asked about the *current* state of sectoral leadership, 86% felt there was a complete absence of it, reflected in concerns that without an effective layer of governance beyond the level of the stage, the industry risks becoming ‘free entry and exit for whoever wants to be a boda boda rider’.<sup>112</sup>

## **v      Surveillance work**

That parts of the Ugandan state use boda riders as an instrument of intelligence-gathering and surveillance is one of the industry’s worst kept secrets. In earlier incarnations of this relationship, workers across the country’s informal transport sector were recruited into community policing structures through the IGP’s Crime Preventers initiative (Fichtmüller,

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<sup>111</sup> Interview with academic, 24 February 2022 [K03]

<sup>112</sup> Participant in focus group with digital riders, 9 December 2021. Also interviews with: analogue rider, 6 November 2021 [17]; analogue rider, 12 October 2021 [30]; former digital rider, 13 October 2021 [33]

2017), forming part of a wider ‘floating population’ that worked as the regime’s ‘eyes and ears’ (Tapscott, 2021: 127, 128). In addition to the incorporation of riders themselves, motorcycles were also given out in huge numbers as part of this strategy: according to one officer in the police’s finance department cited by Kagoro (2019: 49), more than 60,000 bikes were distributed to crime preventers in the run-up to the 2016 general elections, not only helping to extend the NRM’s security operations but also effectively functioning as ‘job creation’ via patronage (Tapscott, 2021).

According to one senior government figure involved in these operations, the active inclusion of riders was:

Not political [but] about dealing with a security problem [...] Community policing is about information. Without information, how do you secure a country? There is a risk in just relying on intelligence advisors, so it is important to get another channel.<sup>113</sup>

The same source also described how the community policing concepts of the Crime Preventers model later fed into the state’s active cultivation of Boda Boda 2010 which, as outlined above, saw the links between riders and security forces strengthen considerably as Kayihura sought to ‘bypass the formal hierarchy’ by incorporating ‘non-designated, informal groups’ into the structure of state policing (Reuss, 2018). Indeed, it was not long until the group became ‘one of the police’s greatest assets in the spy apparatus’ (Philipps and Kagoro, 2016: 19), with ‘innumerable boda boda riders work[ing] closely with the police, sometimes in arrests of suspected traffic offenders, but mostly in the field of intelligence’ (*ibid.*: 20). As part of this, hundreds of riders are said to have undergone specific security trainings that included stripping and shooting AK-47s, martial arts preparation and ideology classes (*ibid.*: 20).

Boda Boda 2010 may no longer be the force it once was, but for riders in Kampala the industry’s connections with state security and surveillance networks remain apparent (see also detailed discussion in Kagoro, 2023: 25-30). Reflecting recent press reports that the sector still houses ‘fully fledged security operatives targeting opposition supporters’ (UGNews24, 2022), interviewees would often reference the continued presence of ‘spies’ and ‘security personnel hiding in our job’.<sup>114</sup> Others alleged that police and military officers could routinely be found moonlighting as boda riders for extra income,<sup>115</sup> while it is also understood that boda riders possessing ‘contacts with the [intelligence] service’<sup>116</sup> had been able to circumvent

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<sup>113</sup> Interview with former high-ranking security official, 22 February 2022 [K35]

<sup>114</sup> Interviews with: former digital rider, 13 October 2021 [35]; analogue rider, 2 December 2021 [64]

<sup>115</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 6 November 2020 [17]; boda association leader, 16 November 2021 [K09]

<sup>116</sup> Interview with boda association leader, 12 January 2022 [K19]

certain lockdown restrictions through the use of a document known as a ‘Temporary Movement Order’, thus allowing them to ‘move at night’ in order to ‘get 50k’ (i.e. UGX 50,000).<sup>117</sup>

The inclusion of select riders into the Ugandan state’s policing work, both via processes of associational capture and for the purposes of surveillance, speaks to three broader points about the politics of the sector. The first is that there is often an economic dimension to these kinds of state-sector relationships. By transgressing or bending official rules, including those temporarily implemented during moments of crisis, security officials stand to benefit from intelligence gains, while connected riders (and moonlighting officers) are able to shore up their livelihoods through privileged access to the streets.

Second, the links on display here also add considerable nuance to mainstream depictions of the sector as both a source and symbol of urban disorder. Rather than flagrantly contesting state authority through reckless driving or wilful law breaking, in this instance riders themselves form an active part of the state’s attempts to impose order through less formal means.

And then following that, perhaps more so than anything else we find evidence here of the crucial role that political informality plays in weaving segments of the boda industry into the operations of the state on a highly selective basis. This is about more than simply relying on groups of informal workers to do the state’s ‘dirty work’.<sup>118</sup> It is also about the opaque and concealed ways in which relations with those groups are often handled, thus allowing the state to engage riders in ‘highly sensitive things’<sup>119</sup> whilst simultaneously using security and surveillance work as an informal channel for extending patronage to politically significant constituencies (Tapscott, 2016; 2021). As a result, the prospect of organising boda riders along more formal and transparent lines becomes problematic from the perspective of the informal (police) state (Khisa, 2013), which it is thought ‘would lose a foothold [...] if they were to be organised’.<sup>120</sup> ‘Between you and me’, one senior government official summed it up by saying, ‘that’s why you see regulation of the industry has become so political’.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Interviews with: boda association leader, 12 January 2022 [K19]; digital rider, 17 January 2022 [71]. Also observations from Geoffrey from within his stage.

<sup>118</sup> Interview with journalist, 3 December 2021 [K15]

<sup>119</sup> Interview with academic, 28 October 2021 [K04]

<sup>120</sup> Interview with academic, 7 December 2021 [K16]

<sup>121</sup> Interview with senior official, Ministry of Works and Transport, 15 February 2022 [K33]

### III ADVERSE INCORPORATION AND THE POLITICS OF DISAFFECTION

What do these multiple, overlapping layers of exclusion and inclusion vis-à-vis the Ugandan state add up to? What does the resulting political status quo, cemented in over the course of the past two decades, mean for the day-to-day realities of work within Kampala's vast boda sector? And how do riders feel about this?

Far from existing in diametric isolation from each other, there is an interplay between the various processes of exclusion and inclusion outlined here that shapes both the livelihoods of riders and prospects for sectoral reform. It is, for example, precisely because of exclusionary dynamics present within the wider labour market that so many individuals are driven towards the 'greener pastures'<sup>122</sup> of the boda industry in the first place, propelled by a lack of access to formal employment alternatives under conditions of jobless growth (Golooba-Mutebi, 2020) and widespread exploitation at the hands of under-regulated former employers (Danish Trade Union Development Agency, 2022). With relatively low barriers to entry and immediate possibilities for daily income, the boda industry offers those excluded from decent work elsewhere the chance to ensure survival whilst maintaining a semblance of autonomy.

But this is just the beginning. Having been 'excluded into' the sector, boda riders then find themselves re-incorporated into new kinds of economic and political relationships with the state. Though still exempted from what is often referred to as a 'boda tax' at the municipal level, through their work riders nevertheless make a wide range of formal and informal 'operating payments' that end up, either directly or indirectly, providing the state with revenue (Keen, 2008; Lough et al., 2013; Valodia and Francis, 2020). These include 'licit' payments in the form of import tariffs on motorcycles, fees for operating licenses and permits, and substantial taxes on fuel, but also cover street-level extractions by law enforcers. Riders with minimal experience of navigating the city appear especially vulnerable to the financial demands of officers, with the wider jobs crisis combined with loose enforcement of escalating boda regulations ensuring the 'garden' of new entrants is kept constantly replenished.

The well-documented connection between riders and state policing in turn reveals some of the day-to-day mechanics of how the politics of regime survival is orchestrated, whilst at the same time generating both an atmosphere of fear, distrust and suspicion throughout the workforce as well as additional *disincentives* for certain state actors to support formal regulation of the industry by municipal authorities. As far as such 'streamlining' measures are concerned, boda riders and their associations have not only been systematically excluded from urban planning designs and decisions, resulting in an unresolved series of questions and

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<sup>122</sup> Interview with former digital rider, 5 October 2021 [28]

uncertainties about riders' fundamental place in the modern city (Wamala-Larsson, 2022), but also actively and repeatedly cast by planners as targets for expulsion. This has been accompanied over the past two decades by a succession of proposals and announcements to rid the city centre of commercial motorcycle use through so-called 'boda free zones', the recurring implementation failure of which speaks to the sector's continued instrumentality from the perspective of both political actors seeking popular support within a shifting institutional landscape (Gore and Muwanga, 2014; Muwanga et al., 2020) and security actors trying to control and repress (Philipps and Kagoro, 2016).

There is no 'political machine' in operation here, as Goodfellow (2020: 290) has already noted in relation to Kampala's market sector. The various political forces that surround and shape the city's boda industry are not the calculated product of a coherent effort by a clearcut set of elites to maximise whatever political and economic value they might be able to extract from the workforce. Neither should the effects of these forces be considered in any way inevitable, complete or fixed. The strategies and actions of those with / in power constitute one set of factors that shape outcomes for the city's informal workers, but they are not the only things that matter (Lindell et al., 2019; Muwanga et al., 2020).

Rather, what the contemporary politics of Kampala's boda sector perhaps reflects more than anything else are the competing visions that different state actors possess and pursue in relation to the industry as part of wider 'projects of rule' (Lindell, 2019: 7), and the ways in which riders have been selectively and contingently drawn into these. It also demonstrates that while ruling regimes can simultaneously enact alternative logics of intervention in their 'handling' (Kamete, 2013) of different urban groups (see Muwanga et al., 2020 for a relevant discussion of this in Kampala), so too can we find a range of different logics at work not just at the *same time* but also within the *same sector*. In other words, Kampala's boda riders are being 'handled' by the state in more ways than one.

The multiple layers of political exclusion and inclusion that arise from this situation accumulate in a messy, ambiguous governance arrangement that nonetheless generates some very concrete livelihood consequences. On the one hand, because of the various channels through which the boda workforce informally generates benefits for wider political and economic actors, riders have frequently found themselves insulated from the most overtly hostile forms of urban policy (in the shape of boda-free zones, for example, or other variants of expulsion). This level of insulation is not formally institutionalised but rather connected to perceptions of the sector's political-economic value, which creates incentives for wider 'beneficiaries' of that value to protect riders from municipal threats and maintain their presence in the city. To borrow from Rollason's (2017: 1281) analysis of Kigali's *motari* across the Rwandan border, where in

some respects these dynamics are very similar, it is arguably because the boda 'profession presents others with opportunities for rent-seeking, enrichment and political influence' that so many livelihoods within the sector continue to exist.

At the same time, however, the nature of riders' political 'protection' against municipal reforms also sets hard limits on possibilities for achieving decent work in the sector. In Rollason's Kigali analysis, the flipside to *motaris'* insulation from technocratic hostility is inclusion within exploitative systems of elite accumulation and power consolidation. But from the perspective of Kampala's boda riders, the cost of insulation extends beyond this. While extraction at the hands of officers at intersections might constitute a major occupational challenge, in the final analysis it is riders' continued exclusion from alternative frameworks of governance *as a result of their present terms of inclusion* that renders their selective incorporation into the city's politics so detrimental. As Goodfellow and Titeca (2012: 269) argue, although acts of forbearance can 'allow vast numbers of informal actors room for manoeuvre to continue pursuing livelihoods on the city streets', the conditional and uncertain rewards of such an arrangement 'are ultimately a poor substitute for gaining formal institutional recognition and support' (see also Tandler, 2002). Indeed, for all the various channels of inclusion connecting riders to different nodes of state power, the bottom line here is that their work remains squarely outside the protective elements of formal state regulation (Chen et al., 2001) and confined to a status of 'permanent temporariness' (Yiftachel, 2009).

Thus, while the vote bank perspective has proven influential in framing Kampala's boda politics to date, it may be more accurate and productive to think in terms of adverse incorporation (du Toit, 2009; Hickey and du Toit, 2007). This helps widen the analytical lens to take into account multiple rather than singular articulations of politics, all existing at the same time, and to trace how these come together in specific ways to generate grounded impacts on workers. As Fischer (2020: 388) points out, adverse incorporation is not simply about how some individuals are included in social, economic or political systems on disadvantageous terms, but rather about how 'exclusions [...] form the basis for subordinated or adverse forms of inclusion'. Indeed, in the context of Kampala's boda industry it is riders' exclusion from certain *formal* relationships with the state (e.g. formally institutionalised protections of their place in the city, social protection, participation in urban planning) that enables and facilitates their incorporation into other, more exploitative and more *informal* kinds of state-sector arrangements (e.g. unofficial street-level extraction, associational clientelism, co-optation by the security forces). In other words, these various dynamics do not exist separately from one another but instead work together (*ibid.*). Moreover – and this is the key point – in doing so they produce and compound the kind of labour precarity that characterises boda riders' everyday working conditions, manifesting in the form of high operating costs, repressive

policing, oversupplied labour, dangerous work, and fragmented internal relations (see Chapter 5).

What are the effects of all this on those at the receiving end?

Though it enables their survival, the limits of this ambiguous political arrangement are keenly felt and routinely criticised by Kampala's boda riders. Far from being passive, grateful recipients of the livelihood opportunities generated through forbearance, most riders I spoke with were both profoundly antagonistic and distrustful towards those in power, reflecting the 'deep rooted discontent' described by Adam Culver 'with what [riders] felt to be a lack of adequate representation [and] participation' in the political process (in Musinguzi, 2018). They talked frequently of their marginalised position within the urban order, expressed hurt at the disrespect shown towards them by others in society, and complained often about the absence of either an official safety net for when problems arose or supportive figures in government upon whom they could reliably depend. The following interview quotes represent a small yet illustrative selection of how these frustrations with the conventions of boda politics have fed into a palpable, widely shared sense of disaffection amongst Kampala's boda riders, directed not just towards the ruling party but towards the political system as a whole:

Boda boda is a big industry and politicians want support from us. But their heart is not there. It is only on TV that they say such [positive] things [about us].<sup>123</sup>

Publicly, he [Museveni] wants to show the public he is a good man. But where is the President when traffic officers are torturing people?<sup>124</sup>

You can support Bobi Wine, [but if you] get arrested with your boda, he is not going to come for your rescue.<sup>125</sup>

With [Museveni's] continuous lies, many boda riders have started understanding. Many now know the truth.<sup>126</sup>

For many of these informal workers, the entrenched status quo described in this chapter has not been working well for some time. They are ready for change and, as Goodfellow and Mukwaya (2020: 53) found in their recent political economy analysis of the capital's transport sector, hungry for a stronger 'collective voice' (see also Culver, in Musinguzi, 2018). What's more, in contrast to popular depictions of the sector as unruly, untameable and perpetually

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<sup>123</sup> Interview with digital rider, 29 October 2021 [50]

<sup>124</sup> Interview with digital rider, 18 October 2021 [45]

<sup>125</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 5 November 2020 [12]

<sup>126</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 3 November 2020 [08]



resistant to any new form of official regulation, the riders encountered throughout this project displayed time and again a desire for reform and a willingness to be engaged more formally. For example, when asked whether they would be prepared to participate in consultations about the future of the boda industry, 89% of survey respondents said yes. Off their own backs, more than one-fifth of the sample had already engaged in some form of action to organise workers or alleviate sector-wide challenges, such as meeting with local councillors, calling in to radio stations to speak out against mistreatment, or joining campaigns. Only 4% said they would be averse to registering with the authorities should another exercise be carried out. And, in a statistic that flips the script on dominant portrayals of boda riders as ungovernable tax evaders enjoying, by virtue of the vote bank politics of forbearance, 'a free ride' in the capital (Khisra, 2018), as much as 69% of the sample said they would be willing to pay a new 'boda tax' if it were introduced.<sup>127</sup>

Towards the end of my time in Kampala, one academic told me that 'the politics of transport are defeating change'.<sup>128</sup> It is against this backdrop that a recent series of private sector initiatives fuelled by global capital have entered the fray under a banner of digital transformation hoping, on the surface at least, to break the deadlock that keeps riders' livelihoods under strain, the city's A&E departments full, and the industry as a whole ineffectively governed 'from above'. In Part II of this thesis, we ask which – if indeed any – of these transformations have actually materialised.

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## **Conclusion**

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There is a concept called 'unruly politics' that some scholars have used to try and capture the diverse forms of political action and expression that 'lie outside [...] civil forms of civic and democratic engagement' (Shankland et al., 2011: 1). These are the actions taken by disenfranchised, relatively powerless groups of citizens to press an urgent claim upon those in power, through methods that to many might seem unsanctioned, overly disruptive and even ugly or disrespectful; a demonstration, perhaps, of what can happen when protest through more formal, official registers falls on deaf ears (Hossain, 2017; Khanna, 2012). But we can also think about unruly politics in a slightly different way to the one conceived within this

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<sup>127</sup> In addition to the  $n = 254$  respondents who answered 'yes' or 'yes but with conditions',  $n = 40$  (11%) said 'unsure' and  $n = 72$  (19%) said 'no'.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with academic, 23 September 2021 [K02]

literature, not as a form of political dissent by angry citizens but as a framework for interpreting the complex political relations connecting states with particular socio-economic groups.

The case of Kampala's boda industry reveals that there can sometimes be an 'unruliness' to how relations between the state and particular sectors of the urban informal economy work. Despite being conventionally framed as a relationship centred around vote bank politics, what we instead see here are *multiple* points of both engagement and disengagement that defy simple theoretical classification (Lindell et al., 2019; Tadros, 2014). I have suggested here that these dynamics can be understood as constituting overlapping layers of political exclusion and inclusion, thus shifting the conceptual focus away from a binary assessment of whether these informal workers are included in Ugandan politics or not, towards a more nuanced analysis of what the terms of their simultaneous inclusion and exclusion actually look like. In doing so, we are reminded that the state does not exist as a homogenous, monolithic entity, but must instead be viewed as an often disparate and contradictory 'ensemble' of institutions with sometimes competing motivations and interests (Cirolia and Harber, 2022; Jessop, 2001), leading to fluctuating and varied rather than singular and static 'handlings' of particular sectors of the urban informal economy (Kamete, 2013).

Although the alternative perspective on 'boda politics' that arises from this analysis embraces the kind of 'messy political interactions and multiple lines of tension' described by Lindell et al. (2019: 63) in their study of street work in Kampala, it does not preclude efforts to understand in a more concrete sense what the implications of all this are for the capital's boda riders. Indeed, it is their exclusion from certain political processes and relations, most notably official systems of urban planning and formal labour protections, that provides the basis for their incorporation into other kinds of more extractive and more informalised relations with the state (Fischer, 2020). At the same time, the routinised inclusion of riders within the workings of the 'informal state' (Khisa, 2013) then further compounds the regulatory challenge faced by municipal technocrats seeking, after years of official neglect,<sup>129</sup> to finally extend formal control over the industry, as powerful vested interests in maintaining the status quo cause the KCCA's reform efforts to repeatedly come unstuck.<sup>130</sup>

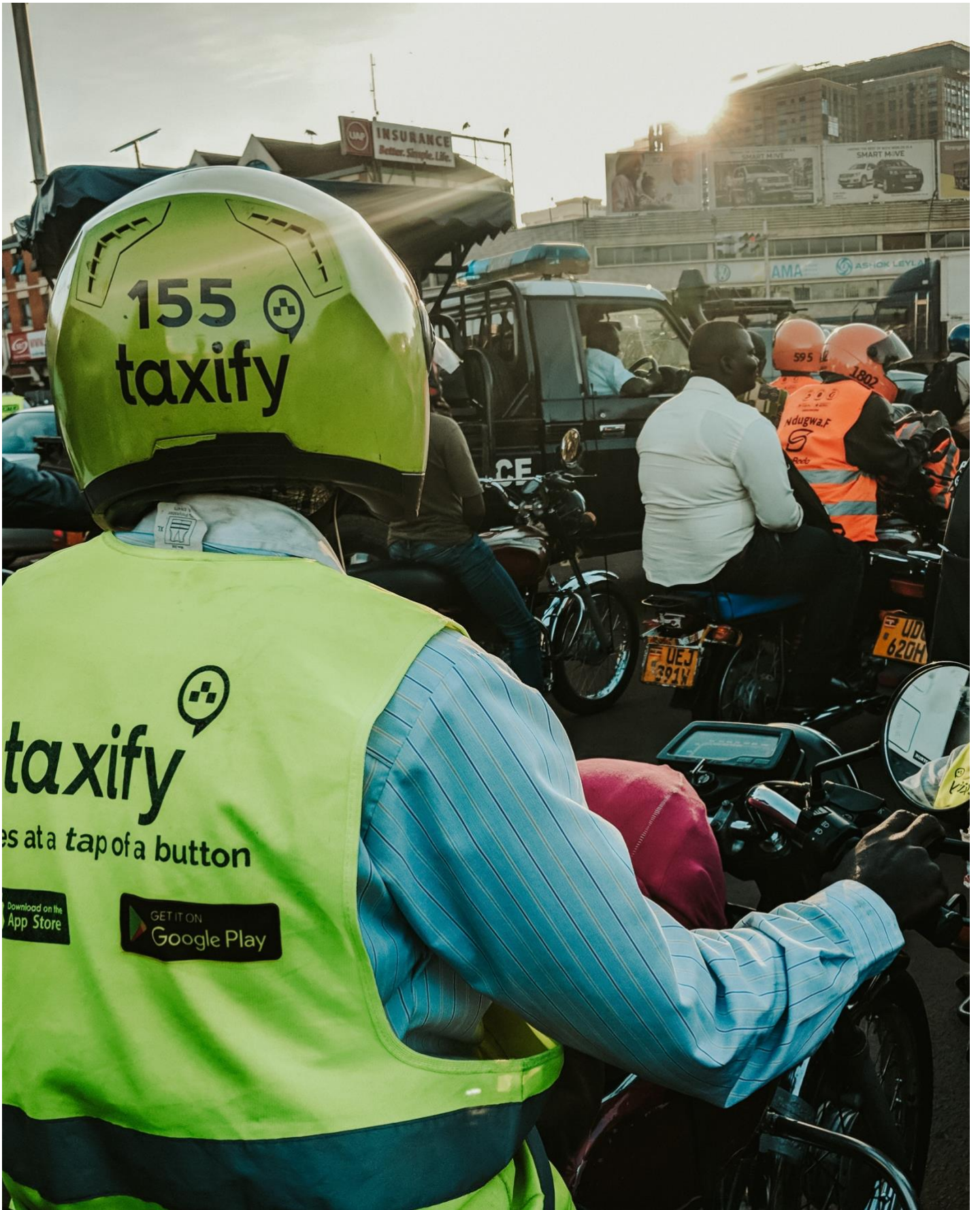
But while the arrangements that materialise from these dynamics might work for particular state actors, it has become increasingly apparent among riders that the terms of their adverse

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<sup>129</sup> Interview with transport planning official, KCCA, 1 December 2021 [K14]

<sup>130</sup> Interviews with: academic, 23 September 2021 [K02]; senior member of the National Planning Board and Paratransit Consultative Forum, 22 November 2021 [K11]; transport planning official, KCCA, 1 December 2021 [K14]; academic, 7 December 2021 [K16]; senior official, Ministry of Works and Transport, 15 February 2022 [K33]

incorporation into state politics leaves them at a near-permanent structural disadvantage, locking in the kinds of precarious working conditions described in Chapter 5 and prioritising thin, fleeting benefits over longer-term reprieve. As a result, they have grown tired of their handling by the political elite and become hungry for change, leading to important questions that are taken up in Part II of this thesis. To what extent have the new and alternative channels of inclusion, opened up by the sector's recent turn towards the platform economy, been able to break this long-running impasse? Have the technologies and promises of digital inclusion finally offered government a way of cutting through the informal state's stranglehold over the politics of sectoral reform? And, to re-centre the overarching research question driving this study, by becoming included within this new economy, have boda riders found their escape route to formalised, more decent forms of work – or simply an extension of the adverse incorporation they are already so familiar with?



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## **PART II**

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### **THE DIGITAL TURN**

## **Chapter 7**

# **Promises of inclusion: digital boda work in the platform economy**

Against a backdrop of persistently difficult working conditions and repeated yet ineffective municipal efforts to bring a swelling workforce of riders under formal state control, over the past decade or so Kampala's boda industry has become the testing ground for a new kind of experiment in sectoral reform. Reframing the decent work deficits and gridlocked politics of Part I of this thesis as opportunities for trying out new forms of techno-innovation (Adegoke, 2022; Tun et al., 2021), since the mid-2010s a wave of platform companies have entered the fray, promising to deliver an upgraded form of digitised boda work that would help address not only the specific livelihood struggles of riders, but also a wider range of social and political ills connected to the 'analogue' workings of the industry.

The purpose of this chapter is to flesh out both the arrival and the promise of this new 'platformised' boda economy in more detail, before offering in the remainder of Part II an 'actually existing' account of how things have since played out in practice, several years after its initial emergence (van Doorn et al., 2021). Drawing primarily on key informant interviews and media coverage, I seek to show here how the platformisation of Kampala's boda sector has been envisioned and enacted from the perspective of the those at the forefront of this process: the platform companies, focusing primarily on digital ride-hailing operations but with one eye on new platform-enabled forms of motorcycle financing. In doing so I establish a basis against which the *promises* of inclusion within new forms of platform work can be, to use Cirolia et

al.'s (2023: 2005) phrasing, 'tested' rather than 'disregarded' in subsequent chapters, which focus in turn on the *realities*, the *disillusions* and finally the *limits* of inclusion.

We begin in **Section I** with a basic introduction: how do these new models of moto-taxi work and financing 'work' and who is behind them? In **Section II** we then dig into the sorts of promises that have accompanied the arrival and expansion of the platform economy, focusing on three in particular: better livelihoods, safer roads and stronger regulation. We finish in **Section III** by looking at 'landscapes of regulation and deregulation', examining the extent to which boda work is re-regulated under platformisation before turning the question back in on itself: to what extent are the platforms themselves regulated by the Ugandan state?

## **I DIGITAL BODA PLATFORMS**

Although the vast majority of African ride-hailing research to date has focused on four-wheeled taxis (Cirolia et al., 2023: 1994), Kampala's ride-hailing experience began on two wheels. In this opening section I provide an introduction to the platforms behind the boda sector's ride-hailing 'revolution' (Kasibante, 2022), starting with a basic overview of how the ride-hailing model works before looking at who these companies are. I then briefly outline another recent shift in the way that boda work is structured, which has not only accompanied the rise of ride-hailing in the sector but has also been facilitated by it: asset financing.

### ***i Digital ride-hailing***

Of all the changes that Kampala's boda industry has witnessed over the past decade or so, the arrival and expansion of digital ride-hailing has proven by far the most headline-grabbing, attracting widespread and broadly positive coverage not only at the national level but from international news outlets too (e.g. Lule, 2018; Kasibante, 2022; Paulat, 2014; Schipani, 2021; Senthilingam, 2015; Russon, 2019). How does it work?

In the basic ride-hailing model found in Kampala's boda industry, customers wanting to make a journey first generate a trip request through a ride-hailing company's app, installed on their phone, which the platform's algorithms then assign to one of their 'digital riders' nearby. Should this rider choose to accept the request, after picking the passenger and completing the journey payment is made in one of two ways: either cash is handed directly over to the rider or a cashless transaction, normally discounted by the company in an attempt to encourage its use, is carried out via the app's 'e-wallet' feature. In both cases, a portion of the payment is

collected by the platform company in the form of commission, typically in the region of 10 – 20%. Finally, the passenger is given the option to rate their rider experience, often involving a five-star ranking system, while the rider awaits their next job.<sup>131</sup>

As one of the model's main selling points to users, the trip payments are set by the platforms themselves and hence non-negotiable by riders. While the same trip may be priced differently depending on factors like time of day and current levels of demand, the removal of riders' transactional bargaining power is central to ideas about how digitisation is said to be modernising, standardising and indeed 'professionalising' the industry as a whole. But it is also important from the platform perspective because it enables companies to pursue aggressive pricing strategies that give them a financial edge over what Uber's former country manager described to me as their main source of competition: the offline 'street-hailing element'.<sup>132</sup> To pull passengers away from that, he explained, 'we needed strategies and incentives. We had to undercut prices for customers'.

Kampala's ride-hailing story begins 10 years ago with a platform called SafeBoda, which was established towards the end of 2014 by two Western development economists and a Kampala-based boda rider originally from northern Uganda, before rolling out properly the following year. Though often described as a 'home-grown' enterprise (Odendaal, 2023) or 'local' alternative to the ride-hailing giants (Doherty, 2022), SafeBoda is almost entirely dependent upon external sources of financing. In addition to some support from development agencies – DFID (now FCDO), USAID and the UN have all provided project-based funding – the operations of SafeBoda have been largely reliant upon injections of private venture capital. In 2021 the company became the first beneficiary of Google's new Africa Investment Fund, receiving an undisclosed sum to supplement the funding it had already received to date, which according to 'people who know the company's dealings' had by then amounted to more than \$20 million (Kene-Okafor, 2021a).<sup>133</sup> This has come from a range of investors, including: various venture capital firms investing in disruptive technologies and the digital economy, such as Unbound (London), BEENEXT (Singapore), DG Ventures (Tokyo) and Ion Pacific (Hong Kong); the investment arms of Indonesian super-app, Go-Jek, and Allianz, one of the world's largest insurance companies; Asian manufacturing firms like Transsion Holdings (phones) and Yamaha Motor Corporation (motorcycles); and the Shell Foundation.

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<sup>131</sup> In some cases, riders are also given the option to rate their passenger.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with former country manager, Uber, 29 November 2021 [K13]

<sup>133</sup> A recent report for the Shell Foundation similarly states that by 2020 SafeBoda had raised \$28 million in backing (Holl et al., 2021).



It took a few years for SafeBoda to cycle through some early experiments with its ride-hailing model, initially connecting customers to riders through a kind of call centre,<sup>134</sup> but by 2017 the SafeBoda app in its more fully-fledged and currently recognisable form had arrived. It was around the same time that Bolt (formerly Taxify) and Uber (under the guise of UberBODA) brought their own tried-and-tested apps to the capital's boda industry, launching respectively in 2017 and 2018. As is widely known, both of these companies are major players in the global ride-hailing industry, with Uber currently operating in 72 countries compared to Bolt's 45 (Bhuiyan and Milmo, 2022; Njanja, 2021). And similarly to SafeBoda, except at a much larger scale, they too have been largely reliant upon private investments of venture capital to 'effectively subsidize' them to 'charge customers rates that do not capture the full cost of service offerings while they ostensibly build market share and explore paths to profitability' (Brail, 2022: 17). Uber, for example, has to date received funding from 115 separate investors around the world (Crunchbase, 2023), including cashless payment company Paypal, Japanese investment conglomerate SoftBank, and early support from Jeff Bezos. At the same time, however, its search for profitable pathways has been long and arduous, with the company only posting a net profit in 2023 – the first time in its 14-year history (Jolly and Wearden, 2024).

Beyond this 'big three', as they were sometimes referred to me during interviews, several other ride-hailing start-ups joined the scene around the same time, including the likes of Dial Jack, Mondo Ride and ORI Rides. While many of these have since fallen by the wayside, at the time of research and writing new enterprises were still continuing to emerge (see also Cirolia et al., 2023), albeit mostly in Kampala where the two-wheeled ride-hailing industry remains heavily concentrated (see Table 5 below). Meanwhile, industry pioneer SafeBoda continues to be by far the largest and most widely used of the ride-hailing apps.

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<sup>134</sup> Interview with senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22]

Table 5. Kampala’s digital ride-hailing platforms, past and present (at time of research)

Operating at time of research	No longer operating at time of research
SafeBoda (2014 –)	Mondo Ride (2018 – 2018)
Bolt (formerly Taxify) (2017 –)	Dial Jack (2018 – 2019)
Uber (2018 –)	Little Ride (2018 – 2019)
Yellow Bird (2018 –)	ORI Rides (2020 – 2020)
SOT Boda (2020 –)	
Smart Cabs (2021 –)	
Lolo (2021 –)	
Rida (2023 –)	

Source: authors’ observations

In addition to ride-hailing operations, several of these platforms also trade in e-commerce and delivery services – a sub-sector that became particularly lucrative during COVID-19 (Deloitte, 2022). SafeBoda in particular has made a concerted shift in this direction over recent years as part of a broader diversification of its product line, which now also includes financial services via its ‘e-wallet’ and a move into the four-wheeled ride-hailing sector under the branding of ‘SafeCar’. In doing so the company joined some large multinationals in the capital’s e-commerce space, most notably including Jumia, established in Nigeria but owned by a German venture capital firm, and more recent entrant Glovo, headquartered in Barcelona but eager to extend its foothold in ‘the African market’, which the company views ‘as the future engine of its growth’ (Mieu, 2023).

## **ii Asset financing**

Alongside the rise of digital labour platforms, the last decade has also seen some major changes in the way that riders access motorcycles. Facilitated by advances in platform technology (Langley and Leyshon, 2017; 2022), new modes of what is often termed ‘asset financing’ have dramatically reshaped the boda industry’s rental and ownership landscape in recent years, not just within Kampala alone, but across both the country and wider region as a whole (Bishop and Courtright, 2022).

Whereas previously riders would either rent from a ‘boss’ through the *kibaluwa* system or buy a second-hand bike outright (see Chapter 5), under asset financing arrangements they have the option of entering into ‘hire-purchase’ or ‘ride-to-own’ schemes, which present riders with the possibility of one day owning the motorcycle they are paying to access. Under these arrangements, riders (or ‘clients’) make an initial downpayment before paying off whatever the

remaining sum might be through weekly instalments until an agreed point of completion is reached months down the line, whereupon the renter becomes an owner. Or to use the phrasing of one of Uganda's largest asset financing enterprises, Tugende, when they 'become their own boss'.

Although the provision of hire-purchase arrangements is not monopolised by any one particular type of actor, with private individuals, savings groups / SACCOs and traditional 'bricks-and-mortar' banks all involved in this expanding economy, it is a new wave of specialist asset financing companies and fintech lenders that has arguably done the most to push this alternative model. The longest running of these is the aforementioned Tugende, a 'for-profit social enterprise' founded in 2010 by two Americans hoping to 'find win-win ways to grow together' with their clients (Wilkerson, in Tugende, 2020a), whilst operating under a parent company domiciled in Mauritius (Wamala, 2023). With 'extensive mentorship, connections and help to navigate Uganda's bureaucracy' from Andrew Mwenda (Crunchbase, 2024a), a Ugandan journalist possessing close links to the Museveni family (Rolls, 2021: 79, 87), Tugende has grown significantly over the past decade or so. In addition to amassing large amounts of venture capital support (Crunchbase, 2024b), including from the investment arms of leading motorcycle manufacturers (e.g. Toyota Group), the company has received public funding from the likes of DFID and SIDA (Andersson et al., 2014), whilst also recently drawing on a practice called 'debt crowdfunding', inviting those with UK and EU bank accounts to invest with the dual promise of 'Impact plus a strong return!' (Tugende, 2021).

Following Tugende's early lead in the 2010s, other specialist asset financiers soon followed. These include: Mogo Uganda, a local subsidiary of the Latvia-based Elevation Group that currently 'provides financial inclusion' across 12 countries on three continents (EQS News, 2021); Boda Boda Banja, the retail financing arm of Uganda's sole importer of Bajaj motorcycles, Nish Auto Limited; Asaak, an American company that has also recently engaged in crowdfunding; and lastly Watu, a Kenya-based lender using 'automated operations' to speed up its processing of applications (Watu, 2024), and whose Latvian founder has been described as 'making better returns financing motorbike sales [...] than he ever did arbitraging gold and silver' as a trader (Business Daily Africa, 2017).

Although distinct from ride-hailing (and other digital labour) platforms, the recent rise of asset financing can be considered a related phenomenon insofar as the operations of these new companies depend, to varying degrees, upon platform infrastructure. This is most notable in relation to the collection and tracking of riders' loan repayments, which under most companies take place via a payment platform. But in certain instances the links go deeper, revealing the close connections that exist between fintech in Africa and processes of platformisation

(Langley and Leyshon, 2022). For example, while some companies require new riders to hold stage membership, instrumentalised here as a means of establishing applicants' trustworthiness and legibility (Mogo, Tugende), in other cases this 'check' is replaced with a digital alternative connected to the workings of the platform economy. Watu, for instance, is an official partner of SafeBoda, which refers riders onwards for loan consideration whilst acting as a kind of backer; several of those interviewed mentioned accessing motorcycle finance in this way.<sup>135</sup> Meanwhile, by using riders' digital histories rather than stage attachments to filter out risky or unbankable candidates, Asaak's approach is built on 'leveraging the rapid digitization [of moto-taxis] happening across the continent' (Untapped Global, 2021). Through partnerships with SafeBoda, Bolt and Jumia, the company draws on 'alternative data' from those digital labour platforms to assess what their founder calls 'questions of character and reliability': that is, 'one, does this motorcycle taxi driver earn enough income on a daily and weekly basis to afford the loan instalments? And two, does he view this as a serious obligation?' (Sattar, in Finnegan, 2021). By accessing these platforms' data, Asaak can see 'how many trips a driver has done in the past month, what their ratings are, how often they're driving, etc.', effectively repurposing this information as a basis 'to make our lending decisions' (*ibid.*). Whether digital riders are aware that this is being done is another question entirely.

How widespread does asset financing appear in Kampala's boda industry? While it is still widely assumed that most riders in Uganda rent through the traditional *kibaluwa* system, emerging evidence suggests that over the past decade or so there has been a 'major shift' towards greater levels of ownership (Spooner et al., 2020: 60), driven to a large extent by the rise of asset financiers and the 'morphing' of the boda industry into a 'financial sub-sector' (Muhindo, 2022).

My own data lend strong support to this. Of the 370 riders surveyed, just 6% ( $n = 22$ ) were found to be participating in the *kibaluwa* system. By contrast, around half the sample (51% /  $n = 188$ ) had accessed their motorcycle via a hire-purchase scheme, with the majority of this group still paying down the loan at the time of fieldwork.<sup>136</sup> Drilling down further, we then find that of these 188 riders on hire-purchase, 110 (59%) had enrolled with one of the main lending companies in Uganda's boda industry (Tugende, Watu, Asaak, Boda Boda Banja, Mogo), whilst the remaining 41% had accessed hire-purchase financing via either a traditional bank, a SACCO or a private individual. What this means overall is that out of the 370 riders surveyed,

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<sup>135</sup> Interviews with: digital rider, 1 November 2020 [01]; digital rider, 2 November 2020 [05]; digital rider, 2 December 2021 [63]

<sup>136</sup> The remaining 43% of the sample had either purchased their motorcycle outright, taken out a cash (as opposed to hire-purchase) loan, or had it gifted to them.

almost 1 in 3 had entered into hire-purchase agreements with a specialist asset financing company, thus re-routing their motorcycle access payments away from the internal rider networks 'of old' (Calkins and Zoanni, 2023; Wamala-Larsson, 2022) and towards external corporate entities.

## II TRANSFORMATIVE PROMISES

The rise of these new digital boda platforms has been accompanied by a bold series of transformatory claims and narratives, which have also served as important legitimating mechanisms for the companies involved (Lanamäki and Tuvikene, 2022). Drawing on interviews with company staff alongside existing literature and press reports, in this section I examine what we might think of as the platforms' collective 'promises of inclusion'. Spanning *better livelihoods*, *safer roads* and *stronger regulation*, we see that digital (and to some extent financial) inclusion here is being framed not simply as a route towards improved moto-taxi working conditions (Cirolia et al., 2023) but also as a pathway to more effective governance of the industry as a whole, including by helping to bring the formal state 'back in'.

### I *Better livelihoods*

Reflecting broader narratives of the capacity of digital labour platforms to solve problems of un(der)employment (Castel-Branco and Dawson, 2023), ride-hailing has been consistently sold to Kampala's riders on the premise that digital work pays better than that which came before it. As my interviews with platform company staff reveal, this premise is rooted in the idea that apps offer substantial economic advantages over the traditional boda stage, with the latter frequently viewed as an outdated, inefficient and unproductive institution in need of an upgrade. By contrast, staff would talk enthusiastically about the empowering effects of ride-hailing technology, looping them into systems of aggregated demand, reducing their unremunerated downtime, and effectively freeing them from the requirement for a physical base – all characteristic of the global ride-hailing discourse more generally (Heeks et al., 2021).

In an interview with Bolt's country lead, for example, it was explained to me that from a rider's perspective there were two main benefits to shifting online.<sup>137</sup> The first concerned what he

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<sup>137</sup> Interview with country manager, Bolt, 19 November 2021 [K10]

called ‘lag time’: whereas ‘with the stage you can find riders sitting for three, four hours at a time waiting for business that does not come, with ride-hailing that is avoided’. The second was the potential for back-to-back trips. ‘With ride-hailing this is more of a guarantee’, he explained. ‘When you go to drop off a customer in destination x, there is a high chance you will get someone straight away or on your way back to where you came from. So there is no wasted or dead mileage’.

SafeBoda operates through a similar logic. Talking for a piece in Ugandan newspaper *The Observer* (Rasmussen, 2019), one of the company’s co-founders explained that:

What we are trying to do is to maximize the time of our drivers. So, the price that you pay when you are using a non-Safeboda is the price of the driver to take you from where you are to your destination and for him to ride back to his stage and wait for another customer. Safebodas don’t need to do that. We take you to your destination, and we come back with another person.

A senior manager at the company went even further in his critique of the traditional system. ‘The ideology of the stage doesn’t make financial sense’, he told me, referencing the rules that compel riders to only acquire customers from a fixed geographical point.<sup>138</sup> It was this ‘stage ideology’, he went on, that keeps the price of trips high across the city, and ‘at the end of the day, it is the customer who is going to feel the pain’.

According to Nancy Odendaal (2021: 10), what Kampala’s ride-hailing platforms are ultimately offering riders here is access to ‘a more individualized system that enables a broader catchment area’, helping them to ‘fill their time with rides and deliveries from anywhere’. The platform logic is about opening up an escape route from the inefficient and localised ideologies of the pre-digital landscape; it promises to ‘free riders from the stage structures and the obligations and politics that accompany them’ (ITF, 2020: 19), and in doing so is seen to create a more flexible and individually empowered form of boda work than what came before. Through incorporation into wider networks of digitally aggregated demand, riders are being given the opportunity to access a higher number of jobs per day and, despite the reduced per-trip rates that come with working under a model that systematically undercuts offline prices, earn more as a result – up to 50% more according to one of SafeBoda’s CEOs (Thomson, 2018; see also Gachoka and Winiecki, 2020; Sussock, 2017; USAID, 2021).

A similar kind of promise pervades the world of platform-enabled asset financing. Companies in this corner of the industry talk routinely of their contributions towards employment and poverty reduction, as they ‘help people drive themselves up the economic ladder’ (Tugende,

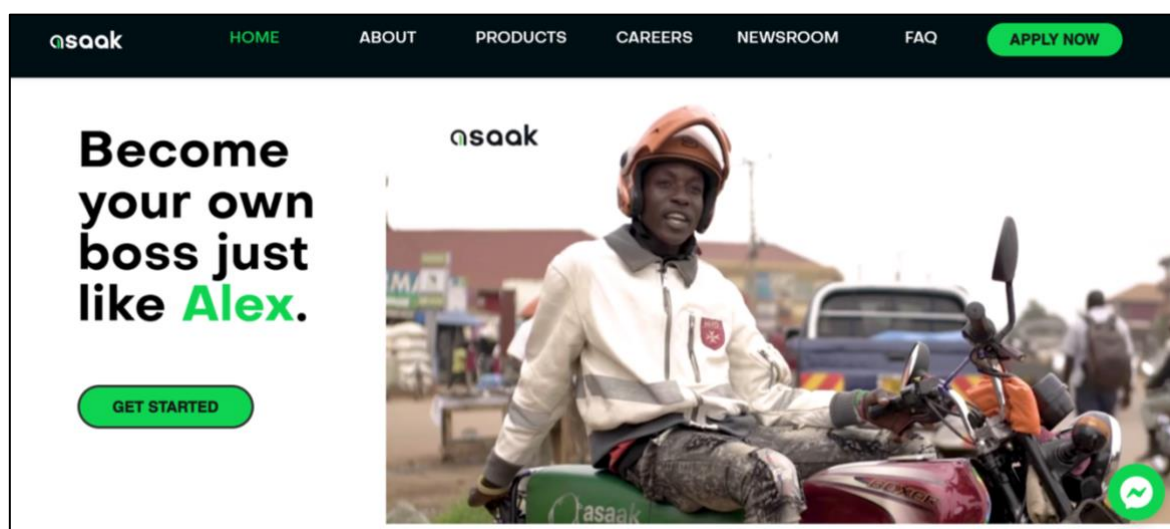
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<sup>138</sup> Interview with senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22]

in SautiTech, 2019) by addressing ‘the most critically unmet need’ facing Africa’s ‘informal and formal workers’: credit (Asaak, in Republic, 2023). In removing the requirement to rent a motorcycle from extractive middle-men each day for work, it is claimed that asset financiers make it possible for riders to double their earnings (Kene-Okafor, 2021b; Republic, 2023), while one recent report for the Shell Foundation suggested that Tugende alone had, by opening up the boda business to a wider audience of would-be riders, created 22,000 new jobs across the country (Holl et al., 2021).

Like ride-hailing platforms, asset financiers also lean heavily into discourses of economic independence and entrepreneurship, reflecting a broader tendency of the global microfinance industry to construct beneficiaries as ‘businessperson[s] whose entrepreneurial spirit would be unleashed by the provision of credit’ (Maurer, 2015: 126). Tugende’s Michael Wilkerson, for example, describes East Africa as a place inhabited by ‘millions of self-employed entrepreneurs’ (in Blue Earth Capital, 2019), whilst boda riders themselves are repeatedly framed by the fintech community as ‘aspiring business owners’, ‘mobility entrepreneurs’ and ‘unbanked African entrepreneurs’ (FMO, 2022; Untapped Global, 2021; Watu, 2024). Rather than simply dealing in motorcycle sales or new financial products, promotional material put out by these companies suggests that what is really being sold here is the idea of private ownership, the prospect of saving on rent, and the dream of one day becoming one’s own boss (see Figures 12 and 13).

Figure 12. Empowerment and autonomy at the heart of Asaak’s branding



Source: Asaak (2023)

Figure 13. Ownership and entrepreneurial dreams in the marketing of Tugende and Watu



Source: Tugende (2022) and Watu (2023)

What links up these various discourses and promises of livelihood transformation is the idea that, by connecting into these new economies of inclusion, it becomes possible for riders to free themselves from the established analogue institutions of boda work in the shape of the stage and the *kibaluwa* rental system (see Chapter 5). Framed from the platform perspective as increasingly inefficient and outdated, these institutions-of-old are seen to exist as barriers to better livelihoods – constructed here as higher incomes and greater autonomy – that digital technologies of economic and financial inclusion are enabling riders to ‘disintermediate’ from (Langley and Leyshon, 2021; Ray, 2024b). In doing so, they position themselves as what Mann and Iazzolino (2019: 1) have referred to as ‘liberation technologies’ within the arena of international development, helping informal workers to disconnect from an extractive and predatory status quo via seamless incorporation into the platform economy (Sitas et al., 2023: 11).

## **ii Safer roads**

Ride-hailing in Kampala is fundamentally also about safety, and this is the case in two key ways. On the one hand, passengers are promised a safer mode of urban transit and a more trustworthy and accountable motorcycle rider than what the ‘offline market’ is considered to offer. And on the other, riders themselves are expected to engage in safer driving practices that may end up saving them from injury or worse, thus leading to an improvement in working conditions beyond the economic dimensions of their livelihoods alone (Cirolia et al., 2023).



The aptly named SafeBoda is the epitome of this proposed transformation. Conceived partly in response to ‘a number of safety complaints with offline players’ (Tracxn, 2024), SafeBoda marketed itself from the outset as an effective way to minimise the physical risks of both travelling by boda in Kampala as well as working in the sector. In an early interview with CNN, one of the company’s co-founders, Alastair Sussock, laid out how the approach would work (Senthilingam, 2015). ‘It’s a market-based approach to road safety’, he explained, insisting that the way to make people in Uganda wear helmets was to give them one as part of the ride-hailing deal. The suggestion here was that by coming up with a more lucrative alternative to traditional boda work (see above), riders could be financially incentivised to engage in safe driving practices. A variant of this holds for the passenger: if the safer app-based option is more affordable, which it typically is as a result of venture capital-enabled fare subsidies (Brail, 2022), then it makes rational economic sense for them to hail online rather than at the stage.

Ride-hailing platforms attempt to increase the safety standards of their riders in a number of ways. First, they issue safety equipment. This includes two helmets, one for the rider and one for the passenger, and in many (but not all) cases a reflector jacket for the rider. Second, they train riders in safe driving behaviours before they let them out onto the roads, and then again at periodic intervals over time. These include remembering to wear a helmet, stopping at red lights, and not riding in the direction of oncoming traffic. Third, passengers are given the option of rating their rider’s performance, which means that those who continue to engage in unsafe driving whilst working digitally stand to be rated poorly and hence potentially deactivated. And finally, in some instances riders are also helped to acquire the necessary operating licenses for both themselves and their vehicles, thus bringing them closer to compliance with existing road traffic laws designed to ensure safety standards among road users, and closer to a status of legal regularity. Uber is a particular case in point here (discussed in greater detail below), but on the financing side this is also something that Tugende engages in.

In addition to road safety alone, ride-hailing in Kampala is also designed to address social concerns around security and public order. As a workforce that many understand to be comprised of morally dubious young men, boda riders are often framed as a security risk in and of themselves (see Courtright, 2022). By assigning digital riders with unique ID numbers, in some cases boldly emblazoned upon their helmets and uniforms, and by storing information on their backgrounds, trips and movements on a company database, ride-hailing platforms claim to offer passengers better protection against the risk of any criminal wrongdoing. In the platform economy, so the corporate argument goes,<sup>139</sup> riders are both more transparent and

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<sup>139</sup> Interviews with: former country manager, Bolt, 19 November 2021 [K10]; senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22]

more traceable than their offline counterparts, and therefore more trustworthy (see also Private Sector Foundation Uganda, 2023: 5). As one senior transport union official put it during an interview, ‘the apps gave customers a guarantee that they are safe because each ride is recorded. Each and every rider can be trusted’.<sup>140</sup>

Against a long-running backdrop of sobering injury and fatality statistics, these concerted efforts to generate safer boda work / transit have been met with enthusiasm from a wide audience. News pieces and commentaries from a few years back extol the transformative effect the apps seem to have had on riders’ behaviours, highlighting a noticeable difference in their conduct and compliance with traffic law relative to traditional riders (Lule, 2018; Namubiru, 2017; Rosen, 2017; Russon, 2019), framed here as ‘informal and unaccountable’ (Hruby, 2019). Meanwhile, one survey-based study carried out in 2017 found that SafeBoda riders were statistically more likely to engage in ‘safe riding behaviours’ than their analogue counterparts, which included wearing a helmet, being in possession of a driver’s license and reflective jacket, and not driving towards oncoming traffic (Muni et al., 2020). Additional ‘impact reports’ produced for the Shell Foundation cite a ‘perceived improvement in safety’ among passengers (Gachoka and Winiacki, 2020: 13), with women in particular ‘feeling much safer’ when using riders from the platform (Nesbitt-Ahmed and Fraser, 2017: 3). Beyond this, reviews and more general academic coverage regularly cite the story of SafeBoda in Uganda as evidence that ride-hailing apps may hold the key to making African moto-taxi sectors safer (e.g. Divall et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2022; Temizel et al., 2021); something that has long posed a ‘considerable challenge’ to policy makers across the continent (Behrens et al., 2021).

### ***iii Stronger regulation...and a step towards formality***

Finally, there is a third set of transformative promises that speaks to even broader ambitions, concerning the potential of digital inclusion to at long last bring an ‘unruly’ and ‘ungovernable’ workforce under formal control. For many observers, the pre-platform boda industry resembled a ‘predominantly informal and chaotic market’ devoid of effective organisation and governance (Adegoke, 2022), but with the arrival of a new privately run system that promised to train riders, enforce safety standards and register their identities (*ibid.*), it was widely anticipated that the platforms would eventually help to put things in order. As one journalist who reported on these early ride-hailing days explained to me, for years Kampala’s bodas had proven ‘hard to regulate because there are so many interests at play’, alluding to the long-running political impasse laid out in Chapter 6. As a result, he went on, ‘at the beginning

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<sup>140</sup> Interview with transport union official, 11 November 2021 [K07]

everyone thought [the ride-hailing companies] were going to change things. Many welcomed them. Thought they would revolutionise the industry'.<sup>141</sup>

Such sentiments provide a useful insight into the general tone of news coverage at the time, which for the most part was unified in hyping up the potential of this new private sector approach to 'restoring sanity' within the industry, as the popular media trope would have it (Buwembo, 2020; KFM, 2015; The Independent, 2019). In this dominant framing, the challenge of both taming and modernising an unruly informal workforce is constructed as a problem requiring innovative thinking and entrepreneurial solutions, with the arrival of the platforms widely heralded as providing government with 'an unexpected boost' for finally 'implementing change' on the capital's streets (Paulat, 2014) (see also: Biryabarema, 2018; Kahunde, 2019; Kampala Dispatch, 2018; Lule, 2018; Rasmussen, 2019; Rosen, 2017; Russon, 2019; Senthilingam, 2015).

A similar line of thinking had also been shaping the fields of urban policy and planning during the early days of ride-hailing. Indeed, although ride-hail platforms are often portrayed in a more general sense as being in conflict with municipal regulators (Niebler et al., 2023; Staab et al., 2022), what my interviews in fact suggest is that, in the Ugandan context, they were *actively invited* into the regulatory space by city planners and officials during the mid- to late-2010s. Further still, this is crucial to understanding why some of them even decided to get involved in the boda industry at all.

Uber's former country lead in Uganda proved particularly open and insightful on this subject, explaining that compared to the city's standard (four-wheeled) taxi sector, which Uber entered in 2016, the boda industry was 'not primarily [considered] a growth opportunity'.<sup>142</sup> Unconvinced by the financial viability of boda-hailing and the likelihood of ever turning a profit, initially the company had no plans to get involved. Things changed, however, after the Ministry of Works and Transport (MoWT) 'requested Uber to step in' as part of a renewed effort to formally regulate the industry, which the company agreed to do 'as a goodwill gesture'. This was around 2017.

The bigger picture at the time, he said, was that the authorities were keen to bring in the apps 'because of all the politics in the sector'. With the reputation of workers' associations tarnished by the spiral of 'crime', 'violence' and 'amputations' that had accompanied the rise of Boda Boda 2010, the government wanted to 'avoid unionisation' by traditional means and instead

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<sup>141</sup> Interview with journalist, 8 December 2021 [K17]

<sup>142</sup> Interview with former country manager, Uber, 29 November 2021 [K13]

work with the private sector to begin ‘formalising under a ride-hailing umbrella’. Invitations were subsequently extended to the big three: Uber, Bolt (then Taxify) and SafeBoda.

Through conversations that took place between 2017 and 2018, these three ride-hailing companies found themselves in dialogue with what he referred to as a ‘Boda Boda Committee’, comprised of four distinct public bodies. These included: the MoWT (the department responsible for extending the initial invite); KCCA (whose technical staff had repeatedly been trying and failing to register riders); the Uganda Revenue Authority (‘so they would be able to tax down the line – that was part of the whole operation’); and the Ministry of Security (a security organ of State House, which he ambiguously explained were there ‘for the purposes of knowing’).

Although other interviewees were not able (or chose not) to provide this level of detail, their testimonies nonetheless help to corroborate these early collaborative relations between government and the ride-hailing platforms. On the ride-hailing side, one manager at SafeBoda informed me that the company’s founders had been in a ‘series of meetings’ with various government figures, while Bolt’s former country head similarly explained that they had been invited ‘several times’ to engage with the likes of KCCA and MoWT because ‘we can agree there is disorganisation that we can fix together’.<sup>143</sup> On the other side, one KCCA official recalled how staff in her department hoped that, in a context where the Authority had ‘always been disconnected’ from the workforce, ‘registration would be simplified by bringing in the ride-hailing companies’, while a member of the National Planning Board described the earlier arrival of ride-hailing as ‘a nice step towards organising’ the industry.<sup>144</sup> These comments are echoed by an influential (but then-embargoed) government report that was mentioned by several key informants during my time in Kampala,<sup>145</sup> which concludes that ride-hailing companies ‘could provide the data to support spatial organization, and work closely with regulators to improve the Boda Boda industry’ (AFD / Transitec, 2020: 22).<sup>146</sup>

Thus, although the entrance of ride-hailing’s global giants into Kampala’s boda industry has typically been presented as a competitive attempt to ‘take on’ SafeBoda in this new economic

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<sup>143</sup> Interviews with: senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22]; former country manager, Bolt, 19 November 2021 [K10]

<sup>144</sup> Interviews with: senior member of the National Planning Board and Paratransit Consultative Forum, 22 November 2021 [K11]; transport planning official, KCCA, 1 December 2021 [K14]

<sup>145</sup> Interviews with: senior member of the National Planning Board and Paratransit Consultative Forum, 22 November 2021 [K11]; senior official, Ministry of Works and Transport, 15 February 2022 [K33]

<sup>146</sup> This report, which was sometimes referred to as ‘the paratransit study’, was commissioned by the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) and carried out by a transport consultancy called Transitec. It was initially for internal use only, including during my fieldwork period, but is now publicly available.

frontier (Jackson, 2018; Namubiru, 2017; Olupot, 2018), what emerges here is an alternative course of events that cannot be understood in economic terms alone. In the Ugandan context, the arrival and expansion of digital ride-hailing has *also* been about testing out a new framework for extending formal control over the boda industry by effectively ‘outsourcing’ certain key tasks to the private sector (ITF, 2020: 19), such as registering riders, tracking them, and increasing their legal compliance, in the hope that such a move might help cut through the informal state’s (Khisra, 2013) long-running stranglehold on the politics of sectoral reform (see Chapter 6). The result is a techno-solutionist framing of digital inclusion as a ‘regulatory force that [...] “corrects” the unruliness of the city’ (Lee, 2018: 4), leading to consistent efforts by the platforms to market themselves as urban reform collaborators (e.g. Mugerwa, 2022; Muhamad, 2022; Nakirigya, 2022) as well as repeated moves by various state actors to link possible futures of boda regulation to new forms of digital registration and legibility (e.g. Kabahumuza and Odeng, 2022; New Vision, 2020b; Riley, 2022), buoyed by the idea that ‘it is easier to work with corporations than with the workers themselves’ (ITF, 2020: 19). In doing so, ride-hailing becomes what van Doorn (2022) calls a ‘platform fix’, bringing sleek technological solutions and private sector expertise to a (boda) crisis rooted in the prior failings of state politics.

Connected to this is the more specific idea that platformisation is providing a pathway to the formalisation of Kampala’s boda riders, and it is in this respect that the case serves as an apt illustration of one of the earlier literature review’s key themes: that in contrast to what has been happening across the global North, platforms in Southern cities are widely assumed to be formalising informal workers (see Chapter 2). This is not just about the ambitious claims put forward by ride-hailing executives and promotional materials, which draw frequently on phrases like ‘formalis[ing] the market’ (Sanford, in Nalumansi and Kikonyogo, 2023) and ‘bring[ing] some structure into an unregulated environment’ (Wright, in Russon, 2019). It is also about how these shifts have been portrayed more widely.

The research literature, which includes both policy-facing reports and academic scholarship, proves particularly illustrative in this regard. SafeBoda has attracted the most specific attention, described frequently as an initiative to create more ordered and better regulated forms of boda work (Doherty, 2022; Evans et al., 2018; Odendaal, 2021). Randall et al. (2023: 12) write of the platform’s ‘potential to organise informal transport modes and erode the boundaries between them and formal modes’. Muni et al. (2020) describe SafeBoda as having ‘cropped up to formalize the boda-boda sector in Uganda’. And in a context where ‘efforts at state regulation and industry self-regulation both failed in the mid-2000s and early 2010s’, Silverman (2021) argues that SafeBoda brings a much-needed ‘private-regulatory function’ to the sector, particularly in terms of its capacity to monitor and punish workers’ ‘malfeasance’.

More broadly, the policy research literature has tended to interpret the ‘Uberisation’ of Kampala’s boda industry as a vital step towards its eventual formalisation, with the introduction of employer-like figures, cashless payment systems and efforts to both professionalise and de-risk boda work all presented as evidence of this transition (AfDB, 2022; Gachoka and Winiacki, 2020; Lakemann and Lay, 2019; Munu, 2019; Tinka and Behrens, 2019).

Thus, in contrast to ride-hailing’s popular depiction as an instrument of disruption, what we instead see in Kampala is a concerted attempt by these companies to position themselves as having the very opposite effect: not disrupting traditional operators *per se*, but helping to finally regulate them once and for all (Adegoke, 2022). As SafeBoda’s current CEO recently put it:

Unlike in other continents whereby ride-hailing has been used to disrupt existing public transport models, I believe that for East Africa, ride-hailing companies can actually formalise the market [...] SafeBoda can help support the government to help improve regulation and quality, which is more challenging when there is less organization within the industry (Sanford, in Nalumansi and Kikonyogo, 2023).

### III LANDSCAPES OF REGULATION

So far in this chapter we have taken an initial look at the changing nature of boda work over the past decade, particularly in terms of what the new models consist of on paper, and laid out the kinds of transformative promises that are boldly claimed to accompany riders’ inclusion in the platform economy. But what about the regulatory dimensions of this shift? This final section examines the new boda economy from three distinct yet connected regulatory angles. The first considers the relationship between platforms and existing regulations as they relate to boda riders, and specifically how the companies have gone about ensuring – or rather, navigating – their riders’ compliance with established road traffic law. The second considers the regulatory relationship between platforms and boda workers more directly, taking a closer look at the kinds of employment relationships being brought into the sector as a result of digital inclusion and showing that, across the board, *all digital riders are gig workers*. Finally, the third section switches tack to consider how the platforms themselves are regulated (or not) by the Ugandan state.

## *i Navigating compliance*

Making Kampala's roads safer for both riders and passengers is central to the ride-hailing 'deal' in Uganda. But beyond issuing safety equipment and corporate 'codes of conduct', what measures have the various platforms taken to ensure that, in a context where roughly 90% of workers do not hold the necessary operating permits (Kwagala et al., 2022), their riders become more compliant with existing road traffic law?

A picture of real unevenness emerges, ranging from subsidising riders' documentation to circumventing these formal requirements by enacting alternative, firm-led forms of professionalisation. Uber is an example of the former approach, taking a position from the outset to only onboard riders already in possession of the official license necessary for commercial motorcycle operation, referred to as a Class A permit and issued by the Uganda Revenue Authority.<sup>147</sup> Keen to avoid the kinds of legal tangles and controversies previously experienced elsewhere in the world, the company insisted that any boda rider operating through the Uber app must be fully compliant with existing Ugandan traffic law – something also confirmed to me by a former legal advisor to the company.<sup>148</sup> 'When there are customers from Europe, America', the former Uber head told me, 'this is what they want'.

However, this approach proved neither straightforward nor cheap. One of Uber's 'biggest problems' during its early operations was trying to find enough riders who actually held the permit in the first place, quickly learning that the cost of acquiring one put most of the workforce off. 'It's the same cost as getting a license for a car', the former lead explained. 'This is something we made a bit of noise about with the transport ministry, because the high cost makes getting the license very unappealing for riders'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, simply willing riders to apply for one did not work:

[We] tried to encourage riders to get the license [but] scaling is a bit of a problem. Riders are having to go through a process in order to get the license and they see it as a hassle. It takes a day, and because they work hand to mouth they just stick to the street instead.

The solution to this was an expensive one. Rather than holding out for riders to become legally compliant through encouragement alone, Uber decided to pay for the permits themselves. According to the legal advisor mentioned above, once insurance costs were also factored in – another official requirement that most riders again do not adhere to – Uber ended up having

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<sup>147</sup> Interview with former country manager, Uber, 29 November 2021 [K13]

<sup>148</sup> Interview with lawyer and former legal advisor to Uber, 10 February 2022 [K30]

to spend an average of \$150 on each rider it brought onboard.<sup>149</sup> As the former country lead put it to me: ‘We burned quite a bit of money on that’.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, some companies have attempted to bypass the need for licensing altogether. SafeBoda, for example, does not require its riders to hold a Class A permit upon registration and it does not subsidise their applications, as Uber did. Instead, the company attempts to get around this issue by putting its new riders through extensive training programmes in road safety, which the ex-Uber head described as a shrewd way of avoiding the expensive licensing requirement.<sup>150</sup> Conceived initially as week-long courses held at the company’s HQ, these trainings were later shifted to a purpose-built ‘SafeBoda Academy’ established in 2018 with Steven Kasiima, the then Director of Traffic Police and guest of honour at the Academy’s launch, remarking at the time how ‘SafeBoda riders are an example to other boda boda riders on the street’ (Big Eye Uganda, 2018) – apparently regardless of whether they held the required permits or not. Bolt, meanwhile, ‘didn’t do anything at all. They would just wait for the trained or licensed riders to come from Uber and SafeBoda’.<sup>151</sup>

There is further patchiness as far as insurance is concerned. Though a formal requirement of commercial boda work – according to law, all riders must hold at least third-party insurance – only a handful of companies either enforce or pay for this. As mentioned above, Uber falls into this category (as does Tugende on the financing side). In other cases, some companies like SafeBoda partner with commercial providers selling low-cost insurance packages to those in the informal economy. Turaco is one such example: a for-profit ‘insuretech’ partner of SafeBoda that, in its branding, describes how ‘traditional insurers are missing an opportunity by failing to reach low-income earners’ (Turaco, 2023). Though not compulsory, for SafeBoda riders wishing to take out Turaco’s basic package the cost is UGX 6,000 per month (approx. \$1.50), deducted automatically from their SafeBoda ‘e-wallet’ and covering their expenses should they end up in hospital (but only from the third night onwards).

## **ii      *Digital work = gig work***

What kinds of employment relationships exist between the boda platforms and their workers, and to what extent does this mark a departure from the long-running status quo?

Again, there are some apparent differences here between the major companies. For the two big multinationals, Uber and Bolt, careful attention has been paid to downplaying the existence

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<sup>149</sup> Interview with lawyer and former legal advisor to Uber, 10 February 2022 [K30]

<sup>150</sup> It is worth noting here that this interviewee’s [K13] work history includes a stint at SafeBoda in Uganda.

<sup>151</sup> Interview with former country manager, Uber, 29 November 2021 [K13]



of an employment relationship by creating distance between themselves and riders. Despite Uber's subsidisation of new joiners' compliance costs, since its early days the company has been keen to minimise its involvement in riders' working lives. According to their former country manager, 'The license was made compulsory, but apart from that there are very few rules apart from safe riding and following road rules'.<sup>152</sup> Forming a kind of 'bare minimum' approach, this strategy can be read as trying to strike a balance between adhering to existing formal regulation as far as traffic law was concerned, whilst reducing the appearance of employer-like behaviour that might, if left unchecked, lead to questions around Uber's legal obligations towards workers. He went on:

There was no enforcement of number of trips or restrictions around app use. We wanted to avoid anything that would make riders look like they were being classified as workers. At that time [around 2017 / 2018] there was a lot of talk about the classification of riders. Things happening in London and other cities. Our legal team were being very sensitive about this. So anything that could have made it look like Uber were controlling riders was being avoided.

Bolt took a similar approach. Reflecting on how the company's strategies had changed since arriving in Uganda, their country manager explained to me that whereas previously there were arrangements in place to facilitate riders' access to both smartphones and motorcycles, including through partnerships with asset financing companies, this was no longer the case. The same was true for branded reflector jackets, which had likewise been phased out. 'We want to give drivers as much ownership as possible', he said; 'the more liability there is, the less the driver is in control'. Over time the company had learned to avoid 'offering too much liability because that takes away control from the driver. So we have no dos and don'ts. There are no conditions. There is no contractual agreement. It is purely gig economy'. He wrapped up by underlining this key point: Bolt's riders were 'simply partners. We don't want them to be employees'.<sup>153</sup>

This shared position of arms-length engagement and projection of minimal 'liability' stands in stark contrast to the way SafeBoda has historically approached rider relations. Relative to Uber and Bolt, SafeBoda not only insists that its riders wear bright orange, company-branded uniform whilst logged-on but also goes much further in facilitating their access to work-related products and equipment, such as motorcycle loans, smartphones and financial services – all via corporate links or formal partnerships with other companies.

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<sup>152</sup> Interview with former country manager, Uber, 29 November 2021 [K13]

<sup>153</sup> Interview with country manager, Bolt, 19 November 2021 [K10]

Despite these differences in approach, however, at the most fundamental level there is more that unites Kampala's boda platforms than separates. In all cases considered here, and regardless of whether companies are transparent about it or not, digital riders are gig workers – or 'fully independent business people' in SafeBoda (n.d.) legalese. This designation, sometimes referred to in the literature as the 'worker misclassification' move (Stanford, 2017), is heralded by the platforms as an important advance in how Ugandan boda work is structured, freeing riders from the unproductive and inefficient 'ideology' of the fixed stage and affording them greater flexibility in the labour market, with minimal 'controls', 'rules' or 'conditions' from above.<sup>154</sup> But at the same time, it is also a move that brings 'platform-ised' riders no closer to the legal rights, benefits and protections that are afforded to formal sector employees under Ugandan law, thereby raising questions about what 'formalising the market' (Sanford, in Nalumansi and Kikonyogo, 2023) actually means in this context.

What also binds these companies is the easily detectable tension that underlies their entrepreneurial narratives of rider freedom and flexibility, seeking as they all do to instil a particular kind of work ethic across their network of 'service providers' through codes of conduct, terms-of-use agreements and punitive measures when a rider misbehaves or underperforms. Even under Bolt's 'purely gig economy' model, for example, riders need to follow 'quality guidelines' which, 'if they violate then they will get reprimanded'.<sup>155</sup> This includes situations where, 'if a rider rating falls below 4.5 [out of five stars] for one week, they may receive a warning. If it extends beyond two weeks then a suspension will follow. If a rider falls short of standards multiple times, they will be deactivated'. SafeBoda, meanwhile, infuses its approach to building a 'community'<sup>156</sup> of entrepreneurs with a range of measures designed to ensure compliance with the company's safety standards and Terms-of-Use, including, as we will see in Chapter 9, through the deployment of street-level 'field' teams and officers whose job is to patrol the capital's streets whilst searching out – and disciplining – errant SafeBoda riders.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Interviews with: country manager, Bolt, 19 November 2021 [K10]; former country manager, Uber, 29 November 2021 [K13]; senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22]

<sup>155</sup> Interview with former country manager, Bolt, 19 November 2021 [K10]

<sup>156</sup> Interview with senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22]

<sup>157</sup> Interview with senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22]; also personal observations and informal conversations with Geoffrey

### *iii Landscapes of deregulation*

In terms of the regulatory relationships that have accompanied the recently changing nature of boda work, we have looked at both how these new actors have navigated questions of riders' legal compliance as well as the kinds of (non-)employment relations that exist between platforms and those who work through them. In this final piece of the chapter, we consider a third domain of regulation: how are the companies themselves regulated by the Ugandan state?

In an illuminating episode from 2022, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) published a list of courier companies found to be trading without the necessary operating licenses, which included SafeBoda (following a more concerted effort to upscale its delivery services during the pandemic) and two of the country's major e-commerce platforms, Jumia and Glovo. In its public notice, the Commission called on all companies named to 'immediately stop providing illegal services' if they wanted to avoid legal action. In immediate response, a newly formed union body called the E-Trade and Start-Ups Association of Uganda countered with the following: 'None of those companies are courier companies. We are simply consumers of courier services' (in Waswa, 2022).

The central issue here concerns the registration status of the platforms in question. Through the worker misclassification move, companies like SafeBoda, Jumia and Glovo are able to avoid being registered as either courier or transport companies in Uganda, and instead technically operate as multi-sided 'marketplaces' bringing together different, sometimes previously disconnected, groups of sellers, consumers and distributors. In some cases, such as with Jumia, this involves outsourcing the direct administration and management of boda labour to what are known as local 'third-party logistics' (3PL) companies, such as Kwanza or Crest,<sup>158</sup> thus further minimising the appearance of an employment relationship. Through manoeuvres like these, Kampala's boda platforms side-step not only the costs that come with providing employee protections and benefits, but also the legal regulations and licensing requirements applicable to traditional transport operators – as has been precisely and repeatedly the case elsewhere, both globally (Brail, 2022; Thelen, 2018) and regionally in Africa (Anwar and Graham, 2021).

The same situation applies as much to ride-hailing platforms as it does those focusing on e-commerce and delivery. As Figure 14 below illustrates, by claiming to operate simply as 'intermediaries' and 'marketplaces' (SafeBoda, n.d.), companies like SafeBoda are able to legally extricate themselves from both responsibilities towards riders and obligations to

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<sup>158</sup> Interview with digital rider, 11 February 2022 [76]; fieldnotes, 3 December 2021

provide a safe, high-quality service, with the implications of this corporate classification move filtering directly into Terms-of-Use documents that effectively transfer all transactional and workplace risk onto individual riders and passengers.

Figure 14. SafeBoda's Terms of Use, with key sections highlighted

- 3.3 We have no responsibility whatsoever for the actions or conduct of any service providers or Users. We have no obligation to intervene in any way in disputes that may arise between drivers, riders, or third parties. Responsibility for the decisions made regarding providing or accepting transportation rests solely with the User and the Driver.
- 3.4 We will not be liable for any damages, direct, incidental, and or consequential, arising out of the use of SafeBoda, including, without limitation, damages arising out of communicating and or meeting with other participants of SafeBoda, or introduced to you via SafeBoda. Such damages include and are not limited to, physical damages, bodily injuries, death, and emotional distress and discomfort.
- 3.5 Drivers shall take reasonable precautions in all actions and interactions with any party they may interact with through the use of the services. SafeBoda has no control over the identity or actions of the users and service providers and SafeBoda requests that users exercise caution and good judgment when using the services. Service providers and users use the services at their own risk.

Source: SafeBoda (n.d.)

The wider context surrounding these particular Terms-of-Use, and digital boda work more generally, is that the companies in question here are barely, if at all, regulated by the state, instead opting to view themselves as 'self-regulators' of the industry (Ciulli and Saka-Helmhout, 2023: 18). For years the existing regulatory environment in Uganda has been slow to grapple with who these new players are, what they do, and how to classify and govern them. While fresh regulations for ride-hailing companies had supposedly been drafted at the time of fieldwork,<sup>159</sup> by the time Fairwork published its first Uganda ratings in August 2023 – in which 11 out of the 12 platforms assessed received a score of 0/10 against the initiative's minimum

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<sup>159</sup> Interview with lawyer and former legal advisor to Uber, 10 February 2022 [K30]

standards of fair digital work – it was apparent that no major changes had been made.<sup>160</sup> As the report plainly states, ‘There are no specific regulations in Uganda that specifically address the gig economy and the digital labour platforms within it’ (Fairwork, 2023: 12).

Asset financing takes place within a similar landscape of deregulation. Though the new boda financing companies talk frequently of the advantages they hold over Uganda’s established ‘bricks-and-mortar’ banks in terms of providing access to credit, portraying them as ‘traditional institutions’ that ‘move slowly, can’t scale’ and have ‘limited reach’ (Asaak, in Republic, 2023), it is also the case that fintech companies in Uganda are not subject to the same kinds of legal regulations that traditional banks are, with many operating largely as unregulated entities (Rowan et al., 2018: 78-79). Reflecting this, recent news reports have drawn attention to the absence of state control over the boda industry’s lending companies (Muhindo, 2022; Namara, 2022), while one legal expert suggested to me that the reason ‘alternative lenders’ have done so well in recent years is ‘because of a lack of regulation’: there is a ‘requirement just that there must be a written contract’, he explained, effectively allowing companies like Tugende, Watu and Asaak to structure their boda loans with whatever interest rates they feel they can get away with.<sup>161</sup>

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## **Conclusion**

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This chapter has provided an introduction to the new economies of digital inclusion that have swept across Kampala’s boda industry over the past decade. It began in Section I by offering a basic outline of what these new models and technologies of boda work involve, highlighting the sector’s shift towards digital labour platforms on the one hand, and platform-enabled asset financing on the other. These shifts have brought an array of new private sector interests and companies into the fold, which for the most part are linked to multinational corporate operations and backed by global venture capital. Across the board, they are for-profit enterprises.

The arrival of these new technologies has been accompanied by ambitious promises of transformation and an emancipatory, reform-facing slant to narratives of digital and financial inclusion. In Section II we looked at three of these in particular: i) better livelihoods, both in the form of higher earnings and individual economic empowerment; ii) safer roads, geared around

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<sup>160</sup> The single exception was Glovo, which for providing ‘clear and transparent terms and conditions’ as well as ‘due process for decisions affecting workers’, received a score of 2/10.

<sup>161</sup> Interview with lawyer and former legal advisor to Uber, 10 February 2022 [K30]

the reduction of physical risk for both boda workers and passengers alike; and iii) stronger regulation, with the expansion of ride-hailing in particular linked to new forms of what Chilson (2021) terms 'digital legibility', improved prospects for effective governance 'from above', and a step in the direction of workers' formalisation. While the platform companies have made concerted efforts to craft these sorts of transformative narratives, strategically positioning themselves as innovative social enterprises swooping in to help liberate boda riders from the entrenched inefficiencies of analogue work and politics, wider actors have played their part too. This includes journalists and media outlets, analysts and academics, and urban planners and government officials – the latter of whom went out of their way to incorporate ride-hailing companies into their plans for sectoral reform during the mid- to late-2010s.

And yet there are some crucial tensions here, evident even before we get to the matter of boda riders' actual experiences with these new modes of digital and financial inclusion in Chapters 8 and 9. Turning in Section III to questions of regulation, we quickly discover that despite claiming to help tighten the regulatory grip over the industry, for the last 10 years the companies themselves have been more or less operating in a regulatory vacuum and with minimal oversight from the state. We see that despite promising to upgrade safety standards, as a result of differences between business models and corporate priorities what emerges is a series of partial and patchy moves towards greater legal compliance and road safety, rather than a cohesive push for wholesale reform. And for all the talk around livelihood improvement and workers' economic empowerment, in all cases here we learn that boda riders are classified as 'independent contractors' rather than employees protected by labour law, meaning that, as before and as with their analogue counterparts, they continue to exist as informal workers hopping from one 'gig' to the next.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Realities of inclusion: requirements, relations and returns**

If the preceding chapter provided an introduction to Kampala's newly 'platform-ised' boda economy, then it also opened up a number of questions. Do these corporate efforts to include represent genuine routes to economic empowerment and decent work or additional forms of extraction and control over riders' livelihoods? Is there more to the process of becoming one's own boss than the promotional discourses of emancipation and autonomy appear to suggest? And in what ways might the new forms of inclusion be deepening rather than overcoming the kinds of problematic working conditions outlined previously in Chapter 5, leading to what Gayatri Nair (2022: 389) has termed additional 'new terrains of precarity' within the digital economy?

This chapter starts to engage with these questions by shifting the empirical focus from the claims and positionings of companies to the experiences and perspectives of workers (Gandini, 2019; van Doorn, 2017). Drawing on a combination of in-depth interview and survey data from riders, it moves beyond a consideration of whether workers are either being included or not within new digital and financial arrangements – and therefore beyond a simplistic binary categorisation of 'included vs. excluded' populations (McCarthy, 2010; Fischer, 2020) – to ask what the *terms of inclusion* look like and how they shape livelihood outcomes (Heeks, 2022; Hickey and du Toit, 2007; Meagher, 2021). Making this move allows a number of core theoretical issues to come to the fore that can help us better situate and understand the nature

of recent transitions within Kampala's boda industry, including processes of both digital *dis-* and *re-*intermediation, platform-enabled methods of economic extraction, and contested control over the labour process. They also set the scene for Chapter 9, which examines the forms of 'friction' (Popiel and Vasudevan, 2024; Tsing, 2012) that emerge when disillusion with these new ways of working accumulates among riders.

This present chapter is split into three sections, each of which analyses the terms of boda riders' inclusion with the new platform economy from a distinct angle. We begin in **Section I** with the *requirements* of inclusion, asking what the process of 'becoming included' within these new economic arrangements actually involves, beyond what the companies state on paper. In **Section II** we prise apart the *relations* of inclusion, exploring not just the uneven relationships and power imbalances that exist within these new, supposedly transformative arrangements but also the ways in which these dynamics can actually threaten their viability in the long run. And then finally, in **Section III** we hold corporate claims up to scrutiny by turning to the *returns* of inclusion, using carefully gathered data to examine the all-important question of rider earnings.

## **I REQUIREMENTS: WHAT JOINING REALLY LOOKS LIKE**

We have seen how these new modes of 'platform-ised' inclusion are framed by the companies behind them (Chapter 7), but what does it actually take to enter into these arrangements in the first place? In this opening section we examine joining requirements from a worker's perspective, focusing primarily on riders' experiences with ride-hailing platforms but also weaving in some detail on the new forms of motorcycle financing that have proliferated under platformisation. It is split into three short parts. In the first we look at eligibility requirements. In the second we examine how much it costs to secure one's place inside the platform economy, showing that inclusion does not always come cheap. And in the third we look at the safety trainings that new riders must undergo before being authorised to work digitally.

### ***i Eligibility requirements***

What emerged clearly from Chapter 7 was the extent to which different ride-hailing companies have taken different approaches in their engagements with boda riders: from arms-length models (Bolt, Uber) to a more open embrace of employer-like behaviour (SafeBoda), and from subsidising riders' licenses (Uber) to side-stepping this requirement via road safety trainings



(SafeBoda). But when we ask what joining really looks like from a worker's perspective, it is the extent to which experiences of registration have also differed among riders *on the same platform* that perhaps comes out more than anything else.

This is most clearly seen in relation to SafeBoda, still the largest of Kampala's ride-hailing companies. During the company's earliest years, when enthusiasm for what the new technology might bring to the industry was at its most palpable, riders were applying in such high numbers that management placed limits upon how many could be accepted each day.<sup>162</sup> Applicants at this time were systematically required to present evidence of existing stage membership, which despite SafeBoda's criticisms of the outdated inefficiencies of 'stage ideology',<sup>163</sup> was nonetheless incorporated into the company's 'vetting and recruitment model' (Doherty, 2022: 247) as a clever way of both filtering out potentially rogue applicants and assuring government that riders' origins were being properly traced.<sup>164</sup> My interviews with long-term riders, association heads and platform staff all underline this early link with the stage, at least as far as registration was concerned (see also Douglas, 2015; Lule, 2018).<sup>165</sup>

This was not to last, however. Serving as a neat illustration of the 'mutating' nature of platformisation (Stehlin et al., 2020: 1251), another consistent theme to emerge from these interviews was that, over time, SafeBoda's entry requirements have become noticeably less stringent than they once were. In particular, those who joined later, once the initial hype and rush to join had subsided, appear to have been only occasionally asked for evidence of stage membership. Many were even able to register without it, as one rider recounted to us during a focus group:

At first I didn't get the stage because it was difficult for me. The stages were very expensive, so I decided to join the SafeBoda app [in 2019] and it was easy for me [...] The good thing with SafeBoda was that they would not ask for your stage.<sup>166</sup>

SafeBoda's inconsistent enforcement of the stage requirement is clearly evident in the survey data. Table 6 below shows what riders working across the three main ride-hailing platforms

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<sup>162</sup> My interlocutor Geoffrey, who was one of the first riders to join SafeBoda, told me that demand to join the platform was so strong during its initial years that riders would sleep outside the company's HQ overnight hoping to grab one of the limited registration spots released each morning. This was also confirmed by other interviewees (e.g. participants in focus group discussion with former digital riders, 9 December 2021).

<sup>163</sup> Interview with senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22]

<sup>164</sup> Interview with former SafeBoda rider and employee, 18 January 2022 [K21]

<sup>165</sup> Interviews with: former SafeBoda rider and employee, 18 January 2022 [K21]; boda association leader, 3 February 2022 [K23]

<sup>166</sup> Participant in focus group discussion with digital riders, 9 December 2021

were asked for as part of their registration process, confirming not just distinct differences between the platforms but ‘within’ each one as well.

Table 6. Ride-hailing joining requirements among survey respondents

	Stage	Class A	Motorcycle	Motorcycle license	Medical records	ID Card	LC1 letter	Guarantor	Registration fee
<b>SafeBoda</b> (n = 317)	42%	7%	32%	2%	1%	97%	6%	5%	91%
<b>Bolt</b> (n = 34)	33%	12%	33%	6%	0%	100%	17%	3%	38%
<b>Uber</b> (n = 13)	42%	83%	50%	50%	8%	92%	8%	8%	67%
<b>Other</b> (n = 6)	0%	0%	40%	0%	0%	20%	0%	0%	20%

Source: survey data (n = 370)

What we see here is that, in contrast to the company’s still-‘official’ policy of only recruiting riders from stages,<sup>167</sup> most of the SafeBoda riders in our sample were *not* asked for proof of stage membership (58%). Given the relative stringency of this condition early on, this suggests a quite dramatic decline in enforcement over recent years. In fact, the share of SafeBoda riders who *were* asked about stage membership is similar to those under both Uber and Bolt, neither of whom rigorously stipulate or enforce such a requirement. Although the result is a picture of real unevenness, it is ultimately also one in which the majority of riders here have been able to work digitally without needing to possess, or at least to demonstrate, pre-existing links to a stage (*contra* Doherty, 2022).

In terms of wider requirements, Uber riders are unsurprisingly the ones who tended to be asked for their Class A operating license: 83% compared to just 12% of Bolt and 7% of SafeBoda riders. While this is squarely in line with Chapter 7’s discussion of ‘navigating compliance’, the 7% SafeBoda figure stands in contrast to a recent claim made by Private Sector Foundation Uganda (PSFU), the country’s ‘apex body for the private sector’, that ‘SafeBoda strives to ensure that compliance with Traffic laws is promoted in support of law enforcement authorities such as *owning a driver’s license or permit*, paying for a Public Service Vehicle License, and paying third-party insurance’ (PSFU, 2023: 2, emphasis added).<sup>168</sup>

<sup>167</sup> Interview with senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22]

<sup>168</sup> SafeBoda is a member of the PSFU.

Half of Uber riders also reported being asked for a motorcycle license compared to negligible shares of the other digital riders, which both further reflects the company's relatively strong commitment to ensuring riders' compliance with official licensing as other companies bypass these checks, but also indicates patchier enforcement in this regard than with the core issue of Class As. There are some similar inconsistencies as far as access to a motorcycle is concerned, with half of Uber's riders again asked about this compared to around one-third of SafeBoda and Bolt riders.

National ID was by quite some margin the most consistent feature of the registration process as a whole, with more than 90% of riders working across each of the three main platforms asked for this. By contrast, neither supporting letters from a Local Council 1 (LC1) chair, which are typically viewed as official proof of an individual's identity, residence and local legibility (in that the subject of the letter is demonstrated to be 'known' to local government), nor wider guarantor details appear to have been important parts of the process. Across the three major platforms, the share of riders reporting these requirements rarely nudged above 10%. The same can be said of medical records.

## **ii Inclusion payments**

A final inconsistency between the platforms concerns the payment of an initial registration fee. As Table 6 shows, just under two-thirds of Bolt riders and around one-third of Uber riders reported *not* having to make a payment, possibly reflecting temporary promotions that have been put in place from time to time in an effort to boost rider registrations. SafeBoda, on the other hand, appears to have been much more systematic in enforcing this requirement, with more than 90% of riders in the sample paying a registration fee. Although one-off, at a flat rate of UGX 50,000 (approx. \$13) this is nevertheless equivalent to more than three days' worth of average net earnings (see Section III). And what's more, it is not the only cost involved here.

As part of the ride-hailing effort to improve safety standards and levels of professionalism, digital riders are required to possess some basic equipment. This includes smartphones, helmets and reflector jackets; sometimes branded, sometimes not. But rather than being given these items in exchange for their registration fee, it is also a condition of riders' inclusion that they must pay for them.

Table 7 below presents the data, showing that the vast majority of surveyed riders acquired all three of the aforementioned items as part of their registration process. SafeBoda again proves the most systematic of the platforms in enforcing this standard: 99% of its riders reported receiving helmets and reflector jackets, while 88% received a smartphone. This came

at an average cost of UGX 427,000, meaning that the 317 SafeBoda riders in our survey spent on average nearly UGX 480,000 (approx. \$124) in order to join the platform (this broadly squares with the remarks of one former SafeBoda employee, who explained that most riders tend to be sold a ‘complete’ onboarding package at UGX 500,000, much of which is then paid off via weekly deductions from their app-based earnings – something we come back to in Chapters 9 and 10).<sup>169</sup> The corresponding costs incurred by Bolt and Uber riders are less expensive but still significant, and in all cases here the price of digital inclusion is at least equivalent to, if not dearer than, the price of ‘analogue’ stage membership (see Chapter 5).

Table 7. Inclusion payments among survey respondents

	% of riders who received equipment	Type of equipment received				Average cost (UGX)
		Smartphone	Helmets	Jacket	Phone holder	
<b>SafeBoda</b> (n = 317)	99%	88%	99%	99%	33%	427,000
<b>Bolt</b> (n = 34)	94%	65%	85%	91%	15%	247,000
<b>Uber</b> (n = 13)	92%	69%	92%	92%	8%	399,000
<b>Other</b> (n = 6)	66%	33%	33%	50%	0%	355,000

Source: survey data (n = 370)

As far as asset financing is concerned, although companies differ in whether they require applicants to already be in possession of either stage membership (Mogo, Tugende) or a digital profile (Asaak) – or indeed neither (Watu) – guarantors tend to be required across the board. Most of the time riders need two of these, and interviewees occasionally mentioned having to make informal payments to secure them and / or pay for the time they would have to take out of their day as part of the application process.<sup>170</sup> Referrals from a ride-hailing platform can sometimes help with this phase of the process, such as when dealing with Watu, but riders emphasised that this would only be provided ‘if you are working well and have no pending debts on helmets, reflector jacket and their phone’.<sup>171</sup>

<sup>169</sup> Interview with former SafeBoda rider and employee, 18 January 2022 [K21]

<sup>170</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 6 December 2021 [67]

<sup>171</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 30 October 2021 [32]

Another universal requirement for hire-purchase financing is an initial downpayment, which tends to be quite sizeable (see Section III). For example, of the 110 surveyed riders who took out a hire-purchase loan with one of the popular asset financing companies, an average of UGX 624,000 (approx. \$163) was spent on the downpayment alone, with 15 of these individuals fronting as much as UGX 1 million (approx. \$261) or higher. In some cases riders take out a separate loan just to be able to make such payments, but for many others the kinds of costs here are enough to price them out altogether, effectively rendering this particular form of financial inclusion inaccessible to those on the lowest incomes or lacking access to sufficient starting capital. Indeed, such was the case for several of those interviewed.<sup>172</sup>

### **iii Safety trainings**

As discussed in Chapter 7, rather than enforcing a licensing requirement upon applicants, SafeBoda has instead sought to raise safety standards by putting new riders through a customised training programme, which was initially designed and implemented in partnership with the Red Cross. Completing this training is a condition of entrance onto the platform, and the company continues to promote this as one of its main edges over competitors. As current country director, Catherine Tulina Kafumbe, recently reiterated: ‘The riders receive extensive training to make them the safest on the streets’ (Kafumbe, 2023).

Though these trainings remain a core requirement, it is clear from the qualitative data that they are now somewhat less ‘extensive’ than they once were. SafeBoda riders who joined relatively early on would routinely talk of the long duration of this training, which for interviewees like Wilson, who registered in 2016, lasted as long as two weeks.<sup>173</sup> A few years later this seemed to have roughly halved: Steven joined in 2019 and remembers, as with others who also joined around this time, being put through one week of training. By the time COVID-19 had arrived, sessions were down to as little as one day. Evert, a laid-off teacher who entered the boda industry without a stage, is but one case here among many.<sup>174</sup>

While it is possible that lockdown restrictions may have forced a further compression of SafeBoda’s safety trainings – a trend that the interview data suggest was already well underway prior to the pandemic – the picture here is one of a gradual dilution of entry requirements and processes over time, especially when the increasingly optional condition of stage membership is also taken into account. This has led many boda riders to view SafeBoda

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<sup>172</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 2 December 2021 [62]; analogue rider, 6 December 2021 [66]

<sup>173</sup> Interview with digital rider, 29 October 2021 [48]

<sup>174</sup> Interview with digital rider, 13 October 2021 [34]

as the easiest way to get online, with relatively few requirements enforced *in practice* beyond the financial costs of inclusion outlined above (which in any case do not necessarily need to be paid upfront). As one interviewee explained, ‘they [SafeBoda] don’t have many requirements. That’s why there are so many riders [with them]’.<sup>175</sup>

There are several reasons why ride-hailing platforms might relax their entry requirements over time. Sometimes increasing competition from rival companies compels it by intensifying the scramble for workers, as appears to have been the case in Hanoi, Vietnam (Nguyen and Turner, 2023). On other occasions it is the high turnover of existing workers that creates pressures to rapidly replenish the platform’s on-demand workforce – a common dynamic of gig work trajectories around the world (Cameron, 2022; Peters, 2020; Rosenblat, 2018; Schned et al., 2024; van Doorn and Chen, 2021), and one which has also been central to the story of ride-hailing in Kampala’s boda industry, as we will see in Chapter 9. But whatever the driving factor, the result is an approach that risks undermining the very standardisation of boda labour that the platforms are aiming (or at least claiming) to achieve, compounded even further by the differentiated way in which questions of legal compliance and road safety have been navigated by the ‘big three’.

## II RELATIONS: WHAT THE EMPOWERMENT NARRATIVE OBSCURES

We have seen what the requirements of inclusion entail, but what happens once riders are ‘inside’ the platform economy? In this section we look at how the relationships between riders and platforms are structured, exploring both the additional forms of control and discipline that digital riders are now subject to as well as their attitudes towards their new ersatz employers. In doing so, the section revisits the concept of disintermediation – something which the companies frame as central to their emancipatory offering (Sitas et al., 2023) – by looking at the various layers of *reintermediation* that have accompanied the platformisation of Kampala’s boda industry. Shifting the analytical lens from disintermediation to reintermediation helps illuminate how pre-existing institutions of boda work are to some extent being displaced and replaced by new forms of digital and financial intermediation (French and Leyshon, 2004; Langley and Leyshon, 2017), with the result that, rather than simply being liberated from ‘predatory’ or ‘inefficient’ traditional analogue arrangements, riders are instead finding

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<sup>175</sup> Interview with digital rider, 1 February 2022 [73]

themselves incorporated into a new kind of power relation – and confronted with a new kind of boss.

*i* ***New rules: ‘You must play by the rules of the company, which most of us do not want’<sup>176</sup>***

Algorithmic management is central to the day-to-day operation of digital labour platforms around the world (Jarrahi et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2019). This increasingly widespread practice concerns the delegation of managerial functions within a given workplace to algorithms – simply, sets of computational rules to be followed in order to solve a specific problem – and involves a wide range of data-driven tools and techniques to assign jobs, track worker performance and sync up the changing rhythms of supply and demand (Lee et al., 2015). It is an important feature too of life under Kampala’s ride-hailing platforms.

The algorithmic management of the capital’s boda riders takes multiple forms and serves various ends, all primarily in the interests of the platform companies. To start with, it is used as a *disciplinary technique* to punish those falling short of acceptable customer service standards and to instil what some have called practices of ‘anticipatory compliance’ among workers (Bucher et al., 2021: 44; Wood et al., 2019). Digital riders whose customer ratings fall below pre-determined thresholds, for example, find themselves being selected for remedial attention, which as Bolt’s former country manager explained involves warnings, suspension and eventual deactivation depending on how long a rider remains below 4.5 stars (out of 5).<sup>177</sup> Similar consequences may also follow if riders are found to be rejecting too many trips each day, as appears to be the case with SafeBoda,<sup>178</sup> or when couriers look to reassign orders they have already accepted on the app. To avoid these detrimental outcomes, riders must learn to ‘pacify’ the platform algorithms by remaining compliant at all times (Bucher et al., 2021: 45).

Second, on many platforms algorithmic management also takes the form of *gamification* (van Doorn and Chen, 2021). This works by providing riders with daily or weekly targets to hit, with the promise of bonus pay-outs if they are successful in doing so. SafeBoda has been particularly prolific in its use of this system over the years, at some points offering riders an additional UGX 30,000 (approx. \$8) for completing 25 trips through the app in a single day.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 12 October 2021 [30]

<sup>177</sup> Interview with former country manager, Bolt, 19 November 2021 [K10]

<sup>178</sup> Interview with former SafeBoda rider and employee, 18 January 2022 [K21]

<sup>179</sup> Interview with former digital rider, 15 November 2021 [56]

By offering riders the chance to effectively claw back commission losses and offset low pay (see below), this technique helps to increase their work-rate throughout the day and ensure that workers remain logged on for longer.

Third, algorithmic management is sometimes used to *nudge* riders into adopting certain economic practices that more directly benefit the platforms. For example, in order to coax riders into accepting more cashless jobs – jobs which, it bears emphasising, usually provide them with less remuneration per trip than those paid for in cash – a few years ago SafeBoda introduced a rule that prevented riders from using the app if they started running a negative balance in their digital wallet.<sup>180</sup> This would tend to occur when riders failed to pass on commissions after they had been paid by customers in cash, effectively leaving the company out of pocket and creating unwanted friction in its cashflow. The negative balance move was thus designed to increase SafeBoda’s capacity to automate revenue capture whilst channelling more data and money through its e-payment infrastructure; important priorities for a company seeking profitability through cashless products and processes.<sup>181</sup>

Fourth, algorithms are used by various platforms to *control pricing* – and it is this that, perhaps more than anything else, cuts to the core of what riders must trade off if they wish to participate in the digital economy. In the long-running traditional system, the pricing of individual jobs and trips emerges through a careful process of ‘analogue’ decision-making carried out by boda riders, whose calculations must factor in a complex and wide-ranging variety of considerations. These include, in no particular order... The weather. Fuel prices. Perceived status of a customer. The potential for them to provide repeat work. How business has been faring so far that day. Whether the route of a trip aligns with where the rider is already heading (or sends them in the opposite direction, thereby increasing fuel consumption). The nature and location of the particular roads to be navigated. Levels of congestion and the likelihood of getting stuck in a time-consuming jam. Proximity to curfew hour and the risk of arrest. And of course, the strength of their bargaining skills.

From a rider’s perspective, or what Qadri and D’Ignazio (2022) call the ‘view from within’, these are all examples of the kinds of things that matter when working out the price of a job, and which also take time, experience and often some initial failure to get right.<sup>182</sup> But as analogue forms of worker-led pricing are replaced with algorithmic ones beyond riders’ control, they are

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<sup>180</sup> Interview with digital rider, 13 December 2021 [68]

<sup>181</sup> Interviews with: former SafeBoda rider and employee, 18 January 2022 [K21]; senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22].

<sup>182</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 14 October 2021 [39]; digital rider, 15 October 2021 [41]; analogue rider, 15 October 2021 [42]



all but stripped out of the equation; disintermediated from the process, as it were. In their place, a digitised system of ‘dynamic pricing’ that helps platform companies ‘respond to sudden fluctuations of service demand in a more granular and agile manner’ (van Doorn, 2020: 3), whilst enabling them to pitch low-cost, haggle-free, frictionless transactions as a selling point to potential customers.

In logging on to the platform economy, boda riders thus lose the ‘authority’ to set their own pricing, as one rider put it,<sup>183</sup> whilst consenting to the *reintermediation* of this crucial process by a third party. In doing so, pricing becomes disembedded from the everyday circumstances faced by digital riders, whose work it must be remembered continues to take place in an ‘analogue’, street-level setting (Heiland, 2022; Vallas and Schor, 2020), and reincorporated as a fundamental feature of the platform business model. Seen from this angle, the platforms’ restructuring of boda work is not just about the disintermediation of the boda stage but of riders too, as they find themselves being evacuated from the pricing process.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that the new controls on platform workers take not just algorithmic forms, but *corporeal* ones too. During my time in Kampala, I occasionally noticed groups of what initially seemed like SafeBoda riders stationed at major intersections stopping and speaking to fellow colleagues, but whom upon closer inspection were kitted out in orange jackets reading ‘Field Agent’. When I asked an operations manager at the company about these episodes, he explained that these groups were being tasked by management to personally check up on riders’ compliance with SafeBoda rules whilst out on the road.<sup>184</sup> Were they wearing a helmet, for example, or stopping at the red lights?<sup>185</sup> He later mentioned them again whilst discussing rider exits from the app, which as Chapter 9 goes on to show has become increasingly commonplace in recent years. What often happens, he explained, is that riders simply leave without saying anything or returning their helmets and uniforms, leading the company to deploy ‘field agents’ as a way of monitoring equipment misuse and apprehending errant former riders.

His words came back to me a few days after our interview when I spotted another collection of field agents at a busy crossroads, but this time with a large heap of bright orange helmets piled up on the pavement next to them. An apt illustration of the way in which ‘human, non-

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<sup>183</sup> Interview with former digital rider, 5 November 2020 [13]

<sup>184</sup> Interview with senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22]

<sup>185</sup> It was also put to me by one SafeBoda rider that when the company catches riders who have failed to comply with such rules, it temporarily confiscates their equipment and fines them UGX 50,000 (interview with digital rider, 14 October 2021 [40])

digital' and 'coercive' methods of governance continue to regulate life in the platform economy, despite them so far bypassing academic scrutiny (Ciulli and Saka-Helmhout, 2024: 17).

*ii Pricing politics: 'If you are used to bargaining with passengers, you can't work for the companies'<sup>186</sup>*

Though Kampala's boda platforms arrived with promises of individual economic empowerment, in practice the new forms of management and control that have accompanied this process serve to drastically undermine any such prospect. While there are some who like the fact that apps allow them to circumvent the analogue institution of the stage (and its attendant costs and rules [ITF, 2020]), the boda riders I encountered through this research were frequently critical of the industry's shift towards digital ride-hailing. What's more, this was not just the case amongst those who had refused the offer of platform work and who thus remained excluded from the new economy, as perhaps might be expected. It was readily apparent among 'included' riders too, for whom the realities of digital incorporation had often failed to live up to the hype.

There are a number of inter-related dynamics at play here but pricing sits at the core, having proven increasingly problematic from a workers' perspective in two major ways. On the one hand, it goes to the heart of what riders must reluctantly trade off if they wish to participate in the platform economy: autonomy over the economic terms of boda work, crystallised most painfully in the loss of 'authority' over the crucial matter of price-setting. On the other, it underpins the central problem that most riders identify with platform work: low and declining pay.

Starting with the former, trip pricing for many riders is about far more than the amount being set. Although boda riding is stigmatised in Ugandan society as dirty work that most turn to only as a last resort – one interviewee who found himself forced into the sector during the pandemic described this shift as 'leaving a smart job and going to do a dirty job'<sup>187</sup> – it nonetheless has certain attributes which many workers find desirable. One of these is the relative economic independence that riding affords compared to various alternatives in the wider labour market, particularly those characterised by exploitative employment relationships that involve, in the words of one interview, 'working for someone else for little money'.<sup>188</sup> This was often linked to their decision to take up boda work in the first place, which they framed as a way of escaping

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<sup>186</sup> Interview with digital rider, 4 November 2020 [09]

<sup>187</sup> Interview with digital rider, 21 January 2022 [72]

<sup>188</sup> Interview with digital rider, 1 February 2022 [73]

bad experiences in the workplace under former bosses or managers and regaining some degree of control over their economic lives (see also Chapter 4). Several riders with histories in the construction sector, for example, talked negatively about the treatment they received, citing long hours, hard work, poor remuneration and late or withheld payments. While hard work and long hours are also daily features of boda riding, what sets it apart is the modicum of power that individuals regain over their schedules and earning potential. As one rider put it when explaining why he would never return to the construction sector, ‘because here [with boda work], you are self-employed. Here, I get the money I want’.<sup>189</sup>

By shifting online, riders cede a crucial aspect of the autonomy that first brought them into the industry: the capacity to make their own economic decisions and assert at least some control over their working conditions. Hostility towards this feature was subsequently one of the strongest themes to emerge through the course of interviewing, reflecting a more general insight that despite their stock promises of greater freedom and flexibility, digital labour platforms nevertheless exert considerable power over the labour process (Anwar et al., 2023; Mendonça and Kougiannou, 2023; Vallas and Schor, 2020).

For riders yet to transition towards digital work, this often proved a deal-breaker. ‘How can you sit somewhere and determine the cost of the ride without looking at the conditions at play?’, one rider reasoned.<sup>190</sup> Another likened participation in the ride-hailing economy to ‘working for someone else because you must play by the rules of the company, which most of us do not want’. Echoing the attitudes of many others, he went on: ‘For me, I want to keep independence in my work’.<sup>191</sup>

For digital riders, meanwhile, the requirement to accept low prices that could no longer be bargained over was often considered one of the very worst aspects of the work – and a reason for many to log off permanently. One former SafeBoda rider recalled how his fellow stage members used to ‘laugh at us on how we could allow someone to think for us and decide the charges without consulting’, later remarking that the app companies rarely sought out the views of their riders on such matters (see also below).<sup>192</sup> Another rider still using the platform, albeit somewhat reluctantly, explained that:

with SafeBoda, there are rules that you must follow when wearing [their] uniform.  
That is what makes me hate them. Low money, low prices. I hate to put on that

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<sup>189</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 15 November 2021 [55]

<sup>190</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 7 November 2020 [21]

<sup>191</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 12 October 2021 [30]

<sup>192</sup> Interview with former digital rider, 13 October 2021 [33]

uniform. As an app, I like it. [But] I'll enjoy putting on the uniform when I make some good money.<sup>193</sup>

His words bring us to the second pricing issue lamented by riders: the low per-trip pay relative to analogue work, connected in turn to both the strategic undercutting of offline prices by platform companies and their collection of a commission payment on each 'gig'. This issue appears to have become increasingly pronounced over time, with those joining early on recalling financially favourable circumstances and a subsequent rush to sign up before a noticeable decline set in. 'At first we were paid good', said one rider who joined SafeBoda shortly after its launch: 'They used to tell us that the whites brought money and wanted boda riders to improve their welfare. Their plan was to first invest in us and when the time comes, they start benefiting. But they now started stealing from us'.<sup>194</sup> Another similarly described how 'in the beginning we thought it [ride-hailing] is aiming to make us increase our income, but currently it's not the case. Because I am the one paying it now!'<sup>195</sup>

Statements like these reflect the shifting sands of digital inclusion. In addition to the fluctuating joining requirements described above in Section I, riders have also seen firsthand how the economic arrangements of platform work, far from being fixed and reliable, can often prove quite unstable. Testimonies from riders suggest that it has been standard practice for ride-hailing companies to start out with 0% commission and tempting bonus offers, sometimes even doubling riders' pay on certain trips in order 'to get enough numbers',<sup>196</sup> before scrapping these promotions and introducing (and later increasing) commissions. The crucial issue here is that when platform pay is topped up by bonuses and protected from company cut-ins, riders earn well – often significantly better, in fact, than their analogue counterparts. But as soon as these features are removed, typically once they have successfully incorporated more labour into the ride-hailing network, the economics of platform work become far less appealing. Critically, this revision of the ride-hailing deal only becomes apparent over time, rendering early assessments of ride-hailing's impacts on workers' livelihoods both misleading and premature (see also Peters, 2020).

Looking at these issues several years into the sector's digital 'transformation', the degree of riders' dissatisfaction with platform pay could not be clearer. Just over 80% of all those surveyed felt that trip prices were set too low by the apps, representing the most frequently cited challenge of platform work. Second to this was commission, as reported by 68% of the

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<sup>193</sup> Interview with digital rider, 21 January 2022 [72]

<sup>194</sup> Interview with digital rider, 6 November 2020 [16]

<sup>195</sup> Interview with digital rider, 4 November 2020 [09]

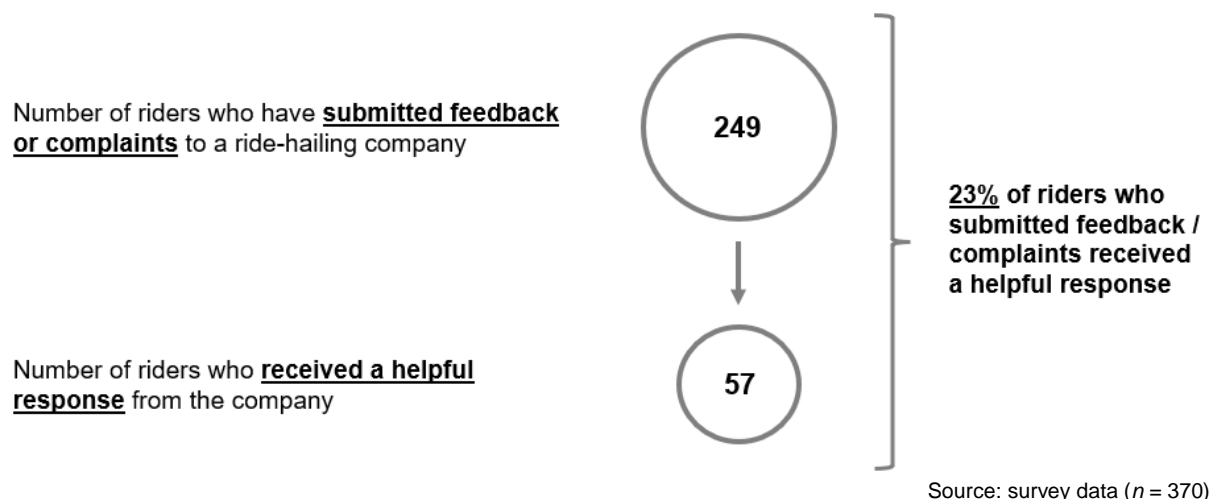
<sup>196</sup> Interview with former digital rider, 5 October 2021 [28]

sample. Meanwhile, when the survey's *former* digital riders ( $n = 183$ ) were asked why they exited the platforms, two-thirds said it was because they were not earning enough on them. We get more into the numbers behind this in the final section of this chapter.

**iii One-way streets: 'Consulting you as who?! They just bring the paper and read you the new policies'<sup>197</sup>**

Far from remaining passive amidst these changes, the evidence suggests that digital riders have frequently attempted to reclaim some of the benefits of the original ride-hailing deal by attempting to negotiate with management – only for these efforts to then fuel further feelings of discontent. Having heard multiple stories of interviewees trying to provide feedback to the companies or appeal their pricing changes, typically without success, through the survey I sought to develop a broader picture of this relationship within the ride-hailing sector. Respondents were first asked whether they had ever made a complaint or submitted feedback to any of the app companies, before then being asked whether they found the company's response helpful. The data show that just over two-thirds ( $n = 249$ ) of those in the sample had attempted contact along these lines, but that only 23% ( $n = 57$ ) of these felt a helpful response followed, with the remaining 77% typically not hearing anything back or instead being met with 'empty promises' that never materialised (see Figure 15).

Figure 15. Surveyed riders who submitted feedback and received a helpful response



<sup>197</sup> Interview with digital rider, 29 October 2021 [50]

What this suggests is that although digital riders are relatively pro-active in voicing concerns or feedback, for the most part there has been limited willingness to either engage with or act upon them. Moreover, even where mechanisms have been put in place for riders to channel their grievances, there is still a general sense of not being listened to. One SafeBoda rider, for example, described how the company had set up a WhatsApp group to allow riders to ‘air our voices’ and ‘lay out dissatisfactions’. It was a good thing in principle, he argued, ‘but they don’t listen. They see the messages but don’t do anything about them’.<sup>198</sup>

The unresponsive approach taken by companies in this respect combined with the (non-)employment status of riders – as one interviewee succinctly put it when asked whether he had ever been consulted about changes to company policy, ‘No, consulting you as who?! They just bring the paper and read you the new policies’<sup>199</sup> – leaves riders with very little bargaining power to re-set the terms of their digital inclusion through orderly, rule-based or formally sanctioned means (Hossain, 2017; Shankland et al., 2011). And for many of those encountered through this research, the underlying reasons behind this are crystal clear: the disadvantaged position they hold within the ‘multi-sided marketplace’ of the platform economy (Poell et al., 2019). The words of two focus group discussants illustrate this point in more concrete terms:

The companies no longer value a rider. That is, they only care much about customers. Even when you complain they only favour customers. The app companies only value you before and immediately after entry. After that, even if you complain they don’t care about your challenges. For example, if a customer calls and complains against the rider for having gone with his or her change of UGX 1,000, the company cuts off the app and suspends you for some weeks. On the other side, if a customer runs without paying they promise to investigate the matter and compensate [...] but they don’t investigate.<sup>200</sup>

SafeBoda does not listen to us as riders with our complaints. They give a hearing ear to the clients, yet we are the people that put in a lot like fuel, time, airtime. We even have the WhatsApp group and Facebook page, but they will never listen to what we tell them. But when the client complains, you can be suspended.<sup>201</sup>

The disenfranchisement that we can sense here appears particularly pronounced within Kampala’s ride-hailing sector, but is not unique to it. Delivery / e-commerce riders often shared

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<sup>198</sup> Interview with digital rider, 29 October 2021 [50]

<sup>199</sup> Interview with digital rider, 2 November 2020 [04]

<sup>200</sup> Focus group discussion with current digital riders, 9 December 2021

<sup>201</sup> Focus group discussion with former digital riders, 9 December 2021

similar frustrations with the platforms, with several highlighting specific instances of perceived mistreatment and difficulties in voicing concerns. ‘Basically, if you have an accident they are not doing anything’, one Jumia rider explained: ‘I’m seeing that’s why they are using sub-contracted [companies], so they are running away from those responsibilities’.<sup>202</sup> Another agreed, insisting that the companies were only interested in ‘customers and profit. For us, we just get a bag and a rain jacket. That’s all. If we get an accident, nothing [...] I think because we are not considered as workers’.<sup>203</sup>

### **III RETURNS: HOW COSTS AND EARNINGS IN THE PLATFORM ECONOMY STACK UP**

In recent years, the corporate revision of the ride-hailing deal – unilaterally removing the economic rewards that brought so many workers onboard initially and replacing them with a commission – has proven both a major source of frustration among digital riders as well as a primary reason for refusing online work among their analogue counterparts. In this final section we drill into some of the concrete numbers behind these declining terms of inclusion, using detailed survey data on costs and earnings to scrutinise the kinds of livelihood claims that have helped platform companies gain a foothold in the industry. It begins by looking at the economics of ride-hailing, presenting a comparison of online vs. offline pay and finding little evidence to support the mainstream narrative of transformation in this regard, before closing with a brief yet caveated assessment of which of these new economies of inclusion really seems to be having an impact: motorcycle financing.

#### ***i Questioning the economics of the ride-hailing deal***

Having explored various dimensions of riders’ economic lives through the initial phase of qualitative research, our survey was sequentially designed to generate detailed information on all revenues derived from boda work and a wide range of costs that come with the job. From this, it is then possible to estimate each respondent’s total expenditure, gross income and net income across different timeframes (daily, weekly, monthly, annual). Furthermore, because of the way in which the sampling strategy was intentionally designed to capture an even split of respondents with both current as well as previous digital experience, it then also

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<sup>202</sup> Interview with digital rider, 16 February 2022 [77]

<sup>203</sup> Interview with digital rider, 11 February 2022 [76]

becomes possible to draw comparisons between: i) on the one hand, *currently digital riders*; and ii) on the other, *currently analogue riders*.

The results from this comparison are presented in Table 8 and Figure 16 below, with a clear pattern emerging. To start with, digital riders are found to make 12% more gross income per week on average than analogue riders. Although this falls short of the 20-50% income gains that have often been claimed (e.g. Thomson, 2018), it nonetheless represents a noticeable increase that can best be explained by digital riders being able to access a higher number of jobs each day via the apps relative to those fixed at a stage. To recall the words of one platform executive, what these riders have in effect been able to achieve is a reduction in their unremunerated 'lag time'.<sup>204</sup>

At the same time, however, these same digital riders are also found to incur significantly higher weekly expenditure: 21% more than those working offline. According to the survey data, the vast majority of this difference can be attributed to three main factors: i) higher spending on data / airtime; ii) higher spending on fuel; and iii) the additional expense of having to pay the platform companies their commission fee – by far the greatest of the three, working out at an average of nearly UGX 24,000 (approx. \$6) per rider per week.

Once these extra operating costs are factored in, we see not only that ride-hailing's positive effect on weekly gross income is wiped out, but also that digital riders end up making around UGX 7,300 (approx. \$2) less per week than their analogue counterparts. This works out at a 7% loss in average take-home earnings.

Table 8. Average weekly expenditure and income: digital vs. analogue riders

	Weekly Gross Income (UGX)	Weekly Expenditure (UGX)	Weekly Net Income (UGX)
<b>Digital</b> (n = 187)	<b>358,589</b>	<b>259,663</b>	98,925
<b>Analogue</b> (n = 183)	320,360	214,138	<b>106,222</b>
<b>Difference</b>	Digital is 12% higher (statistically significant at p < 0.001)	Digital is 21% higher (statistically significant at p < 0.001)	Analogue is 7% higher

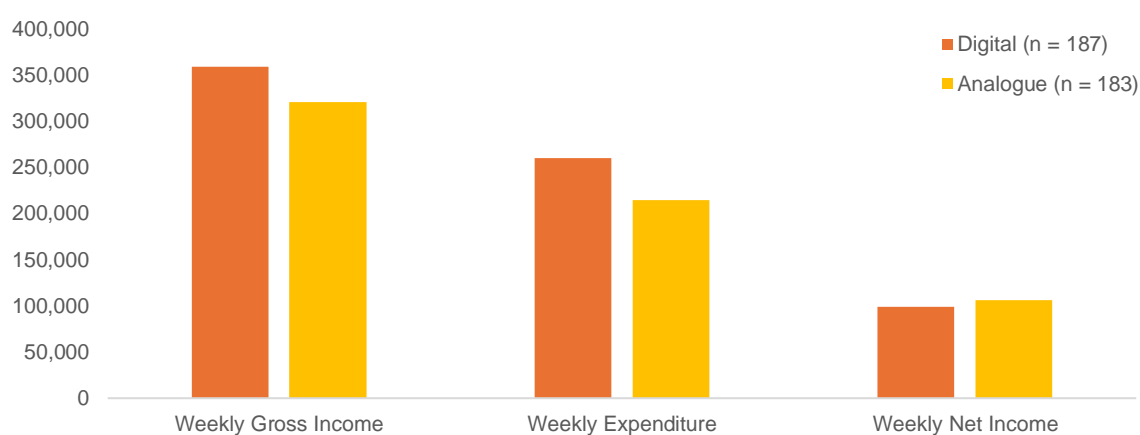
Source: survey data (n = 370)<sup>205</sup>

<sup>204</sup> Interview with country manager, Bolt, 19 November 2021 [K10]

<sup>205</sup> Statistical results generated through simple t-tests.



Figure 16. Average weekly expenditure and income (in UGX): digital vs. analogue riders



Source: survey data (n = 370)

It is against the backdrop of these numbers that digital riders' widespread complaints with low and declining pay must be understood. For many, it is not simply that online trip prices are systematically set lower than offline prices, but rather that the combination of lower trip prices *and* higher operating costs is seen to place them at a financial disadvantage, thus leading riders to question the fundamental fairness of the ride-hailing deal. Indeed, although platform companies criticise the economic inefficiencies of 'stage ideology' and the unproductive 'lag time' this creates, from the digital rider's perspective it is the structure of platform pricing that leaves them feeling poorly remunerated. As one rider summed it up, when working on the apps 'we are using a lot of money to get money'<sup>206</sup> – beyond, that is, the already substantial amount required to participate in the digital economy in the first place (see Section I).

The main consequence of this from a livelihood perspective is that, if digital riders are to match or possibly exceed the earnings from analogue methods of work, then in the simplest terms they must complete more trips. One rider I interviewed explained this using the following example. For a trip from the centre of town to Makerere University, he told me, the apps would typically set a price of around UGX 2,000 (approx. \$0.50). But then there would of course be a 15% commission on top of that, leaving him with UGX 1,700, plus some slightly higher expenditure on data and fuel to consider as well. This would put his earning for that trip, covering a distance of roughly 2.5km, closer to \$0.40. On the other hand, he continued, if he were to arrange himself using 'personal' bargaining, then he would charge UGX 3,000 (approx.

<sup>206</sup> Interview with digital rider, 1 February 2022 [73]

\$0.80), there would be no third-party cut, and he would avoid the additional fuel and data expenses.<sup>207</sup>

Using this rider's example as a baseline, for an analogue rider hoping to make UGX 30,000 in a single day, they would be required to make 10 such trips. But to reach the same figure their digital counterpart would need to find and complete nearly 18 trips, which almost doubles the length of time spent working and, as a number of riders were keen to point out, increases the wear-rate of a motorcycle too, thus ultimately leading to higher maintenance costs and a more rapid process of depreciation. As one focus group participant put it:

We spend a lot on fuel as we make more trips at low charges with high commission cost by the company, which stands at 15%. This makes our motorcycle parts tear and wear out in a short time. This forces us to take our motorcycles for service repairs in a short time. It should be noted that all this wouldn't be a challenge if customers were paying us well. When you do the accounts, you find that the company is exploiting the rider to its advantage.<sup>208</sup>

While it is important to keep in mind the limitations of this study and its sample size, these findings raise both questions about how the ride-hailing deal has been constructed by platform companies and insights into what its (non-negotiable) revision has meant for riders' livelihoods. From a worker's perspective, much of the value of digital ride-hailing hinges on whether the higher work-rate it requires to become lucrative relative to analogue work actually translates into noticeably better earnings. On the basis of this evidence, digital riders appear to be working more on average throughout the day – reflected in higher gross incomes accrued through an increase in the number of jobs performed – but then have those important gains completely neutralised by the greater operating costs of platform work and the corporate conditions imposed upon them.

Thus, rather than working harder for more as the mainstream empowerment narrative might suggest, the reality for most digital riders here is that they are working harder either for the same or for less.

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<sup>207</sup> Interview with digital rider, 13 October 2021 [34]

<sup>208</sup> Participant in focus group discussion with current digital riders, 9 December 2021

**ii What really matters: a final note and five caveats on motorcycle financing**

If riders' inclusion within the circuits of ride-hailing has little overall bearing on their earnings, despite what was and still is claimed, then what is that actually makes any real kind of difference? The answer lies in motorcycle access arrangements.

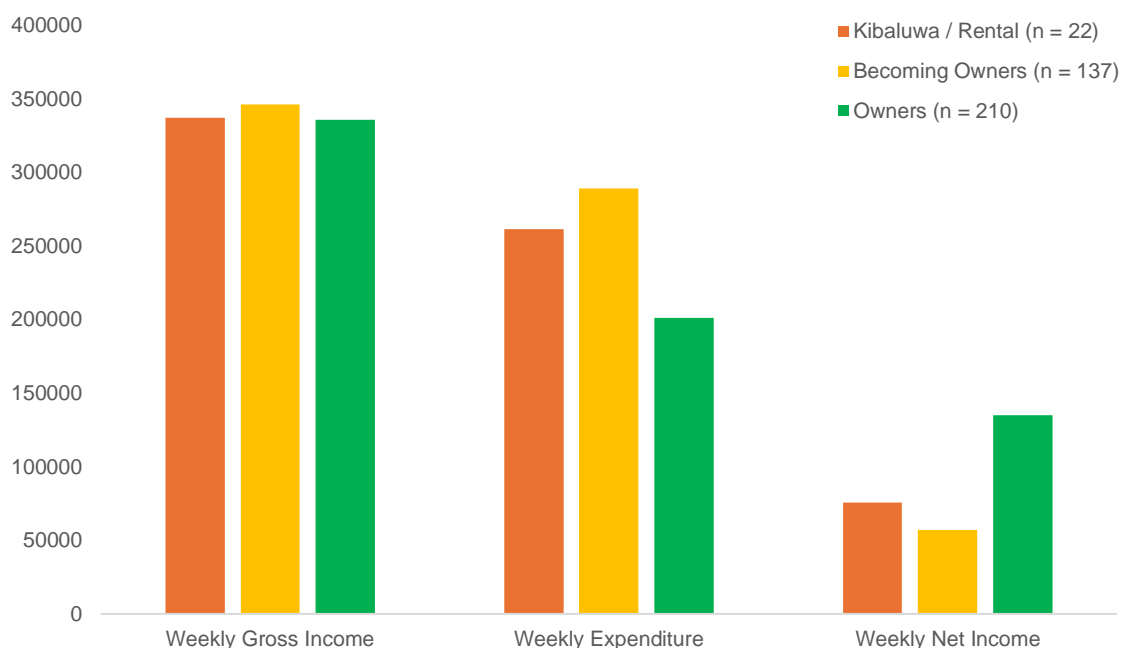
As Table 9 and Figure 17 below clearly show, those who own their motorcycle ('owners') earn considerably more net income per week than riders who are either renting through the *kibaluwa* system or who are in the process of paying off a hire-purchase loan ('becoming owners') – each of whom make 56% and 42% of what full owners do, respectively. This substantial difference is explained by the vast savings that owners make each week in motorcycle access costs, which run on average to just over UGX 60,000 (approx. \$15.50) for renters and just shy of UGX 85,000 (approx. \$22) for loan re-payers.

Table 9. Average weekly expenditure and income, by motorcycle access arrangement

	Weekly Gross Income (UGX)	Weekly Expenditure (UGX)	Weekly Net Income (UGX)
<b>Kibaluwa / Rental</b> (n = 22)	336,977	261,221	75,755
<b>Becoming Owner</b> (n = 137)	<b>346,311</b>	<b>289,099</b>	57,211
<b>Owner</b> (n = 210)	335,876	201,085	<b>134,790</b>
<b>Difference</b>	Those 'becoming owners' make <b>2.8% more</b> than renters and <b>3.1% more</b> than owners	Those 'becoming owners' pay <b>11% more</b> than renters and <b>44% more</b> than owners	Renters make <b>56%</b> of what owners earn; 'becoming owners' make <b>42%</b> of what owners earn

Source: survey data (n = 369)

Figure 17. Average weekly expenditure and income (in UGX), by motorcycle access arrangement



Source: survey data (n = 369)

As previously mentioned, the boda industry’s new asset financiers have played a crucial role in driving riders towards motorcycle ownership, with 1 in 3 surveyed riders taking out a hire-purchase loan with one of these companies. Part of the success of this lending model lies in the companies’ framing of ownership as an aspirational, attainable and importantly lucrative dream, offering riders a pathway to better paid work and an escape route from the predatory rental system.

On the surface, these income and expenditure figures suggest there may be some credibility to this framing. But when we turn to the wider data on hire-purchase riders’ experiences with these schemes, it becomes clear that there is rather more to the process of ‘becoming one’s own boss’ (Asaak, 2024; Tugende, 2020b) than the asset financiers’ promotional material suggests. Five caveats in particular are worth noting.

First, although full ownership drastically reduces weekly expenses in the long run, the route there is not only relatively expensive but also fairly protracted, lasting for several months if not years at a time (see Table 10 below). Asset financing companies boast of doubling the earnings typically found among riders in the *kibaluwa* system, but importantly any such gains only materialise once the asset is paid off in full. In the meantime, hire-purchase riders pay on average around UGX 21,500 (approx. \$5.50) more for motorcycle access each week than

*kibaluwa* riders do<sup>209</sup> – an increase of 34% in weekly access costs (although under some companies this can reach as high as 85% – see Table 11). To cover these cost increases hire-purchase riders must work harder, reflected to some extent in their slightly higher weekly gross incomes shown in Table 9 and Figure 17, whilst also shouldering the additional psychological demands that come with taking out a high-cost loan (see WHO, 2014 for relevant research on this). Indeed, the added ‘pressure’ of paying off a hire-purchase scheme, as one rider put it, was sometimes cited by interviewees as a reason for avoiding the asset financing route altogether and remaining in the *kibaluwa* system.<sup>210</sup> In other cases, riders seek wider sources of financial support simply to help them pay down the loan – including, as I discovered after returning from Uganda, via the non-profit cash transfer platform, GiveDirectly (for case studies of such funds being used to pay off moto-taxi loans, see: GiveDirectly, 2023a; 2023b; 2023c).

Second, hire-purchase riders face constant risk of loan defaulting and asset repossession, underpinned by the tension between fixed repayment demands on the one hand and the precarious nature of boda work on the other. While the likes of Asaak talk proudly of their low default rates, linking the success of their model both to the idea that ‘families cannot stand to be without the bike even for one day’ as well as technologies that ‘make it really difficult for the driver to walk away’, such as tracking the motorcycle via GPS and being able to cut off fuel to the engine (Sattar, in Finnegan, 2021), for riders the possibility and consequences of missed repayment can be extremely troubling. In many cases companies allow some initial slack in the event of a problem like sickness, particularly if the rider is seen to be communicating this transparently and already has a good track record, but after a fortnight or so staff are often sent to ‘grab the bike’ for impounding.<sup>211</sup> Failing to comply with the repayment schedule also carries financial penalties, which interviewees suggested could range from UGX 70,000 to 200,000 (approx. \$18 – 52) per episode depending on the scale of the infraction.<sup>212</sup> Of all hire-purchase riders surveyed, 29% reported having to pay at least one penalty fee during their repayment schedule (most likely resulting from missed payments), at an average cost of just over UGX 175,000 (approx. \$45) per fined rider. In the worst-case scenario, however, riders can have their motorcycle repossessed if they rack up too much in arrears, thus losing access permanently whilst receiving zero compensation for anything paid up until that point.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Rental riders in the *kibaluwa* system typically pay UGX 60,000 per week for motorcycle access.

<sup>210</sup> Interviews with: digital rider, 10 November 2021 [53]; digital rider, 1 February 2022 [73]

<sup>211</sup> Interview with digital rider, 15 November 2021 [55]

<sup>212</sup> Interviews with: ex-rider, 4 November 2021 [51]; digital rider, 15 November 2021 [55]

<sup>213</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 7 November 2020 [21]; analogue rider, 5 October 2021 [27]; analogue rider, 14 October 2021 [39]

Third, riders who acquire motorcycles via hire-purchase end up paying considerably more than those capable of purchasing the same model outright, including one that is brand-new. Survey data on hire-purchase riders' repayment schedules show that, when the accumulated costs of protracted weekly instalments are combined with their initial downpayments, riders routinely spend in excess of UGX 8 million (\$2,089) in the process of becoming a full owner (see Table 10).

Table 10. Average reported costs and duration of hire-purchase arrangements

	Average downpayment (UGX)	Average weekly instalment (UGX)	Average repayment schedule (months)	Average total amount paid / to be paid (million UGX)
<b>Tugende</b> (n = 25)	538,000	78,000	23.4	8.47
<b>Watu</b> (n = 56)	577,000	86,000	18.9	7.64
<b>Asaak</b> (n = 2)	875,000	95,000	19.5	8.92
<b>Mogo</b> (n = 14)	599,000	79,000	21.7	8.05
<b>Boda Boda Banja</b> (n = 13)	1,046,000	111,000	14.5	8.04
<b>Other individual, bank</b> (private SACCO, bank) (n = 78)	631,000	83,000	17.7	7.01

Source: survey data (n = 188)

In order to then assess how these final amounts square against alternative channels of motorcycle access, we can draw comparisons with two baselines: i) the current going rate for a brand-new Bajaj Boxer, ubiquitous on the streets of Kampala and a popular hire-purchase option – as of 2023, this was UGX 5.2mn (approx. \$1,350); and ii) the typical cost of a decent second-hand motorcycle, which is more representative of the route that most riders able to purchase outright are likely go down – using the survey data, we can set this at UGX 3.9mn, or around \$1,000. Table 11 below presents the results, showing the percentage difference between hire-purchase totals under the various financing companies and our two baselines (alongside a more short-term comparison between weekly instalment rates and weekly *kibaluwa* rental costs, as already discussed above).

Table 11. Hire-purchase costs relative to alternative models of motorcycle access

	Weekly % increase – relative to standard weekly rental fees in <i>kibalwa</i> system (UGX 60,000)	Overall % increase – relative to standard price of a new Bajaj Boxer (UGX 5.2mn)	Overall % increase – relative to average price of a second-hand motorcycle, according to survey data (UGX 3.9mn)
<b>Tugende</b> (n = 25)	30%	63%	117%
<b>Watu</b> (n = 56)	43%	47%	96%
<b>Asaak</b> (n = 2)	58%	72%	129%
<b>Mogo</b> (n = 14)	32%	55%	106%
<b>Boda Boda Banja</b> (n = 13)	85%	55%	106%
<b>Avg. across all financiers</b> (n = 110)	34%	58%	110%
<b>Other</b> (n = 78)	38%	35%	80%

Source: survey data (n = 188)

As we can see there are some remarkable differences here, with hire-purchase riders on company schemes paying on average 110% more than the price of a typical second-hand model and 58% more than the price of a new Boxer. Across the range of asset financiers covered, this works out at a product mark-up of between \$630 and \$1,300 relative to the standard market rate for a new model – equivalent to between 24 and 49 weeks' worth of average net income – thus giving rise to a common refrain heard amongst riders in Kampala that by the time you finish paying off one of these company's loans, you have ended up paying for the motorcycle twice.<sup>214</sup>

Fourth, by the time hire-purchase riders have completed repayments and claimed full ownership, both the mechanical quality and financial value of the motorcycle have depreciated heavily. While these riders regularly pay in excess of UGX 8mn to become motorcycle owners,

<sup>214</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 7 November 2020 [19]; analogue rider, 10 November 2021 [54]; digital rider, 15 November 2021 [56]; digital rider, 1 February 2022 [73]

it is important to note that they do not then become the owner of a new motorcycle worth that amount. After 18 months to two years of consistent daily use, resale values drop significantly as maintenance needs increase. Kampala's battered infrastructure and the regularity of scrapes with other road users take a heavy toll on these machines, meaning that, according to one rider, after 'some time bikes disturb you' and become 'junk', 'so you are always changing'.<sup>215</sup> Another estimated that the industry-standard Bajaj Boxer could be ridden hard for about two years – roughly the length of time required to complete many hire-purchase schemes – before the need for major repairs kicks in, a point at which he preferred to sell off rather than take on the new wave of costs generated by an aging vehicle (see also Diaz Olvera et al., 2016).<sup>216</sup>

Finally, it is partly because of this increase in maintenance requirements and costs that many riders choose to sell their motorcycle soon after the ownership rights are transferred into their name. During the interviewing phase it became apparent that many riders are engaged in continuous cycles of access and ownership involving numerous motorcycles. This can take a number of different configurations, but where hire-purchase is involved the process can often resemble the following: i) complete repayments and work as an 'owner-rider' for a period of time, sometimes as short as a few months, then sell off before the motorcycle depreciates too much; ii) use a portion of the resale funds to make a side investment, usually in land or house construction; and then iii) use the remainder of the resale funds to regain access to another motorcycle, either through direct purchase of a second-hand vehicle,<sup>217</sup> (re-)entrance into the *kibaluwa* rental system,<sup>218</sup> or participation in a new hire-purchase agreement.<sup>219</sup>

Although the survey did not investigate these issues in detail, some sense of scale is provided in the form of respondents' *past* ownership experiences, as Table 12 below illustrates.

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<sup>215</sup> Interview with digital rider, 18 October 2021 [45]

<sup>216</sup> Interview with digital rider, 29 October 2021 [48]

<sup>217</sup> Interview with digital rider, 13 December 2021 [68]

<sup>218</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 22 October 2021 [46]

<sup>219</sup> Interview with digital rider, 29 October 2021 [48]



Table 12. Levels of previous motorcycle ownership, by current access arrangement

	% of Sub-Sample Previously Owning a Motorcycle	Average Number of Motorcycles Previously Owned
<b>Kibaluwa / Rental</b> (n = 22)	55%	1.6
<b>Becoming Owners</b> (n = 137)	28%	1.7
<b>Owners</b> (n = 210)	36%	2.4

Source: survey data (n = 369)

Thus, although ‘owner-riders’ certainly stand to earn more than those in the traditional *kibaluwa* system, there are some key insights here into what the nature of ‘becoming one’s own boss’ can actually look like in practice. This is a process that tends to be costly, uncertain and protracted. It is also one that requires intense work-rates on the part of riders whilst simultaneously imposing various forms of contractual obligation and disciplinary action upon them. And crucially, the relatively autonomous and lucrative period that follows successful completion of repayments can often be quite short-lived, with the combination of mechanical wear, financial devaluation and riders’ livelihood strategies compelling quick re-sales and the pursuit, sometimes via another hire-purchase scheme, of new access arrangements.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we shifted from the corporate claims, platform promises and digital discourses outlined in Chapter 7 to a more worker-centred analysis of the ‘realities of inclusion’ from the perspective of Kampala’s digital boda riders, looking at three key dimensions of platform work in particular: requirements, relations and returns.

Beginning with *requirements*, we examined what it takes to become digitally and financially included in the first place, highlighting a range of eligibility criteria that riders must meet alongside a series of ‘inclusion payments’ that must be made, which in turn have the effect of pricing some of the lowest-income riders out of the ‘inclusive’ platform economy. We also saw that differences between the major platforms in terms of entry requirements raises questions about the extent to which boda labour has been successfully standardised under

platformisation, while inconsistent and increasingly relaxed enforcement of the 'stage membership' criterion has made it possible for new riders to enter and operate within the sector completely outside of the 'traditionally' institutionalised methods.

We then looked at the kinds of *relations* that exist within the platform economy between the companies and their workers (or rather, their 'partners'). Though claiming to liberate riders from the inefficient analogue systems of old via processes of digital disintermediation, what we in fact see is that life under the platforms is experienced by many as a new form of exploitation, as promises of freedom and flexibility are replaced with realities of (algorithmic and physical) management, a loss of control over pricing, and corporate prioritisation of customer over worker interests – all standard features of global platform work more broadly. Thus, rather than simply *disintermediating* boda work from its analogue foundations, platformisation should instead be understood here as a process that not only *reintermediates* it in new ways but which actively eliminates boda riders from the business of trip negotiation.

Finally, we turned to the important material matter of *returns* by examining how the economics of 'platform-ised' boda work add up. In contrast to the 'better livelihood' promise of inclusion outlined in Chapter 7, we found here that many digital riders actually end up making less than their analogue counterparts as a result of company commissions and higher operating costs – despite, that is, their being theoretically able to complete more jobs per day. It is within the context of this particular 'reality of inclusion' that riders' mounting disillusionment with the low, non-negotiable pay of platform work might best be understood, giving rise to a series of worker-led responses that we will now go on to explore in Chapter 9.

Crucially, it has only been possible to reveal these adverse realities by looking at the lived experiences of platform work from the perspective of the moto-taxi rider, several years after the initial emergence of the platform economy in Kampala's boda industry. As an unstable, mutating process of experimentation (Pollio et al., 2023; Stehlin et al., 2020), the effects of platformisation cannot be easily or accurately read the moment new technologies 'touch down' on their latest frontiers. They instead need time to emerge as the platform business model kicks in and labour arrangements 'mature' (Gibbings et al., 2022), thus underlining the analytical importance of asking not just what exists beyond the glossy pull of corporate claims, but also what happens when the early buzz and introductory offers dry up.

## Chapter 9

### **Disillusions of inclusion: on frictions and exits**

In a critique of the World Bank's 2019 World Development Report (WDR19) on the changing nature of work, Kate Meagher (2020: 680, emphasis added) writes:

The [WDR19's] vision of a future of work based on ersatz-fairness and flexibility creates an *illusion of inclusion*, but only by connecting the growing ranks of unemployed workers and informal actors to the global economy in ways that undermine job quality, downgrade access to skills, [and] strip away labour rights.

But what then happens when the realities of new modes of digital inclusion, such as those that have swept across Kampala's boda industry in recent years, end up breeding disaffection amongst the very actors with whom they seek to connect?

Recent research into platform work shows that although gig workers are typically understood to have some autonomy and flexibility in the digital workplace (Vallas and Schor, 2020), at the same time they are subject to a range of controls over their decisions, behaviours, experiences and prospects, as we have just seen in Chapter 8. Because of the way in which digital labour platforms tend to atomise and fragment workers (della Porta et al., 2022; Fleming, 2017; Schmidt, 2017), as well as the strategies used by platform companies to manufacture consent and mollify disquiet (Wood et al., 2019), these controls can be hard to contest through unified organisation and action. Subsequently, it is often argued that workers in the gig economy are

left with little in the way of *collective* bargaining power to negotiate the terms of their inclusion (Graham et al., 2017).

Collective, organised bargaining power, however, is not the only form that labour agency takes. According to Anwar and Graham (2020: 1274), especially in situations where ‘institutionalised labour unions’ fail to represent gig workers, ‘it is crucial to explore how workers exert power in different spaces through individual practices that are informal, unorganised and subtle, but which can nevertheless lead to positive outcomes’. Indeed, one thing that Kampala’s recent experience of ride-hailing makes clear is that digital riders *can and do* exercise agency in a variety of ways, not only in response to the mutating practices of platform companies but also in an effort to incrementally improve the terms of their incorporation into the digital economy ‘from below’. As one former employee of SafeBoda put it to me whilst describing the recent emergence of pushback within the workforce: ‘These bodas are not fools’.<sup>220</sup>

In this penultimate substantive chapter we look at how digital riders have acted upon mounting frustrations with the nature of their online work – or upon what we might think of, to adapt Meagher’s phrasing, as ‘disillusions of inclusion’. These disillusions are rooted for many in perceptions of a deal gone bad, or at any rate in a deal that never quite lived up to the original hype (see Chapters 7 and 8), and have produced a sequence of reactions amongst riders that call into question the sector’s supposedly inevitable transition towards a digital future. In doing so, these actions reveal the frictions that emerge when ‘homogenizing and universalizing forces of platform capital’ (Popiel and Vasudevan, 2024: 5) rub up against local livelihood systems, whilst also illustrating Rida Qadri’s (2022) proposition that corporate-driven processes of digital disruption are never a done deal but a ‘two-way street’.

We focus here on three sets of responses in particular, starting in **Section I** with the way in which ‘platform-ised’ riders balance out the poorly remunerated terms of digital inclusion by continuing to take up multiple offline jobs on the side, thus giving rise to a widespread phenomenon of what could be referred to as ‘hybrid work’. We then explore in **Section II** a range of subversive working practices observed among Kampala’s digital boda riders, each of which constitutes a refusal to play by the ‘official’ rules of the game as instituted by the platforms – albeit in ways that more closely resemble individual-level acts of ‘resilience’ and ‘reworking’ than more radical and joined-up forms of ‘resistance’ (Katz, 2004). Finally, in **Section III** we look at what so often happens when these various incremental acts of livelihood

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<sup>220</sup> Interview with former SafeBoda rider and employee, 18 January 2022 [K21]

improvement no longer compensate for the trade-offs riders make in order to participate in the platform economy: they exit.

## I HYBRID WORK

Though I have used it consistently throughout this thesis, the term ‘digital rider’ is perhaps a slightly misleading one. This is because, for those who have made the switch online, platform work generally features as just one part of a wider strategy used by riders to adapt around the ebb-and-flow of the urban economy. Relevant dynamics here include: variations in how much business is likely to be available throughout the day, with peak rush-hour windows often punctuated by lengthy stretches of slow work; a rider’s specific location within the city at particular times, including whether they find themselves in sites that are known for high app use among customers; what prices are being set by the platform’s algorithms and whether these appear slightly better or worse than normal; and the extent to which a rider might be on track to hit one of the app’s ‘gamified’ bonus targets that day.

The rhythms that emerge around these dynamics lead digital riders to engage selectively with the apps as they go about their working day. Sometimes this occurs on a fairly spontaneous basis. For riders like Isaac, for example, it involves occasionally picking up ‘offline’ customers from the street whenever the chance presents itself; a practice that, by his own estimates, typically only accounted for about 10% of weekly business.<sup>221</sup> Another rider explained that although the bulk of his work likewise came through the apps, on the occasions when he was able to find offline jobs he would log out for a while: ‘When I pick a customer offline, I switch off the app until I reach my destination. If I don’t get another offline customer immediately, I put it back.’<sup>222</sup>

For many others, however, the decision to switch off the app tends to be less opportunistic and more of a daily routine. The following two quotes from a focus group with former digital riders help to illustrate:

I used to be online from morning to near evening, but when it reached the rush hours I used to switch off the application. I [would] get customers and determine my own prices, because with the application they used to undercharge the customers. So [this] could be the only way to make some good money.

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<sup>221</sup> Interview with digital rider, 2 December 2021 [63]

<sup>222</sup> Participant in focus group with current digital riders, 9 December 2021

I used to ride the application most of the time around the weekend, because there is less traffic in the city. I also used to target some places like in Ntinda [a relatively wealthy neighbourhood] where many people use the application compared to the places like Wilson Street [in the CBD].<sup>223</sup>

While there is no single formula to riders' selective usage of the apps, it was perhaps most common to hear them being used during slow periods when jobs are generally harder to come by, with 87% of all those surveyed reporting that one of the main benefits of using the apps was that they helped them to find customers. Riders would often talk about switching on the app from around 10 or 11 in the morning until 4 in the late afternoon, a strategy they would use to maximise their chances of sourcing work while it was relatively scarce but then freeing themselves to bargain offline during the busy peak windows either side. Beyond this, there are also those who choose to take advantage of the higher 'surge' pricing offered by some platforms during the busy morning and evening rush hour periods, a technique designed to pull adequate numbers of riders online to meet the heightened demand (Chen and Sheldon, 2016).

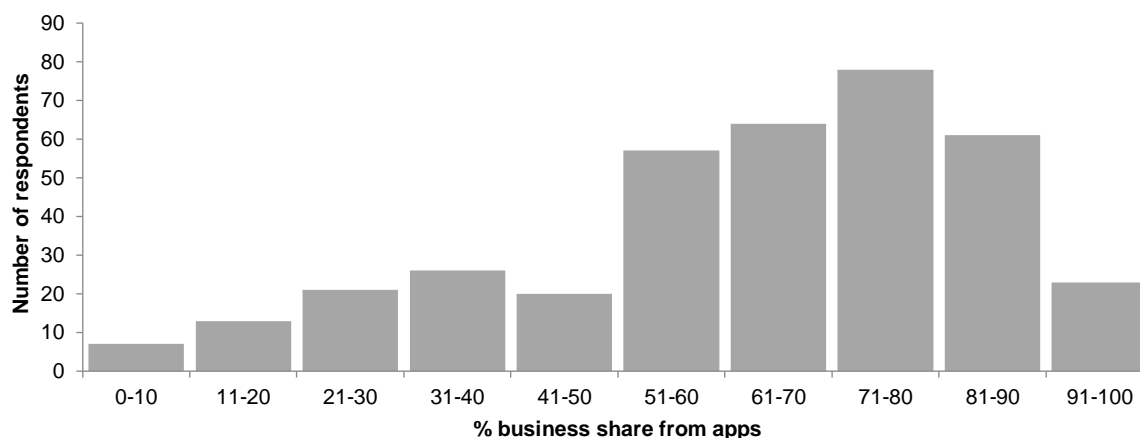
Regardless of the specifics of the arrangement, the overarching point here is that digital riders typically continue to incorporate substantial shifts of offline work into their daily labour practices. That is, in contrast to certain other contexts where the distinction between digital and analogue moto-taxi workers can be considered comparatively more clearcut, for example in Bandung, Indonesia (Frey, 2020) or Hanoi, Vietnam (Nguyen and Turner, 2023), in Kampala hybridity is the norm.

To assess the extent of 'hybrid work' amongst digital riders, our boda survey asked respondents to estimate, in a normal day or week, what share of business came through the app compared to traditional methods, including both stage and roadside pick-ups (see Figure 18). For former digital riders the average share contributed by online work during their digital days was 71%, while the equivalent share for current digital riders came out a little lower at 63%, possibly reflecting the declining terms of digital inclusion outlined in Chapter 8. Across the two groups as a whole, online work made up exactly two-thirds (67%) of riders' business, with the remainder drawn from 'analogue sources'. Moreover, just 3.5% of the total sample ( $n = 13$ ) reported working digitally 100% of the time, with only one such respondent found in the 'currently digital' category.

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<sup>223</sup> Participants from focus group with former digital riders, 9 December 2021

Figure 18. Percentage share of business contributed by apps



Source: survey data (n = 370)

What does this tell us about the relationship between ‘platform-ised’ boda work and riders’ livelihoods? Despite company claims that apps offer a superior alternative to the economic inefficiencies of ‘stage ideology’ by helping to eliminate ‘dead mileage’ when searching for customers,<sup>224</sup> in practice we find a reluctance towards full immersion in the online world which my interview data suggest is linked closely to the perceived shortcomings of the (revised) ride-hailing deal. Amongst those I talked to, there was general consensus that bargaining face-to-face with customers still represented the favoured approach to doing business, providing riders with the opportunity to not only negotiate higher rates than those generated by the algorithms but to also make crucial ‘manual’ adjustments to the fare depending on the specific circumstances of the trip (see Chapter 8). For some riders this was connected to an unwillingness to cede full control over their working lives, with the capacity to still make decisions for themselves – at least some of the time – framed as an important way of retaining a degree of economic independence, despite this being precisely what the platform companies themselves are claiming to offer. ‘They are understanding everything for me’, is how one rider put it when describing the downsides of working under a platform company, which as my interlocutor Geoffrey explained is a local way of saying ‘you have no input or control. Everything is decided for you’.<sup>225</sup>

<sup>224</sup> Interviews with: former country manager, Bolt, 19 November 2021 [K10]; senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22].

<sup>225</sup> Interview with digital rider, 15 November 2021 [57]

Hybrid work should also be understood as a strategy to moderate the least desirable aspects of ride-hailing. Many riders choose to switch off the app when and where levels of customer demand are relatively high, such as during the busy rush-hour periods or in certain parts of town, which shows that when possibilities to work effectively and lucratively outside the algorithms arise, they are often taken. By contrast, when jobs are in relatively short supply, such as typically between the slow hours of 11am and 4pm, apps can help riders refrain from 'sitting and lying idle at the stage'.<sup>226</sup> From this perspective, ride-hailing can be seen as filling in the gaps of the working day by increasing riders' access to work, albeit on terms that are widely judged as being significantly worse. This rather modest and mundane reality (Barns, 2019; Nowak, 2023) jars awkwardly with the revolutionary tone of the mainstream ride-hailing narrative, captured perhaps most succinctly in the claim made by one of SafeBoda's founders that the company had 'radically changed Ugandan urban transportation forever' (Sussock, 2023).

At the same time, the rise of platform work has given way to another kind of hybridity that, crucially, affects not just digital riders but analogue ones too. Many of those interviewed hold ride-hailing directly responsible, alongside rapid recent increases in the labour supply, for noticeably lowering trip prices across Kampala. Drawing attention to the platforms' heavily discounted journeys, they reason that passengers have become accustomed to paying less and today feel 'cheated' by the relative expense of the boda stage.<sup>227</sup> They also argue that ride-hailing has helped to instil new norms among boda riders and passengers, which essentially decentre the stage as the primary locus for orchestrating transactions whilst lending a more professionalised and corporate aesthetic to the widely stigmatised practice of *lubyanza*-style riding.

As a result of these new norms and dynamics, riders across the board are shifting their behaviours. Having been systematically undercut by the platform companies for several years now, analogue riders, most of whom have never even experimented with the apps, are now finding themselves having to move away from the economically decentred stage in order to retain the financial viability of boda work. While there has always been some degree of opportunistic roadside activity among staged riders, many today see *lubyanza* forms of engagement as an increasingly necessary and routinised practice.

Remarks along these lines were common among interviewees. One new arrival into the sector, for example, referred derogatively to those 'just sitting at the stage' all day as '20k riders', a reference to the low returns that are today understood to accompany traditional stage-based

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<sup>226</sup> Interview with digital rider, 13 October 2021 [36]

<sup>227</sup> Interview with digital rider, 17 January 2022 [71]



riding.<sup>228</sup> Another reasoned that ‘even being on the street without the app is better’ than working exclusively from the stage, while another described how he often has moments at the stage where he realises he ‘needs to move’ due to the lack of business, with the majority of his jobs now coming from the roadside.<sup>229</sup>

Illustrating the extent of this particular variant of hybridity, analogue riders within the survey sample ( $n = 183$ ) reported that on average just 57% of their business was sourced through the stage, with the remainder coming either from the street or through personal contacts. For 39% ( $n = 72$ ) of these riders, the stage was not even categorised as their primary source of boda work, while 9% ( $n = 16$ ) ranked it as their least important (see Table 13).

Table 13. First, second and third sources of boda work among *analogue* riders

	Source of boda work (by importance)		
	First	Second	Third
Stage	61%	31%	9%
Roadside	17%	29%	53%
Personal contact	22%	40%	38%

Source: survey data ( $n = 183$ )

Thus, the proliferation of hybrid work across Kampala’s boda industry is not just something that characterises the livelihood strategies of ‘platform-ised’ riders eager to moderate the remunerative unfairness of the ride-hailing deal. In seeking to institutionalise new norms around pricing and behaviour, these processes of digital inclusion have effectively forced digitally ‘excluded’ riders to reconfigure their own working practices too.

## II ‘APP’-ROPRIATION FROM BELOW

Hybrid work represents a relatively innocuous way in which Kampala’s digital boda riders attempt to make the platform economy work better for themselves, but it is only one expression

<sup>228</sup> Interview with digital rider, 21 January 2022 [72]

<sup>229</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 2 December 2021 [62]; digital rider, 13 December 2021 [68]

of labour agency within a broader spectrum. In this section we scan through a series of more subversive working practices observed within the digital workforce, including: i) the parallel use of multiple digital labour platforms at once; ii) a pushback against transacting through the cashless economy; iii) the 'illicit' incorporation of official company equipment into analogue working practices; and iv) a refusal to comply fully with platform safety standards and corporate codes of conduct. In their own specific ways, each of these constitutes a violation of the formal 'rules of the game' as set by the platform companies and, if the pun can be forgiven, a further attempt to 'app-proprite' the new technologies of work from below. The result is a set of 'unruly' practices through which riders seek to 'rework' the terms of their inclusion within the new platform economy (Katz, 2004), with a view to generating some marginal yet meaningful livelihood gains.

### *i*      **Parallel platforms**

It is not always the case that Kampala's boda platforms have demanded exclusivity from riders, but in certain instances there are rules seeking to prevent simultaneous registration across multiple apps. One senior manager at SafeBoda, for example, explained to me that technically riders were not permitted to work for other ride-hailing platforms whilst actively using the SafeBoda app, indicating that the official terms of use contained a clause to this effect.<sup>230</sup> He was quick to admit, however, that in practice management was fully aware that riders were regularly 'breaking the rules' in this respect, conveying a sense of leniency that was not extended quite as fully to other infractions (such as being caught without a helmet or rejecting too many trip requests).<sup>231</sup>

Riders working in this way are not hard to come by on the streets of Kampala. Several interviewees talked about signing up to more than one app at the same time in order to maximise their chances of getting business, or as part of an effort to assess which platforms kept them busiest and were therefore more deserving of their attention. Mutaasa was one such rider who, at the time of our interview, had four separate ride-hailing apps installed on his smartphone.<sup>232</sup> All of these were in active use but it was only SafeBoda that brought him frequent activity. Lawrence was another SafeBoda rider engaging in parallel platform use, having recently signed up with Bolt in a bid to top up his daily business whilst the company, in

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<sup>230</sup> In the latest version of SafeBoda's Terms-of-Use this clause does not appear, suggesting its removal in recent years.

<sup>231</sup> Interview with senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22]

<sup>232</sup> Interview with digital rider, 13 December 2021 [68]

an effort to attract more riders, was temporarily waiving commissions.<sup>233</sup> Acknowledging that this practice was officially prohibited, he described himself as ‘riding illegally’ but justified his decision by referencing what he felt were unfair terms of inclusion under SafeBoda: ‘We advertise and market for them, but financially they don’t reward or appreciate us’.

Working multiple apps at the same time is not something that every rider wants to or even can engage in. As discussed in Chapter 8, each registration attracts a joining fee (unless temporarily suspended for promotional purposes) and eligibility criteria vary from one platform to the next: what a rider needs to register with one company may not be sufficient to sign up with another. Parallel use can thus prove a costly and sometimes time-consuming exercise. Nevertheless, it remains a relatively common practice, with just over one-fifth (21%) of the survey’s ‘current’ digital riders reporting active engagement with more than one boda app at the time of their interview.

## *ii Cash rules*

Ever since the ride-hailing platforms first introduced cashless payment options in Uganda, they have faced strong opposition from digital riders (Oloo, 2020; The Independent, 2021c). Although proponents talk up the frictionless qualities of cashless systems whilst suggesting that the use of e-wallets can help instil ‘financial discipline’ among boda riders (Gachoka and Winiecki, 2020: 21), many of those interviewed took a different view and were often quite reluctant to accept cashless trips. According to the survey data, 69% of past and current digital riders stated that their preference was for cash-based payments, with just 8% coming out in favour of cashless (the remaining 23% had no preference either way).

Although cashless technology makes it easier and more efficient for platform companies to extract trip commissions and reclaim equipment-related debts,<sup>234</sup> enabling as it does the automated capture of such payments without having to manually chase them, from a rider’s perspective it remains more convenient, more practical and more strategic to keep money in their pockets. Boda riding is a job that necessitates multiple expenses and marginal transactions throughout the day, much of the time with small, informal enterprises, fellow boda riders or motorcycle bosses, and in an occupational context like this having a ready supply of cash is considered by many to be vital.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Interview with digital rider, 29 October 2021 [50]

<sup>234</sup> Interview with former SafeBoda rider and employee, 18 January 2022 [K21]

<sup>235</sup> Interviews with digital rider, 13 October 2021 [35]; digital rider, 2 December 2021 [63]; digital rider, 7 January 2022 [70]

In contrast to the ‘technocapitalist’ claim (Pollio, 2022) that going cashless speeds things up by reducing friction within economic transactions (Feyen et al., 2023; McKinsey, 2023), for Kampala’s digital boda riders this technology can actually create new forms of friction that impede smooth operation. Some interviewees, for example, highlighted the problems that can arise when there is a motorcycle owner (*mugagga*) to be paid each day. As one former SafeBoda rider explained, ‘if you are riding for the person who needs his money every day’ – a situation that indeed many renters in the *kibaluwa* system find themselves in – then the cashless system makes that ‘tiresome’ and ‘impossible’ because originally the company was only ‘pay[ing] their clients on a weekly basis’.<sup>236</sup> Despite accumulating earnings in their cashless e-wallet, SafeBoda’s earlier decision to allow ‘cash outs’ just once per week placed riders like this in a difficult situation, impacting not just their capacity to make daily expenditures, which some interviewees said had occasionally left them stranded at fuel stations unable to fill their tanks,<sup>237</sup> but also their relationships with people whose assets they depended upon for work.

It is sometimes also reasoned that, because riders have nothing physical to hand over, the use of an e-wallet ‘diminish[es] the chances of a police officer demanding a minor bribe’ (Schipani, 2021), thus removing another major source of friction in riders’ daily lives. This, however, is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of boda arrests (see Chapter 6). As one rider succinctly put it, ‘even if you have everything [in order], every time they will take money’.<sup>238</sup> Against this reality, keeping money at hand does not increase the likelihood of extraction, but is instead essential for resolving the situation as quickly as possible and getting back to work (see also Ference, 2021). By contrast, its absence serves only to protract such episodes whilst also potentially increasing their cost: as many riders were careful to point out, failure to pay an officer’s bribe on the spot often results in a motorcycle being impounded, representing a far more expensive problem to deal with.<sup>239</sup>

Everyday realities such as these have resulted in a fairly widespread reluctance among Kampala’s digital riders to embrace the cashless revolution, sometimes verging on refusal. Despite it not being possible to immediately reject trips on the basis of them being cashless, with riders typically only learning which payment option had been selected upon physically meeting the passenger *after* they have accepted the request, interviewees would occasionally talk about their attempts to negotiate a different arrangement in person. Others expressed

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<sup>236</sup> Interview with digital rider, 13 October 2021 [35]

<sup>237</sup> Participant in focus group with former digital riders, 9 December 2021

<sup>238</sup> Interview with former digital rider, 5 October 2021 [28]

<sup>239</sup> Interviews with: digital rider, 4 November 2020 [11]; analogue rider, 4 November 2021 [52]; participants in focus group with current digital riders, 9 December 2021

their frustration with cashless payments but stopped short of trying to persuade passengers to switch to cash, fearing the consequences that might follow should the company find out. Indeed, this was a practice that digital riders were often told explicitly to avoid.<sup>240</sup>

Nevertheless, it has happened frequently enough to have become something of a talking point in Kampala.<sup>241</sup> In recent years, Twitter / X posts by SafeBoda have often attracted sarcastic or critical comments from other users on the social media platform, taking to the 'replies' section to ruminate on the anti-cashless attitudes of the company's riders. There has been press coverage too, with some articles describing the 'outrage as SafeBoda riders frustrate cashless paying clients' and suggesting that 'the cashless option is fast becoming a thing of the past' (Kampala Dispatch, 2021; Musinguzi and Courtright, 2022).

To try and ensure that it remains a thing of the future, the city's ride-hailing platforms have recently sought to quell riders' disquiet with cashless technology through various means. On the one hand, this has involved ramping up cashless infrastructure across the city in an effort to increase the range of products and services that can be bought without physical cash. SafeBoda's partnership with fuel company Rubis Energy is one such notable example, allowing SafeBoda riders to access discounted fuel from pump attendants providing they use their e-wallet to pay (The Kampala Report, 2022). There have also been further discounts for customers who choose to pay for their journeys using cashless, thus pulling a greater share of trip revenue through digital channels and into the crosshairs of automated capture, as well as worker-friendly adjustments to 'cash out' rules that remove the once-per-week limit.<sup>242</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, however, are new disciplinary techniques designed to cajole riders into going cashless. As already mentioned in Chapter 8, in 2021 SafeBoda introduced a new algorithmic condition that meant riders would no longer be able to access the app or receive trip requests if they did not hold a specified minimum amount in their e-wallet at all times – it was a system, one rider explained, of 'automatic deactivation'.<sup>243</sup> Thus, in addition to incentivising the embrace of digital payments, the company's stated ambition to go 'completely cashless' (Thomson, in Dosunmu, 2022) also rests upon new rules that actively penalise riders hoping to remain planted in the cash-based economy.

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<sup>240</sup> Interview with digital rider, 18 October 2021 [45]

<sup>241</sup> Interview with journalist, 8 December 2021 [K17]

<sup>242</sup> Interview with senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22]

<sup>243</sup> Interview with digital rider, 13 December 2021 [68]

### *iii 'Caps not apps'*

Early on during fieldwork I took a boda ride from the city centre back to where I was staying. Though I had found the rider at a stage, he also wore a Bolt-branded helmet which I enquired about once the trip was complete. 'So you use this app too?', I asked. After laughing for a moment, he replied with a smile: 'I only use their cap!'<sup>244</sup>

This early episode proved to be symptomatic of a far wider phenomenon among Kampala's digital riders, both current as well as former, that involves the 'illicit' use of app company equipment to increase personalised, analogue forms of business. Indeed, what happens in many cases when a rider decides to leave a platform is that, in addition to dropping off without any word to management,<sup>245</sup> they take the helmets and uniforms with them too. This typically happens for one of two main reasons.

Sometimes, having paid money to the company both upon registration and then later through digitally reclaimed instalments, it is because riders are under the impression that they own the equipment. This not only reflects an assumption found in some of the digital inclusion literature on SafeBoda (e.g. by the World Bank – see Murthy with Deshpande, 2022: 39), but also bears out the insights of one former employee who suggested to me that new recruits were routinely led to believe their '500k' payments for 'equipment and gadgets' entitled them to ownership of those things.<sup>246</sup> This impression, however, is false.

According to SafeBoda's Terms-of-Use, Clause 6.2 states that 'We reserve the right to charge the Driver for use of any SafeBoda equipment', which includes (from Clause 6.1) 'SafeBoda-branded items, SafeBoda-branded reflectors, and SafeBoda-enabled smartphones'. But as Section 6.3 then clarifies: 'The charge in Clause 6.2 shall not be the purchase price of the equipment and neither shall it comprise any arrangement to mean that the ownership of the equipment has transferred to the Driver'. 'For the avoidance of doubt', it continues, 'the equipment shall at all times remain the property of SafeBoda' (SafeBoda, n.d.).

This leads us to the second reason why riders may retain company equipment: because even when the truth of this deceptive arrangement eventually reveals itself, a sense of exploitation and injustice drives them to keep what they feel is morally (if not legally) theirs. As one rider pointed out, with 'SafeBoda we pay a lot of money for the equipment [...] And what is too much is that you don't even have the right of the helmets when you are out of the company, yet you

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<sup>244</sup> Fieldnotes, 8 October 2021

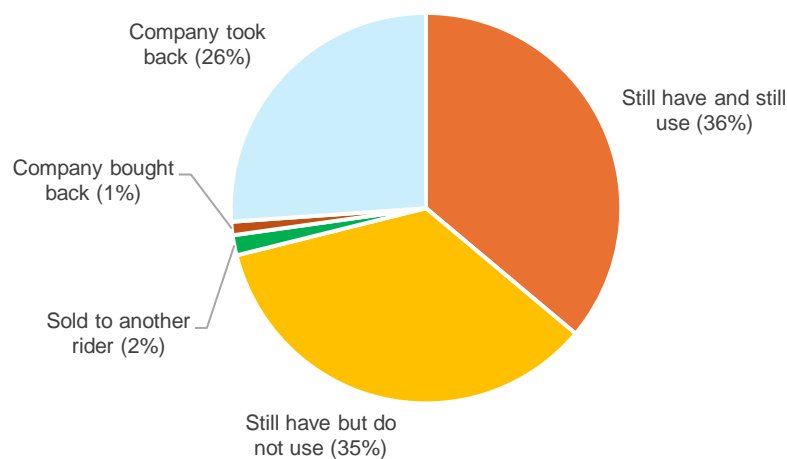
<sup>245</sup> Interview with senior operations manager, SafeBoda, 2 February 2022 [K22]

<sup>246</sup> Interview with former SafeBoda rider and employee, 18 January 2022 [K21]

paid a lot of money for them'.<sup>247</sup> For many, the justifiable response in this scenario is to keep hold of the items, leading to the likes of SafeBoda to deploy 'field agents' on the capital's streets, tasked with detecting and apprehending former riders who are yet to have returned the company's assets (see Chapter 8).

While not all who keep the equipment continue to use it, substantial numbers do. Figure 19 below uses survey data from the 'former digital' sample ( $n = 183$ ) to show what happens to helmets and uniforms after those riders left the world of platform work. As we can see, over 70% reportedly kept the items whilst roughly half of this group claimed to still be using them, meaning that more than one-third of all former digital riders surveyed were actively engaging in officially-prohibited continued use of company equipment having left the apps. By contrast, in around one-quarter of cases the company took the equipment back.

Figure 19. What happens to app company equipment when riders exit?



Source: survey data ( $n = 183$ )

Why do boda riders who have left the platforms continue to wear and display company equipment, especially, as we will see below, given the acrimonious terms on which many depart? For the most part, it is because this helps them get business. One of the main advantages of digital work is that, from a rider's perspective, they are seen by wider society to be more professional and trustworthy – certainly in comparison to the stage-less *lubyanza* who roam the streets hawking for customers. 86% of the survey sample, for example, felt that working through an app was perceived as more respectable than traditional riding, which to some degree is a reflection of how riders feel they are viewed and treated by others (Monteith

<sup>247</sup> Participant in focus group with former digital riders, 9 December 2021

and Giesbert, 2017), including customers belonging to a growing, if loosely defined and still in-the-making, urban middle class (Mercer and Lemanski, 2020). By continuing to wear company equipment, former digital riders seek to project the kind of respectability and professionalism that many of these customers have come to associate with the corporate sheen of the platforms, whilst at the same time appropriating it to secure business on their own terms, even without the aid of the app.<sup>248</sup>

What's more, it is not just former digital riders that engage in this subversive practice but current ones too. A number of those interviewed talked about using the app to connect with new customers, before attempting to take the transaction offline by negotiating prices and payments in person. Though not always a successful strategy, this is nevertheless strictly prohibited by the ride-hailing companies. In other cases, digital riders may take a new passenger through the app but then use that initial connection to try and secure future work on a more personalised, negotiable and offline basis (see also Maffie, 2023), thus extricating the apps from the labour process whilst reintermediating themselves back in. In doing so, riders are essentially repurposing the digital infrastructure of the platform to cultivate social relationships with customers and, perhaps paradoxically, carve out more spaces and opportunities for analogue work.

#### **iv      *Back to the pavements***

Kampala's ride-hailing companies have long prided themselves on instilling safer driving behaviours among riders and creating less hazardous streets, and are therefore keen to emphasise either the training programmes they put new recruits through (in the case of SafeBoda) or the compliance with official licensing that their riders demonstrate (in the case of Uber). There is also some research evidence to back such claims up. In 2017, for example, researchers from the University of Washington and Makerere University teamed up to examine whether inclusion on the SafeBoda platform helped to make riders safer (Muni et al., 2020). Using a mixture of self-reported and observational data to assess behavioural differences between SafeBoda riders and those working through 'regular' analogue means, they found that the former were more likely to 'engage in safe riding behaviours' (*ibid.*: 5). This included helmet-wearing, possession of a driver's license and reflective jacket, and avoidance of driving towards oncoming traffic.

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<sup>248</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 13 October 2021 [31]; digital rider, 10 November 2021 [53]; digital rider, 17 January 2022 [71]; participants in focus group with current digital riders, 9 December 2021



Timing matters, however. In the period since that research was carried out the company's rider training programme has been dramatically compressed (see Chapter 8), and recent years have seen mounting concerns among riders, industry stakeholders and analysts alike that the safety standards of SafeBoda riders have slipped. Several riders I spoke with claim to have observed a general decline in the driving behaviours of those working digitally, with the discipline of earlier years replaced by patchier adherence to road traffic law. One former digital rider, for example, noted that SafeBoda riders 'used to follow road rules but the majority no longer do', while a 10-year veteran of the industry remarked how these days 'they are riding on the pavements, carrying two passengers. Now, they're after money'.<sup>249</sup>

These sentiments were echoed by a senior figure at the Ministry of Works and Transport, who told me that although the platforms 'can make it easier to track [the industry] because of numbers', in practice 'these riders also do the same things as others, so you find that safety is compromised. You can never be sure of SafeBoda riders. Things can happen'.<sup>250</sup> Anecdotally, throughout my time in Kampala I witnessed digital riders breaking traffic law on multiple occasions, whether it be rushing red lights, driving on the wrong side of the road or mounting pavements to avoid congestion. A recent assessment of SafeBoda's impact in the city, produced for one of the company's very first financial backers, Global Innovation Fund, states that despite 'an initial reduction in risky road behaviour and accidents', there are now 'indications of relapse' and a 'widespread belief' among road safety experts that riding behaviours had 'significantly declined' in recent years (Global Innovation Fund, 2022: 3, 4). The company's recent roll-out of a new option called 'SafeBoda Plus' provides further acknowledgement of this relapse, enticing passengers with an 'elevated experience' featuring added insurance cover and 'top' riders who have undergone re-training (Banura, 2023), whilst the fact that customers need to pay more for this 'premium' service reflects the way in which platform companies have become increasingly adept at capitalising on their own failures (Appadurai and Alexander, 2020; Bissell, 2023).

How, then, did Kampala's digital riders come to end up back on the pavements?

Although it would be misplaced to attribute with full confidence, my research points to two possible factors at play. The first concerns the overarching theme of this chapter: riders' increasing disillusion with the realities of digital inclusion. As argued in Chapter 8, the downward revision of the ride-hailing deal affects not just the material returns available to riders, but their more subjective relations with the platforms too. We have already seen how an abrogation of the initial transformative promise, powerfully symbolised by the shifting

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<sup>249</sup> Interviews with: former digital rider, 5 November 2020 [13]; analogue rider, 10 November 2021 [55]

<sup>250</sup> Interview with senior official, Ministry of Works and Transport, 15 February 2022 [K33]

economics of the deal and the stricter management of riders' work, can sour attitudes towards the platforms and create serious issues of distrust. What we now see here is that rather than remaining contained within the realm of riders' perceptions, this kind of disillusion can actually filter into their physical working behaviours; a dynamic hinted at during several interviews but illustrated especially well by the words of one focus group participant called Robert:

At first they were our bosses according to the mission they had come with [...] but they get greed for money in that they exceeded the number of riders they wanted [...] And they are getting a lot of commission from us riders, like about 15%. [So] this has lowered our motivation towards their services, and now we act as their bosses.<sup>251</sup>

A former SafeBoda employee went further in his remarks, suggesting that these erosions of compliance could be explained by the way in which the company's underlying economic motivations had manifested in a kind of betrayal of its riders, leading them to eventually push back against the terms of their inclusion.<sup>252</sup> There are multiple ways that SafeBoda tries to make money off riders, he told me: 'The helmet itself is a business. It's on the side, you can't see it. The phone is a business. It's about business besides riders. It's all about getting commission on things'. When riders finally realise they are being taken advantage of in these ways, he continued, it is common to see them stop following SafeBoda rules. For him, it was this sense of economic exploitation that 'can turn riders against' the company and 'make them behave badly' – and it was this, he felt, that could eventually 'kill' SafeBoda's vision of trying to make boda work and transit safer activities.

A second factor relates to the more concrete and direct effects of the revised ride-hailing deal. As platforms drop the bonuses that helped attract labour in the first place and replace them with commissions that ratchet up over time, the economics of a digital rider's working day change. Now, they must either work longer hours or complete a higher number of trips across the same timeframe if they are to maintain a similar revenue flow. Indeed, the entire premise of ride-hailing is that digital riders stand to earn more than analogue ones, but only if they work harder and / or faster (which the platforms enable them to do by providing access to aggregated demand). Under the added weight of increasingly saturated labour within the capital's boda industry, the competition for jobs and the compulsion to complete them quickly is today arguably greater than ever before.

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<sup>251</sup> Participant in focus group with former digital riders, 9 February 2021

<sup>252</sup> Interview with former SafeBoda rider and employee, 18 January 2022 [K21]

The result is, as the shifting economics of ride-hailing have fused with a mounting sense of widespread disillusion, riders have gone 'back to business as usual',<sup>253</sup> leading ultimately to the 'relapse' in safety standards described by the Global Innovation Fund (2022) report. While this has often materialised in the forms of 'app-ropriation' outlined throughout this section, constituting individual-level attempts to rework (Katz, 2004) the terms of their inclusion from below, there is a final response from riders that perhaps does more than anything else to disrupt the platform dream of a digital revolution: exit.

### III EXIT

In some ways it is to the credit of Kampala's ride-hailing platforms that the issue of rider exits has not been more readily apparent or widely discussed in recent years. The sense one quickly gets from spending even a short time on Kampala's streets, at least at the time of fieldwork, is that the capital's boda sector may have been all but taken over by the apps, with the variously coloured company uniforms and branding sometimes appearing to dominate the streetscape. This is particularly the case as far as SafeBoda is concerned, the vibrant orange of its riders' jackets and roadside advertising displays a frequent, now almost mundane sight.

There is a kind of optical illusion at play here, which to some extent explains the impression of digital dominance. Part of this concerns the way that company branding, especially in its loudest forms, stands out in a sea of heterogeneity: without an employer(-like figure) to dictate a specific look, there has traditionally been a distinct lack of uniformity to the appearance of the city's boda workforce. Through aesthetic standardisation of equipment and uniforms, digital riders become much more noticeable than their analogue or non-uniformed counterparts and as a result take on a somewhat amplified presence within the city.

But this is also partly about the intentional distortion of ID numbering. Riders who register with SafeBoda, for example, are assigned a unique code that is made clearly visible on the backs of both their helmet and jacket, as is often the case with other ride-hailing platforms too. If they later decide to leave the app, that unique number is not then re-assigned to an incoming rider but instead remains permanently out of use, while new joiners are issued with whatever number the overall cumulative count has reached.<sup>254</sup> What this means is that although the high individual numbers adorned by some riders give the impression of an impressively sized

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<sup>253</sup> Interview with journalist, 8 December 2021 [K17]

<sup>254</sup> Interview with former SafeBoda rider and employee, 18 January 2022 [K21]

digital workforce – during my time in Uganda I regularly saw SafeBoda IDs in the region of 25,000 – in practice the number of active riders is significantly lower. As one digital rider told me, ‘The company just goes forward [with numbering], it doesn’t go back. It wants to look big’.<sup>255</sup>

These visual tricks conceal a defining trend of Kampala’s ride-hailing trajectory over the past few years, apparent not only during but also before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic: a largescale exit of riders from the apps.

Interviews often touched on the past and present status of ride-hailing in the capital, and a consistent theme to emerge from both digital and analogue riders’ assessments was one of decline. Many interviewees described how large numbers had moved away from online work as resentment towards pricing, commissions and company controls grew – core issues confirmed by conversations with ex-digital riders<sup>256</sup> – with several using immediate examples from their own stages to highlight the extent of offline returns. One rider stationed within the busy area surrounding Makerere University reckoned that the vast majority of his fellow stage members, perhaps as much as 80%, were previously app users. At the time of our interview, however, that had fallen to just two or three individuals.<sup>257</sup> Another rider based further out of the city shared that while three members of his stage used to work digitally, that number was now zero.<sup>258</sup> The same decrease from three to zero was also described to us by James, a rider working at a stage of 19 members in one of the busiest parts of Central Division, who then went on to estimate more generally that around 50% of SafeBoda riders had probably left the platform since it began operating in the city.<sup>259</sup>

While it is difficult to place a precise figure on this trend, what with departing riders typically drifting away rather than informing the companies and officially closing down their account, James’ rough estimate does not seem too far off the mark. The Kampala-based Lubyanza Research Group, a small outfit carrying out quarterly surveys of evolving trends and practices across the city’s boda industry, recently published data from 5,600 observations and 280 interviews conducted in early April 2023 (Ndhogezi, 2023). Reporting on app use, they found that of the 30% of interviewed riders who had at some point engaged in online work, half had since stopped. This drop-off was more pronounced further away from the city centre, where

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<sup>255</sup> Interview with digital rider, 29 October 2021 [50]

<sup>256</sup> Interviews with: analogue rider, 6 November 2020 [15]; former digital rider, 7 November 2020 [20]; digital rider, 15 November 2021 [57]

<sup>257</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 25 November 2021 [59]

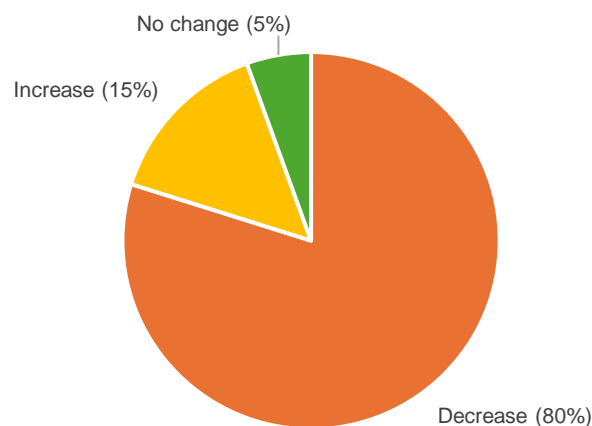
<sup>258</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 6 December 2021 [66]

<sup>259</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 13 October 2021 [31]

as much as three-quarters of riders with digital experience had stopped working online. In addition to this, one executive at a SafeBoda ‘partner company’ recently told reporters that less than half of the 25,000 riders registered with the platform are now actively using it (Musinguzi and Courtright, 2022; see also Nambeka, 2022).

Data from our own boda survey lends further backing to the kind of scale being discussed here. Though only a simple measure, we asked each rider how many members of their stage were currently using an app at the time of research, before then asking how many had been doing so a few years ago. Understandably, not everyone knew the answer to one or both of these questions; this was the case for 117 respondents. Of the remaining 253, 37 riders gave responses that indicated an increase in the number of stage members working digitally while 14 reported no change. By contrast, 202 respondents – that is, 80% of those who provided full answers to these survey questions – reported a fall in the number of digital riders at their stage (see Figure 20).

*Figure 20. Changes in digital share at survey respondents’ stages*



Source: survey data (n = 253)

To get more of a sense of this decline (Table 14), we then also asked these riders to estimate the specific numbers involved, then and now. From this data, we find that at those stages that have seen a decline, there are now on average 70% fewer riders estimated to be working digitally – a drop-off rate that exceeds the 50% estimates put forward by both our previous rider, James, and the Lubyanza Research Group. There are also multiple cases of ‘absolute declines’, with as many as 66 respondents (26% of  $n = 253$ ) stating that the number of digital riders at their stage had fallen to zero. Though it would be wise to treat these estimates with

a degree of caution, they do provide some indication of Kampala’s ride-hailing trajectory that is broadly consistent with wider estimates and more subjective assessments found elsewhere.

Table 14. Survey indicators of the digital decline

Indicator of digital decline		
Stages that have seen a decline in digital workers (% of <i>n</i> = 253)	Average scale of that decline (estimated % reduction in number of digital riders at stage)	Stages with absolute declines (i.e. fall to 0) (% of <i>n</i> = 253)
80%	70%	26%

Source: survey data (*n* = 253)

As several riders and key informants were keen to point out, these vast drop-off rates are not only symptomatic of workers’ emerging antagonisms towards digital labour platforms and their disproportionate control over the terms of inclusion, but are also problematic in their own right. As previously discussed in Chapter 8, digital registration processes frequently bypass the issue of stage membership, thus facilitating the entrance of stage-less riders into the industry whilst normalising new ‘professionalised’ ways of circumventing traditional rules for existing workers. Reflecting this, the survey data indicate generally lower levels of attachment to collective labour institutions amongst riders currently using digital platforms. As Table 15 below shows, relative to their analogue counterparts digital riders are less likely to be members of either a stage or a boda association, while those who *have* retained stage membership nevertheless spend less time there in a typical week. It should also be pointed out that these numbers most likely underestimate the true scale of detachment across the city’s boda industry, with the survey actively targeting populations based at stages and stage-like sites (see Chapter 3 and Appendix 5). Indeed, the Lubyanza Research Group’s own research on this issue recently put the proportion of digital riders lacking a stage at 29%, which is more in line with insights from my own qualitative data.<sup>260</sup>

<sup>260</sup> Although only indicative, it may also be worth noting that around one-quarter of digital riders in my interview sample reported not having a stage.

Table 15. Survey indicators of digital detachment from stages and associations

	Has stage membership (%)	Avg. time spent at stage (days per week)	Has association membership
<b>Digital</b> (n = 187)	89%	5	10%
<b>Analogue</b> (n = 183)	<b>98%</b>	<b>6.1</b>	<b>26%</b>
<b>Statistical significance of difference</b>	<b>P &lt; 0.001</b>	<b>P &lt; 0.001</b>	<b>P &lt; 0.001</b>

Source: survey data (n = 370)

One of the main consequences of this ‘digital detachment’ is that, once a rider exits online work, there is a risk that they are left effectively ‘untethered’ within the labour market, possessing membership of neither a stage nor a platform – in effect, a process of double disintermediation that abstracts riders from both digital *and* analogue regulatory structures.

Although this risk is offset by the continued importance of the boda stage as a core social and political institution (see Chapter 10), meaning most of those who drop off the apps at least remain legible by analogue means, many interviewed riders had detected a marked increase in the scale of street-based *lubyanza* activity over recent years. While there are several dynamics behind this, from perpetual expansions in the boda labour force to competitive pressures on trip pricing that render the stage a relatively expensive option for passengers, the institutionalisation of alternative working norms by the platform companies is part of it too.

Digital riders would often remark how, in the era of ride-hailing apps, ‘your stage is on the phone’,<sup>261</sup> which feeds into the idea that customers can in today’s industry be freely accessed anywhere within the city; a principle that is fundamentally inconsistent with the territorial logic of the stage yet espoused by many riders encountered through this research. At the associational level, one chairman I interviewed felt that the rise of ride-hailing had ‘contributed a lot’ to the pre-existing *lubyanza* problem,<sup>262</sup> simply by virtue of the fact that riders no longer depended so much on the stage, while another long-running association leader suggested its exacerbation had perhaps more to do with the revision of the ride-hailing deal discussed in

<sup>261</sup> Interview with digital rider, 29 October 2021 [50]

<sup>262</sup> Interview with boda association leader, 3 February 2022 [K23]

Chapter 8: ‘After [the companies’] failed promises’, he told me, ‘the riders took off their jackets and started loitering around town’.<sup>263</sup>

Meanwhile, a senior figure at the national transport workers’ union felt that the impact of the apps had been clear in this regard, with the most basic rules of the industry having been ‘distorted’ by the disruptive effects of the companies. Whether it had been the intention or not, he summed up to me by saying, ride-hailing has ‘authorised the existence of *lubyanza*. It has now become legal’.<sup>264</sup>

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### **Conclusion**

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Reflecting Qadri’s (2022) observation that digital disruption is not a one-way intrusion into people’s lives but a ‘two-way street’ involving processes of contest and negotiation, in this chapter we explored the ways in which Kampala’s digital boda riders have pushed back against the terms of their inclusion within the new platform economy: from pursuing ‘hybrid’ working arrangements to rule bending / breaking to logging off altogether. But while the kinds of (re-)actions seen here are clearly inflected with a localised politics of digital disillusion, at the same time it would not be accurate to read them as acts of protest or resistance designed to bring about a new employment bargain with the companies; and neither do they resemble the kinds of associational tactics that have started to emerge in some sections of the gig economy, North and South (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020; Webster et al., 2021). Rather, they are primarily enacted as relatively individualised displays of ‘resilience’ and ‘reworking’ to overcome some of the worst aspects of platform work and eke a little more monetary revenue out of the working day (see Anwar and Graham, 2020 and Veen et al., 2020, who both draw on Katz, 2004). While thus testament to the continued expression of labour agency under adverse digital conditions (Heeks, 2022), in the same breath the predominance of these tactics over anything else perhaps also reveals where the limits lie – for now, at least.

Of particular relevance here has been the idea of friction. The kinds of ‘techno-solutions’ pushed by agents, backers and proponents of the platform economy are often portrayed as creating seamless systems of service delivery, mobility and consumption, thus *removing* pre-existing forms of friction between actors and within transactions (Sitas et al., 2023). The realities, however, are usually far messier. Rather than simply eradicating the frictions and

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<sup>263</sup> Interview with boda association chairman, 14 December 2021 [K19]

<sup>264</sup> Interview with transport union official, 11 November 2021 [K07]



inefficiencies of seemingly dysfunctional analogue systems hamstrung by crises of state politics, the introduction of new technologies of work can also *create* new forces that slow down or throw off course processes of ‘digital transformation’. While this sometimes takes the form of occasionally violent friction between ‘old’ and ‘new’ categories of worker (Adebayo, 2019; Danielak, 2019; Nguyen and Turner, 2023), it can also resemble the kinds of ‘everyday malfunctions’ that arise out of ‘unequal encounters’ between global capital on the one hand and local livelihood systems on the other (Tsing, 2012: 708).

While the platform-generated frictions encountered throughout this chapter are for the most part modest and mundane rather than spectacular and explosive, they are nonetheless decisive in defining ‘the contours of actually existing platformization’ (Popiel and Vasudevan, 2024: 12) as it takes shape within the particular context of Kampala’s boda industry. By showing how riders actively contest the terms of their digital inclusion, they help ‘refute the lie that global power operates as a well-oiled machine’ (Tsing, 2012: 708). By highlighting the ways in which ‘platform-ised’ riders shift back and forth between the online and the offline, in many cases eventually choosing to side with the latter, they bring into view the local practices and politics of de-automation as riders *voluntarily* decide to exclude themselves from digital futures of work often thought inevitable (Bissell, 2023; McMahon et al., 2023). And then finally by doing so, these continued expressions of labour agency raise important questions about the long-term viability of a platform business model that ultimately fails to stabilise the precarities of informal economic life.

## Chapter 10

### Limits of inclusion: revisiting the changing nature of boda work

After a decade's worth of experience with digital inclusion, what can we say has meaningfully changed about the nature of informal work in Kampala's boda industry? Conventional narratives of 'platform capitalism' emphasise the transformative potential of digital labour platforms (Pasquale, 2016), which in the Ugandan capital has taken the specific form of better livelihoods, safer roads and stronger regulation. But what we have seen over the course of the last few chapters is a more complicated trajectory marked by shifting platform practices, disappointing (and disaffecting) labour realities, and the emergence of disruptive forms of friction 'from below'. How, then, are we to make sense of all this, and what might that mean for wider theoretical questions about what digital economic inclusion 'is' and what it 'does'?

In this final substantive chapter, I draw on the collective analysis of Part II of the thesis to reflect on the extent to which this particular 'platform fix' (van Doorn, 2022) has helped to sort out the long-running problems of Kampala's boda sector discussed in Part I. Split into three sections, I begin in **Section I** by returning to the idea that the rise of digital labour platforms, whilst contributing to the informalisation of work in the global North, is widely thought to have the opposite effect in places like Uganda. Developing a critical perspective directly informed by the lived experiences of Kampala's digital boda riders, I argue that this is very clearly *not* what has happened here, with platforms manufacturing *aesthetics* rather than materialities of labour formality that effectively work to conceal more commercially oriented motives beneath the surface. What's more, it is to some extent precisely because of these motives (and

subsequent practices) that the original ‘promises of inclusion’ within the ‘platform-ised’ boda economy have largely failed to materialise. In **Section III** explore how and why this is the case by revisiting each of those core promises in turn, and in doing so reveal the basic ‘limits of inclusion’ in this supposedly inevitable future of work for all. Finally, **Section III** takes us back to the politics of ‘state-boda’ relations first examined in Chapter 6, asking to what extent the sector’s digital turn has meaningfully rewired much of its overarching ‘analogue’ politics – and again finding additional limits in this regard.

## I AESTHETICS OF FORMALITY, MECHANICS OF EXTRACTION

As discussed in Chapter 2, it has been widely assumed that the incorporation of informal workers from the South into the global platform economy constitutes a vital step towards the formalisation of their labour. Tapping into longer running ideas about the benefits of strengthening formal-informal economic linkages (Meagher, 2013a), in this orthodox view platformisation holds the potential to not only extend ‘economic opportunity to millions of people who do not live in industrialized countries or even industrial areas’ (World Bank, 2019: 3), but also to ‘leapfrog barriers to formalization’ (Kring and Leung, 2021: 1) in situations where past state-led efforts might have fallen short (Anwar et al., 2023: 27; Wei et al., 2023). It is a perspective that reflects and reinforces already powerful ideas about the developmental role of private sector actors (Blowfield and Dolan, 2014), whilst encouraging further public and private investment in the cultivation of the digital economy.

Quite recently, however, research from a wide range of Southern contexts has begun to challenge and nuance this celebratory view of what platformisation ‘does’. Rather than bringing about a ‘full’ formalisation of work, what these emerging critical accounts suggest is something more akin to a partial or incomplete process, whereby *particular dimensions* of people’s working lives are becoming regularised and / or standardised through their inclusion in the platform economy. There is increasing discussion of ‘selective formalisation’ (Hunt and Samman, 2023), ‘semi-formalisation’ (Carmody et al., 2024), and of formalisation ‘to some extent’ (Chen and Qiu, 2019), as newly ‘platform-ised’ informal workers become documented (but not protected), ‘taxed’ (but by private rather than public actors), and able to track earnings and working hours (but not to claim sick pay or leave). These are useful Southern correctives to the unhelpfully simplistic theoretical starting point described above, and a key step towards ‘problematizing formalisation’ (Cieslik et al., 2022: 10).

And yet, do these theoretical refinements go far enough? The recent and ongoing experiences of Kampala's boda riders suggest there is more to unpack here, providing as they do valuable grounded insights into the nature of 'actually existing platformisation' (van Doorn et al., 2021), as well as a suggestion that ideas of selectivity alone may not be sufficient to capture and explain the changing nature of boda work in Uganda. Neither may they be sufficient to account for similar processes occurring in other informal and precarious economic settings.

In particular, what these experiences show is that the kind of 'formalisation' being produced by Kampala's boda platforms is not just partial or selective, as the above Southern correctives suggest, but illusory and surface-level too. By playing off particular epistemologies of informality that convey a sense of unstructured chaos and disconnectedness (see Chapter 2), platforms and their proponents are able to sell a brand of formalisation trading in processes of standardisation (e.g. of pricing models and payment methods), traceability (e.g. of completed trips and loan repayment progress) and connection with cleverly marketed and ostensibly formal economic actors (albeit ones which, quite paradoxically, operate in a largely deregulated space). The use of app-based digital technologies adds in an additional sense of modernisation that intersects with both donor-backed state plans to develop Kampala into a 'smart city' on the one hand (Odendaal, 2023) and ideas of a growing urban middle class in search of 'slick-looking', more professional and perhaps better planned transport alternatives on the other (see Mercer, 2020; Sopranzetti, 2022).

But although this approach is effective at creating what we might think of as an 'aesthetic of formality' at the surface, in practice the core, underlying features of workers' informality remain untouched and very much intact (Dolan and Rajak, 2018). While the closer integration of previously 'unprofessional' and 'unbanked' riders into corporate systems of work and finance lends a general impression that formalisation *is* underway – an impression rooted in a 'capital view' of formalisation that reduces it to a process of tracking and capturing informal workers' economic activity (Unni, 2018) – Kampala's 'platform-ised' boda riders continue to be excluded from wage guarantees, social security provisions and other de-commodified forms of protection such as non-contributory insurance schemes. In other words, from a 'labour view' of formalisation there has been little to no progress here (*ibid.*). Although now expected to comply with new contractual obligations and professional codes of conduct *on top of* various forms of existing government regulation (see Chapter 6), riders are ultimately still left to fend for themselves as they remain, as gig workers, outside the protective elements of state labour legislation. This is the beating heart of labour informality, and it has been almost completely unaffected by nearly a decade's worth of private-sector-led digital 'transformation' within Kampala's boda sector.

## *i*      **Mechanics of extraction beneath the surface**

In addition to generating a ‘veneer of formality’ (Dolan and Rajak, 2018: 248) that has proven effective at winning plaudits in Ugandan politics and media, part of what platformisation is ‘doing’ here is providing cover for practices of capital accumulation taking place beneath the surface (Anwar et al., 2024; Kenney and Zysman, 2020; Langley and Leyshon, 2017); a process that Kellogg et al. (2020: 384) describe as ‘obscuring and securing surplus value’ from platform workers. Within the circuits of ride-hailing, this happens through multiple channels.

First, as has already been extensively documented, through the act of commission-taking ride-hailing platforms tap into the flows of money taking place daily between riders and their customers. Although marginal at the level of each individual trip, as with mobile money systems more broadly the logic here is that ‘extremely high volume, low value transactions – propelled by billions of “unbanked” people in the world – can become a significant revenue stream’ (Maurer, 2012: 594) for those with the means of leveraging them. Commissions are not only why many riders choose to reject platform work in the first place but are also part of what renders life on the platforms so precarious, shifting unpredictably over time without warning or consultation as ride-hailing companies lurch towards eventual (yet still highly uncertain) profitability.

Second, many of the industry’s digital labour platforms operate by selling riders the equipment they need to become a fully compliant platform worker, effectively turning the ‘aesthetics of formality’ into an additional revenue stream. Smartphones are one illustrative example of this practice, with as many as 84% of those surveyed receiving one upon joining the apps. For riders registering with SafeBoda this would often be the *itel P36*, an entry-level model reviewed by one tech website as a ‘great gift’ for ‘young ones out of school’ (Techjaja, 2020) and manufactured by Chinese company, Transsion Holdings – a financial backer of SafeBoda with hopes of ‘becoming the most popular provider of smart devices and mobile services for consumers in global emerging markets’ (Transsion, 2024).<sup>265</sup> But while the presence of such an economic relationship might have allowed SafeBoda to offer the *P36* to riders at a discounted rate, the opposite in fact appears to be true. Several riders commented that the very same model could be bought for considerably less if purchased outright from a shop in town – assuming one had enough money to do so, of course – with some estimating that by agreeing to the company’s registration package, and then paying this off over time through automated pay deductions, they had ended up paying 20 to 50% more than the phone’s street

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<sup>265</sup> In 2017, Transsion was the largest manufacturer of smartphones by sales in Africa.

value.<sup>266</sup> There are notable parallels here with how motorcycle financing works under hire-purchase arrangements (see below).

In the most grievous cases uncovered here, platforms make riders pay for compulsory equipment which they must use if they wish to remain included within the platform economy, without ever allowing them to become the owners of that equipment. SafeBoda represents arguably the worst example of this, selling riders an onboarding package worth UGX 500,000 (approx. \$132) that has typically consisted of a smartphone, a branded reflector jacket, and crash helmets for themselves and their passengers. While many riders in this situation are led to believe that such an exchange entitles them to legal ownership of these items – whether that is due to deliberate deceit by the company, unclear communication between the two parties, or riders’ own moral interpretation of the situation<sup>267</sup> – as discussed in Chapter 9 and stated clearly in the company’s Terms-of-Use, this is categorically not the case.

Third, digital labour platforms act as conduits for the commercial strategies and activities of wider private sector actors who, like Transsion Holdings’ use of SafeBoda to shift smartphones, are approaching their relationships with these platforms as a means of tapping into segments of Africa’s vast informal economy that were once beyond reach; in a sense, forming part of the infrastructure required to help capital ‘read’ and access previously ‘unusable’ economies (Dolan and Roll, 2013; Meagher, 2021).

On some occasions this is done via ‘private-private partnerships’, such as when Bolt and Jumia link up with Asaak to facilitate the latter’s sale of hire-purchase schemes (Asaak, 2020), or when SafeBoda partners with Uganda’s Housing Finance Bank as part of a joint initiative to offer riders loans for land purchases and construction work (Mayeku, 2023). In other cases it comes back to the question of who is funding the platforms directly. Investment managers at Allianz, for example, one of the world’s largest insurance companies and a core SafeBoda investor, have described their company’s engagement with the ride-hailing platform as a way of expanding ‘insuretech’ sales by increasing ‘access to consumers in emerging markets’, which include in this instance both boda riders as well as their passengers (Allianz, 2019; Gaschler, 2021: 16).

And fourth, on top of the vested economic interests that drive their funding, digital labour platforms also engage in what some have termed ‘dual value production’ (van Doorn and Badger, 2020), not only extracting a commission on each transaction they orchestrate but also

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<sup>266</sup> Interviews with: digital rider, 2 November 2020 [04]; analogue rider, 15 October 2021 [42]; digital rider, 1 February 2022 [73]; participant in focus group with former digital riders, 9 December 2021.

<sup>267</sup> A former employee of SafeBoda [K21] alleged that, at least during his time at the company, it was often the first of these.

tracking and harvesting data on their users – a strategy that is central to how platforms seek to ‘extract value from intermediation’ (Langley and Leyshon, 2021: 379). As these authors point out, ‘platform reintermediation is not merely a matter of extracting “direct rent” in the form of fees and charges, but also turns on extracting “indirect rent” by accruing user data’ (*ibid.*: 382), which is then typically analysed in combination with other ‘contextual data’ to refine sales approaches and more effectively segment target markets. In some cases this data is also shared with or sold to third-party private enterprises. For example, in a 2020 report titled *Trading privacy for a cheap transport system*, Ugandan civil society organisation Unwanted Witness (2020) revealed that SafeBoda had been sharing data with Facebook without users’ consent and regardless of whether they even had a Facebook account. While SafeBoda responded at the time by removing Facebook trackers from its application, three years on the same core practice of capturing and distributing data for commercial purposes remains apparent, as the company’s updated Terms-of-Use continue to attest to (SafeBoda, n.d.).

## **ii Leveraging data and survival**

Of course, economic practices like these, which are for the most part obscured by the virtuous ‘promotional discourses’ of solution building and entrepreneurial empowerment that tend to accompany the globalised promise of big tech (Shade, 2018), are not limited to the boda industry’s digital labour platforms.

Though claiming to help solve unemployment whilst putting antiquated, predatory rental models out of business, it bears emphasising that the new wave of boda financing platforms to have emerged over the past decade or so are fundamentally *for-profit* enterprises that seek to generate secure, healthy returns on their backers’ investments. In promotional materials geared towards potential investors, these asset financiers highlight the continent’s ‘\$100B unmet need for capital’ and speak of the ‘unique foothold’ that ‘gig workers’ in Uganda’s boda industry represent for engaging in this ‘untapped African market’ (Republic, 2023). American CEOs take to social media to impart realisations that ‘Fintech in Africa is a goldmine’ and that ‘The opportunity is massive’ (Terrill, 2021), whilst explaining in interviews with financial media outlets why this particular ‘asset class [...] actually performs far better than many lending companies in the US’ (Sattar, in Finnegan, 2021). The reason?

Because every motorcycle that we [Asaak] give out supports a family of five. These vehicles aren’t being used for leisure: they’re putting food on the table for families, and because of that, families cannot stand to be without the bike even for one day. Since it plays such a big role in survival, we have been able to guarantee productive use of the funds by lending in kind rather than in cash (*ibid.*).

With riders' survival needs guaranteeing 'productive use' of the asset, Asaak then 'quickly and securely amass[es] data about a borrower's creditworthiness' on the basis of their performance against the initial loan, before using 'this data to underwrite him for additional financial products (e.g. smartphone loan, fuel loan)' (Asaak, in United States Securities and Exchange Commission, 2022). Under this model, the original motorcycle loan serves merely as an instrument to 'capture the data of the newly "included" in ways that enable lenders to map, know and govern "risky" populations' (Gabor and Brooks, 2017: 425) and a 'hook' to leveraging further sales down the line, which Asaak proudly states is 'how we are able to capture up to 38.5% more revenue per customer' (in United States Securities and Exchange Commission, 2022).

Also recall from Chapter 7 that industry pioneer, Tugende, recently embraced 'debt crowdfunding' as a way of expanding its operations, inviting individuals with UK and EU bank accounts to invest with the dual promise of 'Impact plus a strong return!' (Tugende, 2021). While European investors can expect to benefit from a stable annual return of 5.5% on their contributions, as then shown in Chapter 8 boda riders who take out these loans will end up paying back between 40 and 60% more than the motorcycle's standard market price. This is a fairly typical rate across the industry's fintech lenders, which some riders in the wider region attempt to manage by applying for cash transfers from the likes of GiveDirectly, a US-based organisation that allows individual donors sitting anywhere in the world to send money to low-income people elsewhere. In the convoluted financial gymnastics of all this, we find not only that boda riders are generating the economic surpluses that will enable Tugende's crowdfunders to be rewarded for their investment; it is also theoretically possible that, via the involvement of organisations like GiveDirectly in this strange constellation of economic flows and practices, the well-intentioned donations of one philanthropically-minded Westerner may inadvertently end up in the private bank account of another.

### ***iii A different kind of formalisation***

If part of what platforms are thought to 'do' in the South is to 'correct the unruliness' (Lee, 2018: 4) of its workers by helping to formalise their labour, then this is not what has happened in Kampala's boda industry, generating no discernible impact on either the way in which the Ugandan state relates to boda workers or the fundamental nature of their employment status. What it *has* done, however, is succeed in integrating at least some of these riders into new kinds of globalised economic relations.

Viewed through this alternative lens, the kind of formalisation enacted by Kampala's boda platforms is not one that sees previously informal workers being brought under the protective



wing of state labour law (Unni, 2018), but rather one in which low-income but high-volume actors and revenues circulating within the informal economy are being made legible – and, crucially, accessible – to formal enterprises working the ‘new frontier’ of global ‘profit-making and accumulation’ (Gabor and Brooks, 2017: 424). Subsequently, this is not a process of labour formalisation as it is conventionally understood but a vague approximation of formalisation that sees the creation of new formal-informal linkages being used as the basis for novel forms of commercial activity and private economic capture. In doing so, it seeks through reformist narratives and solutionist technologies to siphon off variously sized amounts from (still-)informal workers before redistributing them elsewhere, including to investors and partner companies spread around the world. Whether this practice actually succeeds in making Kampala’s boda platforms profitable or even sustainable, however, is another question entirely (Fleming et al., 2019; Howcroft and Leaver, 2024); these are highly uncertain, speculative endeavours whose ability to one day turn a profit remains as yet unproven, as recently intimated by one of SafeBoda’s co-founders (see Augustine, 2022).

Against this backdrop, it is far from clear whether the evidence here supports the rather sweeping argument made by some academics that ‘counteracting informal economic activity is a goal’ for labour platforms (Weber et al., 2021: 1338). In fact, it suggests quite the opposite. By bringing powerful yet largely concealed economic motivations into play, Kampala’s boda platforms are left with a business model that actively favours the *maintenance* rather than the counteraction of labour informality (Harriss-White, 2010), minimising as this does the costs borne by these companies (in terms of not having to provide a stable or guaranteed income, sick pay and other employment benefits) whilst boosting their own chances of breaking into eventual profitability. As a result, the boda industry’s long-running structure of labour informality, previously held in place exclusively by the ‘analogue’ politics of adverse incorporation (see Chapter 6), is reproduced and reinforced under the platforms – thereby adding in a new layer of adverse *digital* incorporation (Heeks, 2022) to the existing political economy of boda work.

Because Kampala’s boda platforms effectively function as inroads for global capital, helping private actors in the wider formal economy to forge new commercial connections with Uganda’s informal workers, what they ultimately end up doing is replicate rather than undo the old logics of extraction to which, over time, the city’s riders have become well-accustomed. Rather than feeling empowered by their inclusion in the platform economy, as a celebratory view of digital inclusion would imply, what riders often described in interviews was a contrasting sense of being unfairly taken advantage of – that is, of *disempowerment* – with many seeming incredulous that they were having to make payments to foreign companies in

order to access work, whilst also questioning the ethics of such an arrangement. ‘The benefit is one-sided’, one rider summed up by saying, ‘but it should be mutual’.<sup>268</sup>

However, the effects of ‘platform-ised’ economic inclusion in Kampala’s boda industry do not end with the creation of new formal-informal linkages that disguise, tweak and professionalise riders’ informality in an effort to extract value, but which do not fundamentally ‘counteract it’ (*contra* Weber et al., 2021). Platformisation here is also a process that has important implications for questions of decent work and ideas about how, or rather how *not*, to one day achieve it. Indeed, it is as a result of the economic motivations and practices described throughout this section that the capacities of Kampala’s boda platforms to genuinely transform working conditions become compromised, leading not just to diluted and ambiguous ‘market-based’ approaches to improving road safety, but also to working arrangements that produce fleeting rather than permanent experiences of inclusion.

## II THE PROMISES OF INCLUSION, REVISTED

Although formalisation of riders’ work remains a distant prospect under platformisation, that is not to say it has been unaffected. In this final section we revisit each of the three sets of ‘transformative promises’ first laid out in Chapter 7 – i) better livelihoods, ii) safer roads, and iii) stronger regulation – in light of the evidence and analysis subsequently presented in Chapters 8 and 9. In doing so, we find that the sector’s recent digital turn has, in contrast to what has often been claimed, created fresh constraints on the realisation of decent work for Kampala’s riders that serve to consolidate rather than overcome the existing analogue terms of their adverse incorporation.

### *i* **Better livelihoods...?**

Increasing riders’ incomes and empowering them to become more autonomous entrepreneurs is central to the promise of digital inclusion, but it is clear from the evidence that, for many at least, this is not how things have panned out. We see this in three major ways.

First, *the worsening economics of the ride-hailing deal short-changes digital riders*. By escaping the economic inefficiencies and frictions of the stage-based system, platforms reason that workers are able to access a greater number of jobs throughout the day and bring

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<sup>268</sup> Interview with digital rider, 29 October 2021 [49]

in more revenue as a result. What they fail to mention, however, is that platform work also costs them more. As described in Chapter 8, evidence from the survey shows that although digital riders were earning an average of 12% more *gross* income per week than those who had left the platforms, at the same time they were actually making 7% less *net* income. The reason? Riders in the former category pay substantially more in operating costs each week, primarily due to: increases in data and airtime (necessary to remain online for longer and for contacting passengers); increases in fuel consumption (a product of often having to travel in order to meet passengers); and the introduction of commission (typically amounting to around 15% of per-trip revenue, and accounting for the largest of these three additional expenses). Once these extra operating costs are calculated in, digital riders in fact pay out 21% more each week on average relative to their analogue counterparts, thus completely eradicating any economic gains derived from a higher trip rate and leading many to engage in what we can think of as 'hybrid work': balancing time on the apps with substantial continued shifts of offline work, primarily in a bid to offset the declining terms of the ride-hailing deal.

These escalating costs are further exacerbated by another feature of the new boda economy: asset financing. While the economic benefits of *full* motorcycle ownership are impressive, the *process* required to reach that point is time-consuming, precarious and extremely expensive. The evidence here suggests that riders entering hire-purchase agreements with formal asset financing companies take on a considerable financial burden, with relatively little room to manoeuvre should personal circumstances worsen. For the duration that riders pay off their loans, a period of typically between 18 and 24 months, their weekly operating costs as far as motorcycle access is concerned increase by an average of 34% relative to those in the rental system. Penalty fines for late repayments constitute an additional expense laid on top of this, and are backed up by the constant threat of repossession should excessive arrears accumulate. And then by the time everything has been paid off, riders have ended up paying substantially more for their motorcycle than if they had been able to purchase a new model outright: 58% more on average according to the survey data, or around UGX 3mn (approx. \$787) – equivalent to 29 weeks' worth of average net income. Clearly, *being* your own boss and *becoming* your own boss are two very different things.

Thus, in expanding rather than easing the daily economic pressures faced by Kampala's boda riders, these new modes of digital and financial inclusion are simply deepening the first problematic working condition laid out in Chapter 5: high operating costs.

The second major way in which platformisation has impacted riders' livelihoods is by *imposing new forms of management and control over informal workers*. Though claiming to exist as a kind of 'liberation technology' (Mann and Iazzolino, 2019: 1) that disintermediates the

economic rules and restrictions of the boda stage from riders' working lives, in reality platform work entails a *re-intermediation* of the labour process by platforms themselves. Consequently, digital riders must play by an alternative set of rules (and corporate 'codes of conduct') if they wish to remain digitally included whilst continuing to hand over a portion of their revenue generated on each and every trip. On top of this, riders under asset financing arrangements must comply with a strict repayment schedule that some 'can't even recommend [to] my brother'.<sup>269</sup> When they fall short, lenders draw on a range of coercive techniques to pressure riders into paying up that sit awkwardly against corporate narratives of autonomy and empowerment.

Third, in addition to directly affecting the livelihoods of digital workers in these ways, *platform company practices have more broadly undermined the earning capacity of both analogue as well as digital riders*. By intentionally and systematically undercutting offline prices in a bid to win market share, ride-hailing companies have placed a downward pressure on trip pricing that ripples out across the sector as a whole. Good from a customer's perspective no doubt, but much less desirable for riders – whose income, it must be remembered, directly and indirectly supports a considerable network of dependents (an average of 3.9 people within Kampala, according to the survey data, and 2.2 outside the capital).

As a result of this downward pressure, stage-based riders have lost some of what we might think as their 'micro-collective' bargaining power to determine prices: a practice that has long been socially regulated at the most local of levels by the collective rules of the stage, which are designed to prevent workers from constantly undercutting one another (Calkins and Zoanni, 2023; Doherty, 2022; Ibrahim and Bize, 2018). Because these riders are increasingly encountering customers who 'are now looking for those lower fares' as a result of platform practices,<sup>270</sup> they are effectively being left with one of two second-rate options: either drop their prices at the stage in order to continue securing jobs (but in the process increase the number needing to be done each day), or stand firm but risk losing business.

In response to this challenging new economic reality, stage-based riders have been increasingly compelled to head off in search of additional work if they want to avoid making a loss at the end of the day. The result is that just as digital riders engage in hybrid work beyond the confines of the app, stage-based riders now regularly operate outside the stage system simply to stay afloat (see also Ndhogezi, 2023). Analogue workers within the survey ( $n = 183$ ), for example, were found to source an average of just 57% of their daily business from the stage, with the remainder coming either from the street or through personal contacts. For 39%

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<sup>269</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 14 October 2021 [39]

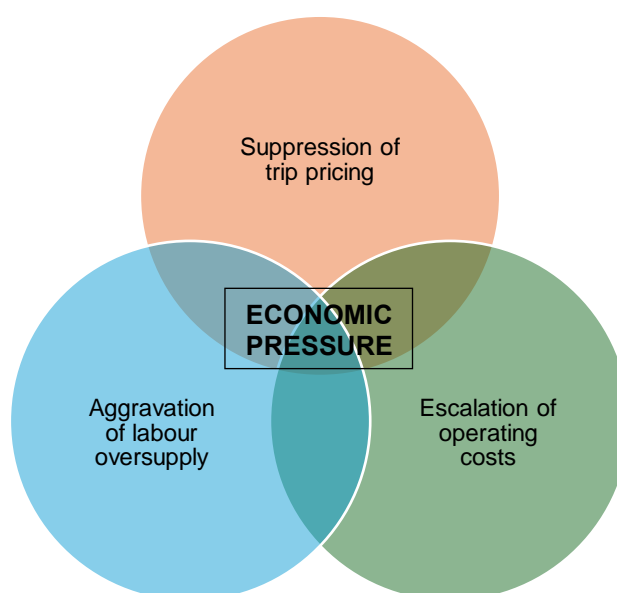
<sup>270</sup> Interviews with digital rider, 4 November 2020 [11]; analogue rider, 22 October 2021 [46]

( $n = 72$ ) of these riders, the stage was not even categorised as their primary source / site of work.

At the same time, the lower prices that the companies have helped to instil across the sector are but one dynamic within a broader livelihood effect. On the one hand, there are the escalating costs already mentioned, which increase the amount of revenue that needs to be generated each day for riders to stay operational and keep the companies at bay. On the other hand, as a result of continued expansions in the number of people taking up boda work over the years, trip prices are being driven down even further by increasingly competitive relations within the workforce over a supply of jobs that has not kept up. By allowing new riders to circumvent established analogue methods for gaining access to the sector – chiefly, the boda stage and the *kibaluwa* rental system – the recent push towards digital and financial inclusion cannot help but feed into this process, thus compounding another of the difficult working conditions outlined in Chapter 5: oversupplied labour.

Sitting at the intersection of these three dynamics – the suppression of pricing, the escalation of operating costs, and the aggravation of oversupply – is arguably the most pernicious livelihood effect of platformisation: *a generalised intensification of economic pressure on riders across the board* (see Figure 21). What makes this effect so damaging is that, by eroding the economic terms of boda riding across the capital, it impacts riders regardless of whether they have chosen to take up platform work or not. By stretching the outer limits of the sector's absorptive capacity, it compromises the ability of boda work in general to act as an effective safety net for those failed by the wider economy (Breman, 2009). And by filtering into the day-to-day behaviours of workers, as we will now see it causes the entire ride-hailing safety logic to come unstuck.

Figure 21. Livelihood dynamics under digital inclusion



Source: author's own

## **ii Safer roads...?**

Supporting riders' livelihoods is not just central to how the industry's digital labour platforms present themselves, but also crucial to the entire 'market-based approach' (Sussock, in Senthilingam, 2015) used by ride-hailing companies to engineer safety improvements on Kampala's roads – another of their core promises. According to the platform logic, digital riders stand to earn more through this way of working than they would by staying offline, and it is this economic carrot that is supposed to secure riders' compliance with safety measures set by the companies. In this framing, better livelihoods and safer riding are not only compatible goals but mutually reinforcing ones too.

The idea that the platforms have been successful in achieving this stated objective can be found both within national and international press coverage of ride-hailing's initial years in Kampala (Lule, 2018; Rosen, 2017; Russon, 2019), as well as a smattering of research literature. In addition to Muni et al.'s (2020) study cited in Chapter 9, which found that SafeBoda riders were more likely to engage in 'safe riding behaviours' than their analogue counterparts, reports produced for the Shell Foundation, a financial backer of SafeBoda, point to perceived improvements in safety among passengers (Gachoka and Winiacki, 2020; Nesbitt-Ahmed and Fraser, 2017).

Subjective data on passengers' perceptions of safety and observational data on helmet-wearing are both useful for scoping out effects, but they do not tell the whole story. Rather than providing conclusive evidence that ride-hailing has led to safer roads – that boda work has, in fact, become less dangerous – these findings need to be weighed against a wider understanding of how the platformisation of riders' livelihoods shapes the everyday nature of their work. This is particularly the case when we consider that the aforementioned news reports and research outputs were put together *prior* to the revision of the ride-hailing deal.

While participation in safety trainings and adherence to professional codes of conduct may help slow digital riders down (at least initially), and while the provision (read: sale) of helmets and third-party insurance may offset some of the physical and financial impacts of a collision,<sup>271</sup> there is an internal contradiction at the core of the ride-hailing model found in Kampala's boda industry that pulls in the opposite direction. As an extension of the gig economy, the livelihood promise of ride-hailing hangs not in the offer of a guaranteed wage but in the *possibility* of higher earnings. By trading off lower trip remuneration in exchange for access to aggregated labour demand, platform companies reason that riders 'have the potential to increase their earnings by up to 50 per cent' (Thomson, 2018). But crucially, this desirable outcome only materialises if they do more work throughout the day – a raw reality of platform work that some have referred to as the gig economy's 'flexibility mystique' (Kincaid and Reynolds, 2024).

To reframe it in more realistic terms, the core livelihood promise of higher earnings here is almost entirely contingent upon riders reaching and maintaining a faster work-rate. As one interviewee put it, 'We are like stakeholders [under the company], I can say that. [There is] no basic salary, just commission. So it depends on your speed'.<sup>272</sup> What this means in practice is that digital riders must spend more time on the road, completing enough jobs that pay 'little money'<sup>273</sup> in order to make the endeavour worthwhile, and less downtime at the stage (if they have one), thereby minimising opportunities for both rest and camaraderie. Though there is a balance to be struck – staying busy enough to earn what is needed, which platforms can certainly assist with, whilst trying to avoid doing too much – my interlocutor Geoffrey summed it up with the following illustrative words: 'The app's point is not for people to get acquainted with each other [at the stage]. It is to keep [them] moving'.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Of the 29% ( $n = 54$ ) of digital riders in the survey who reported holding insurance – a share that is almost double that of analogue riders – 88% ( $n = 48$ ) of these paid for it themselves.

<sup>272</sup> Interview with digital rider, 11 February 2022 [76]

<sup>273</sup> Interview with digital rider, 13 October 2021 [36]

<sup>274</sup> Fieldnotes, 15 November 2021

Geoffrey's important insight is reflected not only in the survey data, which shows that digital riders spend less time at their stages per week, but also in the qualitative testimonies of several interviewees. One digital rider, for example, explained that since moving online 'I no longer have leisure time as I previously did when at the stage. The app gets me busy at all times'. When later asked whether he would consider signing up with an e-commerce platform like Jumia, he replied: 'I don't think I can manage [...] Even the speed on which they deliver, you see someone being under pressure'.<sup>275</sup> Another argued that although digital opportunities can 'increase skills and experience in someone's career', it also carried the potential for overwork: 'I think that the traditional way of riding gives a rider peace of mind, since he is the boss of his own and has no pressure from customers. Whereas the digital way of riding overworks the person'.<sup>276</sup> This was sometimes cited by analogue riders as justification for remaining offline – 'If you work hard [on the app] you earn much, but you get tired'<sup>277</sup> – as well as other interviewees who stressed that digital pressure resulted not just in bodily tiredness but 'over-use' of one's motorcycle too.<sup>278</sup>

It has been well-established in other transport contexts and sectors that gig economy models have a tendency to encourage and reward speed (Christie and Ward, 2019; 2023; Cook et al., 2021; ILO, 2021; Lefcoe et al., 2023). This includes not just how fast a transport operator drives, but also their propensity to run red lights, turn across a busy road or engage in risky driving behaviours more generally. But at the same time, research from both Uganda and the wider East Africa region has consistently shown that it is speeding and risk-taking induced by economic pressure which is often associated with boda crashes (Francis et al., 2023; Kitara and Ikoona, 2022; Kitara and Karlsson, 2020; Raga et al., 2023), with one Kampala-based study in particular underlining the strong role that competition for jobs has in this regard (Siya et al., 2019).

For an industry shift that claims to have been carried out in the name of improving safety standards, this is a jarring choice of model to say the least. On the one hand, the ride-hailing solution to dangerous work / roads found in Kampala seeks to slow riders down by incentivising participation in safety trainings and compliance with codes-of-conduct. But on the other, it is structured in a way that ultimately rewards higher work-rates and faster speeds, thus threatening to unravel whatever safety gains are achieved through the former mechanism. To use O'Neill's (2021) phrasing from his research on the 'velocities' of informal

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<sup>275</sup> Interview with digital rider, 1 November 2020 [01]

<sup>276</sup> Interview with digital rider, 14 October 2021 [37]

<sup>277</sup> Interview with analogue rider, 12 October 2021 [29]

<sup>278</sup> Participant in focus group with current digital riders, 9 December 2021.



transport workers in Guatemala City, this is a model that imposes new forces of both ‘upward drag’ and ‘downward pull’ on boda riders *at the same time*; reducing their speed through formal safety initiatives whilst simultaneously compelling them to work harder in an effort make the ride-hailing promise come good. Truly, the structural tension within this approach could not be starker.

What makes this whole situation even more problematic from a safety perspective is the disaffection that the revised ride-hailing deal has generated amongst Kampala’s digital riders, and the kinds of worker-led reactions this has ended up fuelling. As detailed in Chapter 9, through multiple individual-level acts of what Katz (2004) refers to as ‘resilience’ and ‘reworking’, digital riders seek to ‘make do’ with the negative aspects of platform work more effectively whilst also doing what they can to improve the terms of their digital inclusion from below, even if the resulting gains are relatively marginal. This includes: (mis-)using company equipment in an effort to attract customers, without necessarily complying with either road traffic law or codes-of-conduct in full; operating outside the apps, and subsequently the apps’ rules, in order to routinely re-enter the analogue world of face-to-face bargaining; and refusing to engage in safe riding behaviours when doing so might threaten to compromise their daily trip-rate – a refusal that is then further compounded by riders’ growing sense that inclusion in the platform economy amounts to little more than a form of economic exploitation. It is partly because of such reactions that, as recently noted in a report by one of SafeBoda’s first financial backers, the past few years have seen ‘indications of relapse’ in safety standards among Kampala’s digital riders (Global Innovation Fund, 2022: 3).

As we have also seen, ride-hailing in Kampala has additionally proven to be a model that struggles to retain labour over time. When the above acts of resilience and reworking fail to modify the terms of digital inclusion to an acceptable degree, riders turn to one of the few options for resistance left at their disposal: exit. In doing so, huge numbers of once-included workers are making an active decision to reject what the platforms have to offer, thus turning ride-hailing into ‘a risky vehicle for implementing society-wide change such as in road safety’ (*ibid.*: 4) and raising serious questions about the alignment between market-based safety solutions and sustained improvements over the long term.

### ***iii Stronger regulation...?***

In addition to being used as a ‘vehicle’ for road safety, ride-hailing in Kampala has also been deployed as a technology of sectoral re-organisation and regulation. According to economist Brian Silverman, ride-hailing platforms like SafeBoda fulfil a key ‘private-regulatory function’ in Uganda’s boda industry, where he argues that past ‘efforts at state regulation and industry

self-regulation both failed in the mid-2000s and early 2010s' (Silverman, 2019). By contrast, it was hoped and assumed that by incentivising, through promises of better livelihoods and safer work, riders' inclusion within a new system of 'digital legibility' (Chilson, 2021), this 'unexpected boost from the private sector' (Paulat, 2014) would provide government with the means to finally tame Uganda's notorious 'rogue sector' (Goodfellow, 2015), once and for all.

Premised on the idea that 'it is easier to work with corporations than with the workers themselves' (ITF, 2020: 19), under this slick new 'outsourcing' model (*ibid.*: 19) data on riders would be more seamlessly gathered, their movements and malfeasancess more effectively tracked and punished, and eventually their labours more easily taxed. Indeed, as Uber's former country manager explained to me, early collaborative meetings between ride-hailing companies and government included the involvement of the Uganda Revenue Authority, 'so they would be able to tax down the line – that was part of the whole operation'.<sup>279</sup> All of this, it has often been argued, represents a crucial step towards strengthening the formal state's grip over a workforce long considered beyond the limits of effective regulation.

Although ride-hailing in Kampala has been widely framed in the media and research literature as generally successful in this respect (see Chapter 7), filling in the institutional voids carved open by the prior failings of state politics, my own findings suggest the reverse may in fact be true. In addition to what we have already established about the platforms' tendencies to manufacture aesthetics rather than materialities of labour formality, the research also suggests that platformisation, instead of transforming this historically unruly workforce into a more governable entity, has actually compromised the ability of state actors to 'restore sanity' within the sector. This happens in five ways.

First, *platform work risks disembedding Kampala's boda riders from the industry's existing structures of associational life and the systems of 'analogue legibility' that accompany these*. Part of how ride-hailing companies have justified their advances into the capital over recent years is by presenting a picture of the boda industry as a chaotic free-for-all devoid of organisational forms and rules. As the director of a now-defunct platform put it soon after his company's launch in Uganda, 'SafeBoda, ourselves and a few others are doing our best to bring some structure into an unregulated environment' (Wright, in Russon, 2019). But what portrayals like this fail to recognise or do justice to is the analogue landscape of informal institutions and regulations that already existed prior to the platforms' arrival, and which have long provided a way – imperfect but workable – of governing riders' behaviours, ensuring they

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<sup>279</sup> Interview with former country manager, Uber, 29 November 2021 [K13]

are 'known' locally, holding wrongdoers accountable, and generally moderating the worst excesses of hyper-competition (see Chapter 5).

While life under platformisation does not render these analogue structures obsolete, with the unstable economics of digital boda work leading most riders to retain at least some degree of 'traditional' attachment, it does place them under duress. Reflecting the popular local saying that 'the stage is on the phone', relative to their analogue counterparts digital riders in the survey were less likely to be members of a stage, while those who had retained membership were found to spend less time there in a typical week. They were also less likely to be members of another of the industry's core collective structures: a boda association.

From a regulatory perspective, the problem that arises here concerns the fact that the boda stage has, up until recently anyway, represented the most foundational form of order and organisation in a constantly expanding industry (Doherty, 2022: 136; Mukwaya et al., 2022). But by failing to 'pass through' the stage system, as one association secretary put it (and which the survey data also confirm – see Chapter 8),<sup>280</sup> the platform companies have challenged and disrupted the centrality of the stage as an institutional basis for participation within the sector, leading another association lead to describe the resulting situation, whereby *lubyanza* practices have become increasingly normalised, as a 'mess'.<sup>281</sup> What compounds this disruption even further is the economic devaluation of the stage; a pernicious process that derives directly from the platforms' systematic efforts to undercut offline trip prices, and which pushes increasing numbers of analogue riders away from the stage as they head off in search of the jobs that used to flow towards them.

Second, *platformisation generates dynamics which actively feed rather than limit the expansion of boda labour in the capital*. A core objective of previous government attempts to 'streamline' Kampala's boda workforce through registration exercises and spatial exclusions was to slow down its growth, the formally unregulated nature of which is understood by city authorities to have 'led [to] the mushrooming of ungazetted boda boda stages in every division', 'rampant insecurity and thefts involving boda boda riders', and a level of crowding that 'has made the streets disorderly and congested' (KCCA, 2022). It is currently estimated that there could be anywhere between 150,000 (KCCA, 2023) and 400,000 (Saturday Vision, 2022) boda riders in the Ugandan capital alone, whilst as many as 500 new motorcycles are entering into circulation every day, leading one senior KCCA figure to call for a cap on imports because 'the city is choking' (Serunjogi, in The Independent, 2022).

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<sup>280</sup> Interview with general secretary of boda association, 4 November 2021 [K06]

<sup>281</sup> Interview with boda association leader, 3 February 2022 [K23]

SafeBoda's country director, Catherine Tulina Kafumbe, recently argued that because digital riders 'don't need to wait around in congested areas to pick up a customer', the alternative way of working enabled by the platform 'greatly contributes to decongestion of the city and hence improves sanity' (Kafumbe, 2023). But viewed through a different lens, it is precisely because platforms open up alternative ways of working outside the traditional stage-based system that claims like these must be treated with caution. As self-professed forms of job creation (see Chapter 7), both digital labour platforms as well as asset financing companies allow new riders to circumvent the industry's existing institutions of work and motorcycle access, with several interviewees stating explicitly that ride-hailing in particular had made their entrance into the sector far easier (and many longer term riders attributing recent increases in workforce size to the arrival of these new technologies).<sup>282</sup> The consequence is that rather than aligning with government efforts to decongest the city of riders, by generating additional economic interests in keeping the market as large as possible these new forms of inclusion simply reinforce the existing political economy of road congestion in Kampala (Kumar, 2011) – adding, that is, to the structural reasons behind this problem instead of solving them.

*Third, by operating through a gig economy business model, digital labour platforms maintain the distance between the sector's informal workers and state labour regulations whilst reducing exchanges between riders and passengers to a series of individualised, thinly regulated transactions. We already saw in the previous section that inclusion in the platform economy does very little in practice to overhaul the fundamental characteristics of riders' labour informality. But it is also the case that this same approach disembods rider-passenger relationships from their original social contexts, which had previously enveloped labour market exchanges within a bottom-up system of grounded accountability. Part of the reason why the boda stage exists in the first place is because it helps to establish trust not just between riders, but between riders and customers too. When something goes wrong within an exchange, or if a stage-based rider is accused of serious misconduct, then it is the task of the stage and its leadership committee to step in, mediate and resolve matters. This is both motivated and reinforced by the fact that most stages are deeply enmeshed within their surrounding neighbourhoods and communities, which helps to create tendencies towards mutuality and fairness rather than predation and indifference. In other words, as informal institutions stages exert strong forces of social regulation over the exchanges that take place through them (Harriss-White, 2010).*

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<sup>282</sup> Interviews with: digital rider, 13 October 2021 [34]; digital rider, 21 January 2022 [72]; focus group with former digital riders.

Under platformisation, these forces disappear. Though publicly claiming to make boda transit more secure, more traceable and more trustworthy (Kafumbe, 2023), when it comes down to it labour platforms like SafeBoda accept ‘*no responsibility whatsoever* for the actions or conduct of any service providers [boda riders] or Users [passengers]’ and have ‘no obligation to intervene *in any way* in disputes that may arise between drivers, riders, or third parties’ (SafeBoda, n.d., emphasis added). Thus, in addition to re-intermediating certain parts of the labour process by imposing new rules and controls over digital riders’ working lives, platform companies are also responsible for dis-intermediating it in other ways, removing the social checks and balances that have long worked to informally protect both riders and customers. The result is a mode of economic governance that ‘sidesteps labour market safety nets and regulations, leaving it as a basic form of unencumbered economic exchange between capital and labour in a nominally open marketplace’ (Fleming et al., 2019: 491), and a more poorly regulated, less accountable version of what existed before.

Fourth, *platformisation prioritises the economic rather than political legibility of informal workers*. Part of the way in which digital labour platforms were supposed to enhance the state’s capacity to regulate boda riders was through the creation and distribution of new data about the workforce, which it was hoped would ‘enable the government to keep track of’ riders within a sector that had thus far remained largely unregistered (ITF, 2020: 19). Crucially, it is an approach whose success hinges on there being enough co-operation on data sharing between platforms and government; something we know from other contexts does not always materialise easily in practice (Monahan, 2020).

Indeed, despite continuing to claim that their data gathering ‘enables traceability which enhances security’ (Kafumbe, 2023), whilst also issuing repeated public statements about wanting to ‘work closely’ with government (Banura, 2023; E-Trade & Startup Association of Uganda, 2022; Muhamad, 2022), actual developments over the years portray a rather different picture. At KCCA, for example, one official I interviewed described positive early interactions – ‘we were moving in sync’ – but went on to describe how longer-term cooperation with the ride-hailing companies had never really ‘kicked off’,<sup>283</sup> while a member of the National Planning Board had found in practice that the platforms tended to ‘withhold their data’ when participating in wider reform initiatives.<sup>284</sup> These insider accounts should also be seen alongside a recent ‘private sector position paper on how to organise the motorcycle business’, published by the Private Sector Foundation Uganda in October 2023 following a request by the Uganda

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<sup>283</sup> Interview with transport planning official, KCCA, 1 December 2021 [K14]

<sup>284</sup> Interview with senior member of the National Planning Board and Paratransit Consultative Forum, 22 November 2021 [K11]. Also mentioned in interview with academic, 23 September 2021 [K03]

Revenue Authority for data from SafeBoda, one of the Foundation's members. While appreciating the government's 'efforts towards broadening the tax base', the paper argues that:

requesting the personal data of riders who subscribe to the SafeBoda platform will inadvertently drive riders to operate offline. This is mainly because they would think that the government wants to tax them which would not only hinder the government's revenue collection efforts but also negatively impact SafeBoda's business thus a reduction in PAYE since they will be forced to scale down their operations and / or in the worst-case scenario close business (PSFU, 2023: 3-4).

The statement ends by emphasising that 'PSFU and SafeBoda are committed to providing *unwavering support* to help realize the vision of a well-regulated Boda Boda industry that makes a substantial revenue impact on the economy' (*ibid.*: 6, emphasis added), but it is quite clear from both the preceding text and our key informant insights that this does not extend to complying with formal requests for data-sharing. Thus, despite generating 'vast amounts of data on ride patterns, customer preferences, and market trends' (Kafumbe, 2023), what the evidence here suggests is that Kampala's boda platforms have been rather more eager to share their users' data with other private sector actors for commercial purposes (see Section I) than with public sector actors for regulatory ones.

Fifth, and finally, *by struggling to retain labour over the long term, platformisation exists as a precarious model for sustained social, economic and political reform*. For ride-hailing to work as a vehicle for reform and regulation, transport workers need to first become but then crucially *stay* digitally included; otherwise there are limits to the reliability of the registration data that platforms are able to generate over time, their attempts to monitor and track riders, and the behavioural changes they are claiming to instil throughout the workforce. But for the various reasons discussed across the preceding three chapters, Kampala's ride-hailing trajectory over the past decade or so cannot be properly understood without reference to the large-scale digital exit that has occurred in recent years. In the end, many riders find that the realities of digital gig work do not square with the promises that initially led them into it, leaving them disillusioned and ultimately disconnected. It is precisely because of such a dynamic that through their embrace of 'an unadulterated and idealistic version of capitalism' (Fleming et al., 2019: 491) in the shape of the gig economy, digital labour platforms 'bump up against the *limits* of feasible and reproducible economic activity' (*ibid.*: 503, emphasis in original), disaffecting those who labour through them and in doing so rendering their operations intrinsically unsustainable in the absence of adequate concessions towards workers.

Moreover, when digital riders vacate the platforms there are no guarantees that they then (re-)embed themselves within the sector's long-running informal institutions of work. Having devalued and decentred the economic functionality of the boda stage whilst simultaneously helping to 'legalise'<sup>285</sup> the long-stigmatised figure of the *lubyanza* rider, platformisation creates a situation in which workers who log off risk becoming excluded not just from new systems of digital legibility but from old systems of analogue legibility too – representing a process of 'double disintermediation' that undermines even further the capacity of the state to extend formal control over the sector.

### III BODA POLITICS AS USUAL

Thus, despite seductive ideas about the 'platform fix' – both at a global level (van Doorn, 2022) and within the specific context of Kampala's boda sector – the evidence here suggests that the arrival of digital moto-taxi platforms in Uganda has not led to meaningful improvements in the capacity of public authorities to either cut through the disruptive politics of the informal state or exert stronger control over the capital's growing workforce of boda riders. Under platformisation, riders across the digital-analogue spectrum are forced to engage in more atomised forms of work on a more regular basis; a consequence of the platforms' decentring effect on the core institution of the boda stage. Digital riders appear less likely to affiliate with traditional boda associations, therefore compounding a problem of collective representation that predates the onset of ride-hailing operations. And there is an apparent reluctance on the part of platform companies to cooperate with government requests for data-sharing – at least when the nature of such cooperation does not appear to be on the companies' own terms. The result is the creation of a messier and more patchily regulated workforce to deal with, highlighting some of the limits of an approach to sectoral regulation geared around 'outsourcing' to the private sector (ITF, 2020: 19).

Beyond the question of whether the digital turn has strengthened or undermined formal state capacity to regulate Kampala's boda riders, what have these changes meant for the nature of 'state-boda relations' discussed in Chapter 6 and the politics of adverse incorporation that these have long been productive of? As previously explained, these relations are not simply descriptive features of the context that form 'background' to the sector, but instead speak to the ways in which various state actors instrumentalise riders for their own political and economic gain. They are also important for helping us to understand some of the underlying

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<sup>285</sup> Interview with transport union official, 11 November 2021 [K07]

reasons why working conditions within the industry are the way they are, and why these have proven so difficult to reform.

For all the allusions towards disruption, the industry's recent digital turn has done relatively little to rewire these political relationships and routines. This is not, as Doherty (2022: 247) suggested in earlier work, because Kampala's ride-hailing economy 'relies on and recognizes the value of existing stages', thereby displaying 'compatibility with existing norms' of analogue boda work and leading him to conclude that platformisation has proven 'far less disruptive than either its boosters suggest, or its critics might fear'. As should now be clear, ride-hailing companies have frequently bypassed the issue of pre-existing stage membership when it comes to joining requirements, whilst directly undermining the economic centrality of the stage through aggressive pricing strategies. Instead, it is because the boda platform economy has – to date at least – proven itself a far less dominant or sweeping force than initially expected.

In some ways, the high rates of digital exit described previously are just the tip of the iceberg here. The wider backdrop is that most boda riders in Kampala have never shifted online in the first place; deterred by the costs of inclusion, unconvinced by what they have heard from colleagues about the economics of working via the apps, or simply located too far away from the geographical epicentres of the capital's ride-hailing customer base for joining to seem worth it. Reflecting this, my interviews with ride-hailing managers suggested that at the time of research digital had only made a dent, capturing somewhere between 5 and 10% of the workforce as a whole and leading one informant to describe the market as still 'so virgin'.<sup>286,287</sup> Meanwhile, several informants I talked with were either dismissive of the impact of the app companies or seemed genuinely unaware of their current operations, including those who possessed in-depth knowledge of the industry or had histories of personal involvement within it.<sup>288</sup>

Throughout the course of interviewing, with both key informants and boda riders themselves, I detected little sense that the industry's digital turn had dramatically altered or dislodged many of the specific political relations described in Chapter 6. Police arrests continued to occupy the thoughts of digital and analogue riders alike, while the survey data on this reveal almost

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<sup>286</sup> Interviews with: country manager, Bolt, 19 November 2021 [K10]; former country manager, Uber, 29 November 2021 [K13]

<sup>287</sup> In each case, the 5-10% estimate offered by these interviewees refers to market share by ride-hailing apps in general, rather than market share by any one company in particular. SafeBoda's senior manager declined to offer an estimate.

<sup>288</sup> Interviews with: academic, 27 October 2021 and 17 February 2022 [K03]; academic, 7 December 2021 [K16]; journalist, 8 December 2021 [K17]; senior official, Ministry of Works and Transport, 15 February 2022 [K33]; former high-ranking security official, 22 February 2022 [K35]



exactly equal shares citing the issue as a major challenge of their work.<sup>289</sup> Neither was there much indication that the ways in which riders were routinely drawn into campaign politics had begun to shift, nor that the informal state's practice of carrying out surveillance work through the sector had been unsettled. In other words, for the most part it was still (boda) politics as usual.

Only time will tell if this changes much, if at all. As discussed at the very beginning back in Chapter 1, platformisation is an unstable and indeterminate process that takes time to unfold (Stehlin et al., 2020; van Doorn et al., 2021). Over the past few years, Kampala's boda platforms have continued to explore ways to evolve and pathways to profitability, including through new products (e.g. SafeBoda's roll-out of 'SafeCar'), new territories (e.g. Bolt's expansion to Gulu in northern Uganda) and new partnerships with public sector bodies (e.g. Kabayo, 2021; Kazibwe, 2023; UNCDF, 2020) that speak to the increasing integration of privatised platform technologies into the infrastructures of urban service delivery and logistics, both North and South (Pollio et al., 2023; van Doorn et al., 2021). And yet, for as long as these processes continue to expose the informal labour sustaining them to new patterns of adverse digital incorporation (Heeks, 2022), rather than to meaningful improvements in transport workers' lives, there will be deep uncertainties about how wide and how lasting their impacts are likely to be.

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## **Conclusion**

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SafeBoda's Alastair Sussock (2023) may have recently claimed that his company had 'radically changed Ugandan urban transportation forever', but what has really changed about the nature of boda work under platformisation? By returning to the 'promises of inclusion' first outlined in Chapter 7 and reviewing them again in light of Part II's analysis, this chapter has raised serious questions of the transformative narrative underpinning the arrival and operation of Kampala's boda platforms. Rather than systematically upgrading working conditions, safety standards and systems of regulatory control, the kinds of changes generated by this new economy are for the most part more modest than revolutionary, more fleeting than permanent, and in some senses more insidious than emancipatory.

Despite operating under an agenda of formalisation, in which ride-hailing companies seek 'to bring some structure into an unregulated environment' (Wright, in Russon, 2019), at the most

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<sup>289</sup> 77% of former digital riders compared to 76% of current digital riders, with no statistically significant difference between the two.

fundamental level there has been no shift in boda riders' status of labour informality under platformisation. As before, they remain excluded from and unprotected by the regulatory labour frameworks of the state. At the same time, however, through their inclusion in the 'platform-ised' boda economy riders find themselves being incorporated into what we might think of as an approximation of formalisation; a largely commercial arrangement in which a commodified aesthetics of formality at the surface conceals a deeper mechanics of corporate extraction. But because this ultimately does relatively little to break with existing working conditions and transform riders' livelihoods in meaningful ways, in many instances it is not long before digital riders decide to disconnect, thus helping to explain why, to paraphrase Fleming et al. (2019: 488, emphasis in original), ride-hailing '*has not* taken over the world' of Ugandan boda work.

In the final analysis, it is the lived experiences and grounded perspectives of Kampala's digital boda riders that lay bare the 'limits of inclusion' within the globalised platform economy and the vacuity of its original promise. Rather than cutting through the entrenched 'politics of transport' that had long been 'defeating change',<sup>290</sup> in many ways what the sector's recent inclusive turn has 'done' here is simply replicate and reinforce the existing status quo of adverse incorporation, keeping riders politically excluded from formal working arrangements whilst including them economically in new systems of commercial activity. In the process riders are not only being turned into a 'frontier' revenue stream for global corporate actors, with Kampala's boda platforms providing the infrastructure that renders them newly legible and bankable (Dolan and Roll, 2013; Meagher, 2021), but are crucially being done so through gig work business models that prioritise cheap, formally unprotected labour and which lead in turn to a further degradation of riders' working conditions. What emerges as a result of these dynamics is not a situation in which boda work has 'radically changed [...] forever' for the better, but one where the adverse incorporation of old becomes the adverse *digital* incorporation of new (Heeks, 2022).

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<sup>290</sup> Interview with academic, 23 September 2021 [K02]



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# **Chapter 11**

## **Conclusion**

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2020, an article appeared on the website of leading Ugandan news outlet, *The Monitor*, under the headline: ‘Gig economy is the future of work, let’s embrace it’. It was written by William Benthall, a former director at Adam Smith International who had since become the head of operations across sub-Saharan Africa for Glovo, the multi-national, Barcelona-based delivery app that had launched in Uganda during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the article Benthall (2020) writes of the ‘great opportunities’ opened up by the emergence of the digital gig economy in Africa, which he suggested had already ‘given millions of people the freedom to work and live more efficiently and effectively’ whilst ‘becoming increasingly important as a pathway to socio-economic development and income creation’. But his real excitement lay in what was surely to follow: ‘In our post-pandemic world’, Benthall urged, ‘the gig economy will only become more vital’, ‘shifting the source of work away from informal labour and towards digital platforms’, with ‘on-demand delivery start-ups and ride-hailing apps leading the way’.

Though having now been promoted to global director of Glovo’s public affairs and government relations, Benthall’s words about ‘the working model of the future’ in Africa (*ibid.*) remain symptomatic of a much wider conventional narrative around the seemingly endless – and apparently inevitable – benefits of enhanced digital connectivity under ‘platform capitalism’ (Pasquale, 2016). From development agencies (Choi et al., 2019; World Bank, 2016; 2019) and the Big Four (Deloitte, 2021; PWC, 2016) to Ugandan state ministers (UNSDG, 2020),

there is a powerful sense of clarity about what is to come and why it is so desirable, further buttressed by the wider global embrace of digital labour platforms during COVID-19 (ILO, 2021; OECD, 2023) alongside major post-pandemic investments in digital infrastructure. Indeed, the question for many policy makers and business executives is not so much what the coming future of work will look like, but how to ‘accelerate’ there faster (Bradley et al., 2020).

The findings of this thesis suggest the road there could be less direct, more potholed perhaps, than this conventional narrative makes out. While the closer integration of digital platforms into both workers’ lives and wider systems of economic production and circulation is portrayed in the mainstream as a ‘seemingly seamless’ process (Popiel and Vasudevan, 2024: 3), in reality it is often something that generates considerable friction as experiments fail, strategies shift and users push back. Neither is it always so apparent what precisely the benefits of digital transformation are, particularly when we venture ‘beyond the screen’ (Mahmoudi and Levenda, 2016) to ask what the conditions of platform work are really like; or where they do materialise, to whom these benefits actually flow. But perhaps clearest of all is that when slick new platform technologies ‘touch down’ in informal and precarious economic settings, there are no guarantees that an escape route to decent work suddenly opens up.

## I PLATFORMS, MOTORCYCLES AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES

In this thesis I set out to address the overarching question of whether inclusion in the new platform economy represents a pathway to decent work or a new form of adverse incorporation, with a particular focus on workers situated in highly informal and already-precarious settings. I did this through an in-depth case study of one ‘platform-ising’ transport sector in the Ugandan capital of Kampala: the city’s notorious moto-taxi, or boda boda, industry. Here, powerful narratives of sectoral chaos and disorder, readily found in Ugandan media and politics (Buwembo, 2023; Clarke, 2021; Khisa, 2022; Nalubwama, 2022) but also reflective of persistent (mis)characterisations of informal work more broadly (see literature review in **Chapter 2**), have been used by platform companies and venture capitalists as a pretext ‘to test potentially disruptive ideas [...] in the search for better transport solutions’ (Tun et al., 2021: 18). First and foremost, these ideas have taken the form of digital ride-hailing apps, last-mile e-logistics, and new infrastructures of platform-enabled asset financing.

Following a case-oriented approach to research design (**Chapter 3**), I have been able to carefully explore the ‘actually existing platformisation’ (van Doorn et al., 2021) of Kampala’s boda industry by paying close attention to: questions of how, against a backdrop of pre-

existing conditions and ‘analogue’ starting points, platform companies construct socio-economic needs and fixes; to unstable processes of mutation as digital trajectories mature and the dynamics of inclusion within them shift; and, crucially, to the effects and frictions that such changes produce in the lives of informal workers. Because there is relatively little existing data and evidence on these issues in Uganda specifically, but also throughout the wider region more generally (Cirolia et al., 2023; Ehebrecht et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2023), case studies that proceed with a commitment to inductive theory building rather than deductive theory testing are well-suited to this kind of research problem, allowing as they do iterative lines of enquiry to open up and for theoretical propositions to emerge that are grounded in carefully sourced data (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Small, 2009). It has also been suggested that such an approach is particularly well-g geared towards the study of informality (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004; Kamalipour and Peimani, 2024), which by its very nature demands precision, patience and sensitivity in how it is handled methodologically. Certainly, I would like to think that my own experience throughout this project provides further corroboration, if any were needed, that case studies remain invaluable tools for deciphering processes of (attempted) transformation within the informal economy.

Through this overarching approach and a combination of more specific research methods, including semi-structured interviews ( $n = 112$ ), structured surveys ( $n = 370$ ), focus groups ( $n = 2$ ) and observations ( $n =$  difficult to quantify but about six months’ worth), I generated data that would help me piece together the story of how boda work in Kampala came to be ‘platform-ised’ and with what consequences. I started by examining ‘the before’; that is, the pre-digital or ‘analogue’ landscape of working conditions, informal economic organisation and ‘state-boda’ relations that some insist is vital for understanding what inclusion in the platform economy ‘does’ in any given setting (Gomez-Morantes et al., 2022). The resulting chapters form Part I of the thesis, thematically framed as ‘situating Kampala’s moto-taxis’.

Part I began with **Chapter 4**, which offered an introductory account of the Ugandan boda sector in recent historical perspective. Discussing origins and evolution, I showed here how the industry quite rapidly became the largest national source of male employment outside agriculture (Amane, 2021), whilst also diversifying internally over time. This chapter also reflected in a more critical capacity on prevailing characterisations of the city’s boda riders as a politically ‘untouchable’ (Mamdani, in Ford, 2019) and subsequently unruly ‘vote bank’ impervious to formal regulation, forming an important discursive part of the backdrop for the coming ‘platform fix’ (van Doorn, 2022).

Having provided this broad overview of the industry, in **Chapter 5** we took a much closer look at the organisation and conditions of pre-digital / analogue boda work. In contrast to the still-

widespread view that informal economies in general, and Kampala's boda workers in particular, are unstructured, disorganised and hence ripe for 'void-filling' interventions, I showed here that a distinct set of informal institutions has in fact long been present, which: lend shape to riders' everyday working lives; establish widely respected rules and regulations that are systematically enforced throughout the workforce; and moderate some of the worst excesses of an economy that has become increasingly saturated with informal labour. At the same time, however, these long-running analogue institutions cannot do everything, and they certainly do not guarantee decent work. To that end, the chapter also examined five core working conditions that have become ever more problematic as the sector has expanded within the capital, ranging from stunningly high operating costs and repressive policing to structural violence in the form of dangerous work and increasing levels of fragmentation amongst workers.

In **Chapter 6** I sought to explain how and why these conditions have been allowed to persist over time, and what has prevented their reform, by examining how boda work has been 'handled' (Kamete, 2013) by the Ugandan state over the past two decades or so. Putting forwards a fresh take on 'boda politics', I suggested here that rather than finding expression through a singular articulation (i.e. 'vote bank politics'), it may be more accurate and useful to think in terms of a multi-dimensional state-sector relationship constituted through overlapping layers of political-economic inclusion *and* exclusion. By unpacking and dissecting these overlapping layers, I illustrated how the state's handling of the sector, whilst fragmented and ambiguous, nevertheless generates an overarching status quo that is well captured by the concept of adverse incorporation: essentially, inclusion within a political-economic system on disadvantageous terms. Although this is a political arrangement that enables the continued existence of boda work and popular livelihoods in the capital, it locks in riders' labour informality, continually siphons off value from the sector and, via the stranglehold that the workings of the 'informal state' (Khisa, 2013) place upon the politics of the sector, compresses possibilities for meaningful reform. In doing so, this long-running status quo has engendered deepening frustration and disaffection among both riders and city planners alike, whilst stirring up the collective appetite for a change in how the sector is governed and regulated from above. Or put differently, for a new kind of 'fix'.

That fix arrived in the shape of the platform economy, and it was the task of Part II of the thesis – 'the digital turn' – to ask how the inclusion of boda riders within it has since played out.

I began here in **Chapter 7** by discussing the 'promises of inclusion' in this new economy. Focusing primarily on digital ride-hailing platforms but with one eye on platform-enabled forms of motorcycle financing, this chapter offered an overview of who specifically these new

platform actors are and how their models work, before laying out the legitimating claims and transformative discourses that have accompanied their arrival into Kampala's boda sector. In addition to cross-cutting promises of livelihood promotion, individual economic empowerment and safety improvements, I discussed how ride-hailing companies in particular were actively invited into the policy space by government as part of a renewed attempt, during the mid- to late-2010s, to cut through the existing politics of anti-reform in a bid to finally extend formal control over the workforce: 'formalising under a ride-hailing umbrella', as it was put to me in one interview.<sup>291</sup>

**Chapter 8** took us from corporate claims, platform promises and digital discourses to the 'realities of inclusion' from a worker's perspective, exploring three dimensions in particular of the platform labour experience. Beginning with the 'requirements' of inclusion, I laid out what it takes to become digitally and financially included in the first place, highlighting a range of eligibility criteria that riders must meet and a series of 'inclusion payments' that must be made. We then considered the 'relations' of inclusion, asking what the nature of riders' experiences and interactions with these companies looks like and how workers feel they are seen, treated and valued. While claiming to liberate riders from the inefficient analogue systems of old, I showed in this section that inclusion in the platform economy is experienced by many as a new form of control and capture, as the promises of freedom and flexibility are replaced with the realities of algorithmic and corporeal management, disintermediation from price-setting, and corporate prioritisation of customer over worker interests. Finally, we turned to the important material matter of the 'returns' of inclusion. Examining how the economic costs and rewards of 'platform-ised' boda work add up, I demonstrated here that, in contrast to the 'better livelihood' promise of inclusion, many digital riders actually end up making less than their analogue counterparts as a result of company commissions, higher operating costs and low pay – despite, that is, working harder throughout the day.

Against the backdrop of these frustrating realities, in **Chapter 9** we looked at how 'disillusions of inclusion' do not simply sit there latently but rather coalesce in a series of concrete responses by workers. It was here that we focused our attention most squarely on the question of labour agency, examining a range of ways in which riders have sought to rework the terms of their digital inclusion 'from below' (Katz, 2004), including through the 'app-ropriation' of platform technology and equipment, non-compliance with corporate rules and codes-of-conduct, and perhaps most consequentially of all, digital exit. Although driven by individual rather than collective acts of agency, the steady stream of labour 'de-automation' (Bissell, 2023) that we have seen in recent years is nonetheless testament to the capacity of Kampala's

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<sup>291</sup> Interview with former country manager, Uber, 29 November 2021 [K13]



boda riders to contest, resist and ultimately derail a process of transition once thought inevitable.

To round things out, **Chapter 10** returned to the core theoretical question of what inclusion ‘is’ and what it ‘does’ by bringing together the insights of both Parts of the thesis. Framed around the ‘limits of inclusion’, this final substantive chapter critically examined the extent to which inclusion in the new platform economy has altered boda riders’ original working conditions, led to improvements in the municipal government’s ability to regulate and ‘reign in’ the industry, and more generally brought about the kind of far-reaching transformation upon which this whole enterprise was initially premised. I argued here that in connecting previously ‘untapped’ informal workers to formal (yet only sketchily regulated) actors in the global economy rather than to the regulatory frameworks of the Ugandan state – a move that is aptly summed up by the classification across the board of digital boda riders as gig workers – platforms help to expand the range of livelihood options and opportunities available to riders without fundamentally altering the legal basis of their work or even rendering it less ‘indecent’. Instead, despite generating a superficially impressive aesthetic of formality at the surface, this recent digital shift has actually compounded some of industry’s already problematic working conditions (e.g. high operating costs, oversupplied labour, fragmentation), whilst creating an additional corporate interest in keeping boda riders’ labour cheap, unprotected and informal. Thus, rather than ‘fixing’ the political status quo that has long surrounded and structured work within the industry, the particular variety of economic inclusion seen here simply adds in a new digital layer to the existing system of adverse incorporation – ultimately giving rise to what Richard Heeks (2022) has termed ‘adverse digital incorporation’.

The story that subsequently emerges is one that challenges conventional readings of digital inclusion as a purely supportive, perfectly seamless and all but inevitable process of economic transformation. Placed alongside growing evidence from other Southern contexts about what happens when informal workers encounter new systems of digital labour (Anwar et al., 2023; Muldoon et al., 2023; Wei et al., 2024), it highlights dynamics that are rather more parasitic than generative in what they ‘do’ (Carmody et al., 2024), and suggests that fervent calls to ‘Disrupt Africa’ (PWC, 2016) should be weighed more carefully against both the new mechanics of extraction they provide cover for as well as the alienating and exclusionary effects these can have on workers over time. In doing so, the story of Kampala’s partially, turbulently ‘platform-ised’ boda sector adds to an emerging ‘counter-narrative’ of the platform economy (Pasquale, 2016) which, although less rosy than one might have initially hoped, is more reflective of what can actually happen when global changes in the nature of work ‘touch down’ in highly informal and already-precarious settings across the global South.

## II WIDER THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Through researching and telling this story, my thesis brings original empirical material and lessons to the table as far as *this particular case* is concerned. But beyond the confines of the particular, this research also speaks and contributes to wider theoretical debates about the changing nature of informal work, especially within the context of contemporary urban Africa. To bring this thesis to a close I outline in this final section four such contributions, including: i) the ‘plat-formalisation’ fallacy; ii) ideas about what digital inclusion ‘does’ beneath the surface; iii) digital disconnection and de-automation; and iv) the ‘priors’ and the politics of informality.

### *i The ‘plat-formalisation’ fallacy*

Across the global North, it has become increasingly recognised that the expansion of gig work under platformisation feeds into a process of labour casualisation that, in countries like the UK and the US, has already been several decades in the making (De Stefano, 2016; Lata et al., 2023; Stanford, 2017). In places like Uganda, however, something quite different is assumed to be happening. With upwards of 85% of all non-agricultural employment located in the informal economy (Apio, 2023), the rise of platforms has and continues to be widely framed as a boon for Ugandan workers. Dovetailing not only with the developmentalist agendas of ICT4D and poverty reduction in low- and middle-income countries (Lata et al., 2023; Sitas et al., 2023), but also I would add with the creeping ‘individualisation’ of employment programming in such contexts (Flynn et al., 2017; Sumberg and Okali, 2013), inclusion in the platform economy is constructed here as both a solution to mass formal unemployment and an instrument for ‘upgrading’ existing forms of precarious and informal work (Carmody et al., 2024). The relative lack of appropriately contextualised research and evidence to support such claims does not seem to have prevented them from amassing a degree of mainstream consensus, fuelled one suspects by persistent (though often challenged) assumptions about informal workers’ apparent absence of standards, structures and connections to wider political and economic systems – still defining epistemological features of informality for many (Nason and Bothello, 2023).

There is a troubling theoretical move at play here. It is not one that simply extends an idea derived from Northern empirical experiences to diverse Southern contexts (i.e. that platform work informalises labour ‘here’, and so it must therefore be doing the same thing ‘over there’) but rather one that imposes a neat theoretical flipside. That because so much labour informality already exists in countries like Uganda, it is inevitable that the reverse is happening: that platforms there are helping to *formalise* people’s work. This is tantamount to ‘reading the South’ in the negative, approached not as a broad amalgamation of diverse and particular

contexts to be studied and understood on their own terms, but as the singular, ‘developmentalised’ opposite of whatever is seen to be unfolding in the core Northern sites of theoretical production (see Robinson, 2002 on the geography of urban theory).

On the basis of this study, there is a far more nuanced and interesting story to be told. The evidence presented here falls broadly in line with conclusions from other recent research that emphasise the ways in which labour platforms *selectively* rather than comprehensively formalise work that is carried out on / through them (van Doorn, 2021). Analysis from a variety of contexts across the global South has begun to highlight the partial or limited effects of digital inclusion in this particular respect (Carmody et al., 2024; Chen and Qiu, 2019; Cieslik et al., 2022; Hunt and Samman, 2023; Ray, 2024a), lending weight to an increasingly muscular counter-narrative of Southern platform work that reveals continuities as opposed to breaks in the informalisation of labour and the reproduction of precarity (Nair, 2022).

Whilst contributing to this counter-narrative, what the evidence from Kampala’s boda industry additionally suggests is that processes of platformisation can create aesthetics and approximations of formality that effectively conceal both the consolidation of informal labour under ‘new’ gig economy arrangements, as well as the conduct of extractive commercial activity ‘beneath the surface’ by platform companies and their financial backers. Although the city’s boda platforms have had some success in registering riders’ details, assigning them with personal ID codes and getting them to wear crash helmets – modernising objectives that the municipal government has long shared but repeatedly struggled to see through (Doherty, 2022: 247) – it must be underscored here that such practices do not formalise labour in any conventional sense or meaningful way. Indeed, by not only keeping boda riders distanced from the formal regulatory framework of the state through the worker misclassification move, but also by bringing to the table new corporate interests in maintaining this long-running status quo, the hard limits of ‘plat-formalisation’ become clear.

## ***ii      Crash helmet capitalism: what inclusion is and what it does***

Although some academics have recently suggested we would do well to acknowledge that platforms do more than simply extract from workers (Cirolia et al., 2023; Wei et al., 2024), calling out the ‘techno-pessimism’ they feel has become increasingly characteristic of digital labour studies in the South, it still matters that we identify extraction when we see it. Prevailing accounts of ride-hailing, last mile e-logistics and asset financing in Uganda have focused largely on the benefits and possibilities that these changes in the nature of boda work present to riders, society and government. While some more critical attitudes have begun to emerge over the past few years (Musinguzi and Courtright, 2022; Namara, 2022), for the most part

there has been very limited reflection on the question of whether riders' inclusion within this new economy can be anything other than a move in the right direction, especially given the supposedly 'chaotic' (Adegoke, 2022), 'unstructured' (Russon, 2019) and 'unaccountable' (Hruby, 2019) state of Kampala's boda sector in the pre-platform age. Neither has there been much questioning of the motives and credentials of the companies behind these changes, who compellingly present themselves as philanthropically-minded social enterprises trying to marry poverty reduction with profit-making.

In addition to showing that analogue (if imperfect) forms of organisation, structure and legibility have *always* existed within the industry, embodied most discernibly in the informal institution of the boda stage and the working norms wedded to it, in this thesis I have illustrated that the 'actually existing' (van Doorn et al., 2021) operations of the digital boda economy are rather less altruistic than the 'promises of inclusion' (Chapter 7) let on. By effectively serving as the vehicle or conduit through which previously 'left behind' boda riders are enlisted into new kinds of market relations, inclusion here should be read as a process that works to open up 'frontier' revenue streams for formal economic enterprises whilst also trying, with mixed results (at best), to engineer more localised improvements in livelihoods, road safety and sectoral regulation along the way.

This happens through a variety of methods, including: by tapping into the flows of money taking place daily between riders and their customers, which although small at the level of an individual transaction aggregate up into something much larger; by making riders pay for entrance into the platform economy alongside the equipment they need in order to remain included – all part of the (commodified) aesthetics of formality; by providing those who financially back the platforms with a way of increasing access to new markets at the bottom of the pyramid; and by amassing privatised data on riders, customers, trips and transactions that then provide the basis for further commercial activity, including additional extensions of credit (see Chapters 8 – 10). In the process, digitally 'included' riders come to represent not simply the 'infrastructures of global technologies' as they touch down in particular places (Qadri, 2021: 33), but also a crucial part of the 'infrastructures of value creation' (Kasinathan and Dasarathy, 2022: 36) as new avenues of profitability are sought in and around the promotion of crash helmet use.

That the arrival of new private companies into Kampala's boda industry has brought with it new techniques of economic extraction should perhaps come as no great surprise. These are *for-profit* enterprises, after all, and they have been operating on a largely unregulated basis for the past decade or so (Fairwork, 2023; Muhindo, 2022; Nabbale, 2022; Namara, 2022). But what turns this from a win-win situation in which profits and social goods are generated

without compromises (Cross and Street, 2009) into a new landscape of adverse digital incorporation (Heeks, 2022) is, beyond the unmet hype of initial promises, the multiple ways in which digital inclusion has further compounded poor working conditions across the sector. By embedding new private sector interests that escalate operating costs, drive oversupply and competition, ‘deliberately’ (Harriss-White, 2010: 170) consolidate riders’ labour informality, and systematically devalue existing informal institutions of work (Chapter 10), platformisation not only introduces ‘new terrains of precarity’ into the lives of the digitally included (Nair, 2022: 388). It also threatens to destabilise both the livelihoods of ‘non-adopters’ (McMahon et al., 2023: 220) in the form of the analogue boda rider, as well as wider social infrastructures that moderate the worst excesses of an already-saturated informal labour market (McFarlane and Silver, 2017).

### ***iii De-automation and the (uncertain) future of work***

If part of what digital inclusion in the platform economy ‘does’ is to incorporate informal workers at the bottom of the pyramid into new circuits of extractive economic activity, without really formalising anything other than the destination of revenues as these become re-routed towards the formal economy, then another part of what it can do is alienate, disenchant and ultimately repel.

There is an emerging strand of research in the global North that details and dissects what happens when users of digital platforms reach their thresholds with the technology (Bissell, 2023; Kuntsman and Miyake, 2022; Kuntsman et al., 2023); when those who labour through them hit the ‘basic internal limits’ of the gig economy and its ‘purist version of neoliberal capitalism’ (Fleming et al., 2019: 488). In contrast to mid- and post-pandemic visions of a coming world in which ‘automated infrastructure threatens to take hold’ (Lin, 2022: 463), and where the trajectory towards digital futures of work, already taken by many as a given, had been subject to a ‘great acceleration’ under global lockdown (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021), the core message resonating from this new body of research is that any foregone conclusions about what is to come may be premature. According to Bissell (2023: 16), the ‘disaffection’ that is often felt by those who have spent time within the extractive, unprotected world of platform work may eventually form part of what ends up ‘unravel[ling] the gig economy’, constituting a new ‘politics of deautomation’ that unsettles the conventional narratives of digital inclusion and platform work.

While the limits of digital inclusion in the ‘developmentalised’ contexts of the global South are often discussed in relation to inadequate or uneven digital coverage, inequalities in access, and the challenges of incorporating ‘hard to reach’ populations and terrains (McMahon et al.,

2023), what the experiences of Kampala's digital boda riders suggest is that similar dynamics of disaffection, refusal and voluntary de-automation are relevant here too. Contrary to the idea that for people already familiar with unprotected and badly paid work the corporate sheen of the gig economy represents a necessarily desirable alternative, the evidence from Kampala shows that when the *terms* and *realities* of inclusion undercut the promise, digitised informal workers are not averse to taking things into their own hands – by 'app'-propriating company rules and equipment, by maintaining a considerable presence in the analogue economy, and by logging out for good. To recall an earlier quote from one of SafeBoda's former employees, 'These bodas are not fools'.<sup>292</sup>

Through acts such as these, Kampala's boda riders reveal the frictions that are generated rather than simply removed by processes of digital inclusion, as well as the limits of an approach to sectoral reform whose success depends on informal workers buying into, and continuing to accept, a newly digitised variant of what has basically always existed – and that in many instances leaves them worse off. In doing so, this particular case raises questions not only about the sustainability of inclusive economic processes geared along such lines, but also about the inevitability of a Southern future of work that is wired into the platform economy.

#### ***iv The priors and the politics of informality***

Finally, by paying close attention to both the pre- and non-digital nature of Kampala's boda sector, this thesis has generated new insights into the politics of informal work/ers. To study inclusion and platformisation as 'actually existing' processes, as I have sought to do here, is to move from a vague, decontextualised sense of process in the abstract to a more grounded analysis of how those processes work in fundamentally uneven ways that are always shaped by place (Markusen, 1999; Yeung, 2019; Yin, 1994). To then take such an approach seriously is to first understand 'what came before', so that the arrival of new technologies, interests and economic practices can be properly situated through their interactions with relevant aspects of prior context. As van Doorn et al. (2021: 717) explain in their elaboration of 'actually existing platformisation', the point of this approach is to highlight the contested ways in which platform company strategies interact with pre-existing 'uses of space', 'institutional configurations' and landscapes of 'sociopolitical power' (drawing on Peck et al., 2009: 54).

But although consideration of such features is vital for understanding what inclusion in the platform economy 'does' in any given setting, they are also features that have been 'under-

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<sup>292</sup> Interview with former SafeBoda rider and employee, 18 January 2022 [K21]

represented' by the 'great majority of literature to date' (Gomez-Morantes et al., 2022: 997). In this thesis I set out to help address this particular limitation of the literature on platform work in the global South by responding in Part I to a series of 'prior context' questions. What were riders' livelihoods and working conditions like to begin with? How has their work 'traditionally' been organised and regulated, both 'from above' and 'below'? In what ways had past efforts at reform played out, and what were the big challenges and unresolved questions that now remained? It is hoped that by doing this, I have contributed a fuller understanding of the changing nature of boda work than if this had been studied 'in isolation' from what came before.

Methodologically, in addition to drawing on past academic, policy and media coverage of the industry and carefully selecting well-positioned key informants, ensuring that 'non-digital' / 'analogue' workers were included in the research design was crucial to this exercise. Though in reality the divisions between Kampala's analogue and digital riders tend to be far more porous and temporary than might be expected, those who have chosen or felt compelled to remain (or indeed to return) beyond the 'reach' of the platforms constitute not just the majority of the workforce, but also a vast pool of knowledge about the changing nature of the industry that an exclusive focus on platform workers would risk bypassing. According to the survey data, they have also spent longer in Kampala than current digital riders (14.6 years on average compared to 12.6)<sup>293</sup> as well as more years working in the industry (8.5 compared to 6.2)<sup>294</sup>, meaning their timeframes often stretch slightly further back. Beyond the temporal dimension, the methodological inclusion of analogue workers brings additional perspectives to the study of actually existing platformisation that help to push understandings of this phenomenon past direct experiences of platform work alone and into broader territory.

Moreover, by closely examining the prior contexts of pre-digital boda work, this thesis has opened up fresh critical insights into the contemporary nature of 'boda politics' that in turn have implications for wider conceptions of the politics of informal work in the South (Atzeni et al., 2023; Banks et al., 2020; Lindell, 2019). Though generally depicted as an 'untouchable' political force (Mamdani, in Ford, 2019) that leverages 'considerable informal power' (Evans et al., 2018: 677) to enjoy a 'free ride' in the capital (Khisra, 2018), I have shown here that Kampala's boda riders in fact occupy a rather more ambiguous position within the wider political landscape than is often assumed. Via an empirically grounded and fine-grained analysis of 'state-boda' relations, my findings point to a variety of ways in which the workforce is 'handled' by the state (Kamete, 2013), entailing different logics of exclusion, repression,

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<sup>293</sup>  $p < 0.1$

<sup>294</sup>  $p < 0.001$

extraction, instrumentalisation and highly selective forms of clientelism that are often enacted at the same time, by separate state actors. Although these diverse handlings are not the product of a well-oiled ‘political machine’ (Goodfellow, 2020: 290), they nonetheless accumulate in a suffocating political status quo that resists moves towards formalisation, ‘interrupts’ the formation of collective power amongst riders (Li, 2019; Wright, 2000), and sets limits on both alternative ways of governing and future possibilities for decent work.

At the same time, however, there are also insights here into the nature of informal worker politics ‘from below’, which although not necessarily constitutive of greater bargaining power in the first instance, are nonetheless testament to Li’s (2019: 29) argument that because ‘it emerges from the contradictions embedded in our everyday lives’, the ‘capacity for critical politics is permanent and broadly distributed’. In much the same way as Kampala’s boda riders do not consider themselves grateful recipients of the political status quo simply because it permits them to make a precarious living, becoming as they have increasingly disaffected by the adverse nature of this arrangement (Musinguzi, 2018), neither have they embraced the presence of the platform economy simply because it offers an apparently superior alternative. As the realities of what it means to be included within this new economy have gradually revealed themselves, so a similar politics of (digital) disaffection has taken root that culminates in the kinds of de-automation moves described above. In the disillusioned words of one rider, ‘Everyone is looking from where they can benefit from [us]. Everyone is looking for profits’.<sup>295</sup>

In the final analysis, then, it is not just the nature of elite politics ‘from above’ that decides the outcomes of new attempts at sectoral reform (Dewey, 2024; Goodfellow and Mukwaya, 2022; Hickey et al., 2021; Khemani, 2017; Whitfield and Therkildsen, 2011); nor is it simply the political stranglehold exerted by the disruptive workings of the informal state (Khisra, 2013). As important as such dynamics undoubtedly are in many cases, what this thesis has shown is that ‘street-level analysis’ of how change is received, experienced and made sense of ‘from below’ can serve, at a minimum, as both a useful lens for exploring why certain reforms play out the way they do and a valuable addition to questions addressing a higher level of power and politics. Ultimately, the various forms of resilience, reworking and resistance (Katz, 2004) that Kampala’s riders have displayed towards this latest ‘platform fix’ (van Doorn, 2022) should not be read simply as evidence that digitised informal workers continue to possess agency in the face of changing work arrangements. By highlighting the exclusionary dynamics and limits of digital inclusion, they are also crucial to understanding the turbulent and contested nature of processes often assumed to result in foregone conclusions.

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<sup>295</sup> Interview with digital rider, 2 November 2020 [04]





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## Appendix 1. List of rider interviewees

Note: interview codes in red represent interviews carried out through 'remote' methods

#	Date	Time	Location	Division	Gen	Age	Stage?	Digital?
01	01/11/20	1330-1500 (1.5hr)	Kampala Road	Central	Male	32	Yes (Gayaza)	Yes
02	01/11/20	0800-0900 (1hr)	Kampala Road	Central	M	-	Yes (Mulago)	Yes
03	02/11/20	0930-1015 (45mins)	Kampala Road	Central	M	25	Yes (Kileka)	No
04	02/11/20	1040-1200 (1hr20)	Kampala Road	Central	M	39	No	Yes
05	02/11/20	1300-1400 (1hr)	Nakasero	Central	M	22	Yes (Nakasero Faze 2 + Seeta Namilyango Rd)	Yes
06	03/11/20	0900-1000 (1hr)	Nakasero	Central	M	36	Yes (Nakasero, near State House)	No
07	03/11/20	1130-1230 (1hr)	City centre	Central	M	22	No	No
08	03/11/20	0900-1000 (1hr)	Makerere		M	19	Yes (Makerere)	No
09	04/11/20	0830-0930 (1hr)	City centre	Central	M	33	Yes (SBR)	Yes
10	04/11/20	0840-0940 (1hr)	Makerere	Kawempe	M	22	Yes (Nanfumbambi Rd)	No
11	04/11/20	1100-1300 (2hrs)	Makerere	Kawempe	M	34	Yes (SBR)	Yes
12	05/11/20	0800-0950 (2hrs)	Kampala Road	Central	M	29	No	No
13	05/11/20	1000-1120 (1hr20)	Kampala Road	Central	M	28	No	Former
14	05/11/20	1200-1310 (1hr10)	City centre	Central	M	35	Yes (city centre)	No
15	06/11/20	0840-0920 (40mins)	Nakasero	Central	M	30	Yes	No
16	06/11/20	1300-1345 (45mins)	Kampala Road	Central	M	35	Yes	Yes
17	06/11/20	1500-1550 (50mins)	Nakasero	Central	M	26	Yes	No
18	07/11/20	0830-0920 (50mins)	City centre	Central	M	40	No	Former
19	07/11/20	1330-1430 (1hr)	Nakasero	Central	M	48	Yes (Makerere)	No
20	07/11/20	1100-1150 (50mins)	Makerere		M	49	Yes	Former
21	07/11/20	1030-1130 (1hr)	City centre	Central	M	57	Yes	No
22	08/11/20	0930-1020 (50mins)	Kampala Road	Central	M	27	Yes	Yes
23	08/11/20	1320-1400 (40mins)	Kampala Road	Central	M	20	Yes	No
24	09/11/20	0930-1040 (1hr10)	Kikoni	Kawempe	M	28	Yes	Yes
25	09/11/20	1430-1530 (1hr)	Kalerwe	Kawempe	M	49	Yes (Kalerwe)	Former
26	09/11/20	1430-1530 (1hr)	Kikoni	Kawempe	M	40	Yes	No
27	05/10/21	0940 – 1215 (2.5hrs)	Near Kabojja Stage / Good Shephard Hostel	Nakawa	M	30-45	Yes (Kabojja)	No
28	05/10/21	0940 – 1215 (2.5hrs)	Near Kabojja Stage / Good Shephard Hostel	Nakawa	M	30-45	Yes (Kabojja)	Yes (former)
29	12/10/21	1000-1200 (2hrs)	Makerere Main Gate	Kawempe	M	34/5	Yes (Makerere Main Gate)	No (but nearly joined)
30	12/10/21	1000-1100 (1hr)	Makerere Main Gate	Kawempe	M	36	Yes (Makerere Main Gate)	No
31	13/10/21	0930-1030 (1hr)	City Square, opposite	Central	M	36	Yes (City Square Stage A)	No

			Mapeera House, Kampala Rd					
32	13/10/21	0930-1030 (1hr)	City Square, opposite Mapeera House, Kampala Rd	Central	M	51	Yes (City Square Stage A)	No
33	13/10/21	0930-1030 (1hr)	City Square, opposite Mapeera House, Kampala Rd	Central	M	38	Yes (City Square Stage A)	Former
34	13/10/21	1100-1200 (1hr)	Shell City Square II Service Station	Central	M	34	No	Yes
35	13/10/21	1100-1200 (1hr)	Shell City Square II Service Station	Central	M	27	No longer	Yes
36	13/10/21	1100-1200 (1hr)	Dastur Street, Nakasero Market	Central	M	51	Yes (Nakasero Market)	Yes
37	14/10/21	0900-1030 (1.5hrs)	KFC, Kampala Boulevard	Central	M	24	No	Yes (Jumia)
38	14/10/21	0930-1030 (1hr)	Outside Jumia Office, Lumumba Avenue	Central	M	20s	No	Yes (Jumia)
39	14/10/21	1115-1230 (1hr15)	Speke Road Roundabout, near Ind. Monument	Central	M	24	No	No
40	14/10/21	1115-1215 (1hr)	Speke Road Roundabout, near Ind. Monument	Central	M	Early 20s	Yes	Yes
41	15/10/21	0940-1040 (1hr)	Masembe Lane, Bukoto Kisaasi Road	Kawempe	M	41	Yes	Yes
42	15/10/21	0945-1040 (1hr)	Masembe Lane, Bukoto Kisaasi Road	Kawempe	M	28	No	No
43	15/10/21	1100-1200 (1hr)	Masembe Lane, Bukoto Kisaasi Road	Kawempe	M	21	No	Yes
44	15/10/21	1115-1220 (1hr)	Masembe Lane, Bukoto Kisaasi Road	Kawempe	M	34	No	Yes
45	18/10/21	1215-1350 (1.5hrs)	Bar near Kabojja Stage	Nakawa	M	41	Yes (Kabojja)	Yes
46	22/10/21	1150-1320 (1.5hrs)	Just off Mengo Hill Road, Usafi Market Stage	Central	M	40-50	Yes (Usafi Market)	No
47	22/10/21	1325-1500 (1.5hrs)	Just off Mengo Hill Road, Usafi Market Stage	Central	M	30-40	Yes (Kansanga Didi's)	Yes
48	29/10/21	1030-1200 (1.5hrs)	Outside Glovo Office, Bukoto Street	Central	M	40ish	No	Yes
49	29/10/21	1215-1315 (1hr)	Outside Endiro, Sturrock Road	Central	M	30ish	Yes (Kawonawo, near Hotel La Grande (Bwaise))	Yes
50	29/10/21	1315-1430 (1hr15)	Outside Endiro, Sturrock Road	Central	M		No	Yes
51	04/11/21	1015-1045 (30mins)	Just off Mengo Hill Road, Usafi Market Stage	Central	M	40ish	Ex-rider (but yes)	No
52	04/11/21	1045-1215 (1.5hrs)	Just off Mengo Hill Road, Usafi Market Stage	Central	M	30ish	Yes (Usafi Market)	No
53	10/11/21	0950-1150 (2hrs)	Infant Stage, Lugoba	Kawempe	M	31/32	Yes (Infant Stage)	Yes
54	10/11/21	1150-1330 (1.5hrs)	Infant Stage, Lugoba	Kawempe	M	30-40	Yes (Infant Stage)	No
55	15/11/21	1210 -1410 (2hrs)	Ave Maria Stage	Makindye	M	35-40	Yes (Ave Maria Stage)	Yes

56	15/11/21	1440-1540 (1hr)	Waswa Stage, next to Shell Makindye	Makindye	M	29/30	Yes (Waswa Stage)	Yes
57	15/11/21	1600-1700 (1hr)	Waswa Stage, next to Shell Makindye	Makindye	M	35-40	Yes (Waswa Stage)	Yes
58	17/11/21	0840-1120 (2.5hrs)	Interviewee's house, just off Mbogo Road, Kisugu	Makindye	M	33	Yes (Soja Stage)	Yes
59	25/11/21	1040-1200 (1hr20)	Oryx Fuel Station, Sir Apollo Kaggwa	Kawempe	M	29	Yes (Makerere Western Gate)	No
60	27/11/21	1245-1400 (1hr15)	Endiro, Kisimenti	Central	M	30s	Yes (Acacia-Kisimenti)	No
61	30/11/21	1300-1430 (1.5hrs)	Masaka Road, just off Kibuye Roundabout / Market	Makindye	M	30ish	Yes (Bwaise, Kawempe)	Yes
62	02/12/21	1100-1220 (1hr20)	Kinawataka Road, Mbuya	Nakawa	M	35ish	Yes (Kinawataka Stage)	No
63	02/12/21	1300-1415 (1hr15)	Opposite Jazz Supermarket, Spring Road, Bugolobi	Nakawa	M	35ish	Yes (in Namuwongo)	Yes
64	02/12/21	1420-1520 (1hr)	Opposite Jazz Supermarket, Spring Road, Bugolobi	Nakawa	M	36	No	No
65	06/12/21	1120-1220 (1hr)	Near Blessed Supermarket on Makumbi Drive, but on main road, Kira Town	Kira Municipality	M	20s	Yes (near Blessed Supermarket)	No
66	06/12/21	1220-1350 (1.5hrs)	Near Blessed Supermarket on Makumbi Drive, but on main road, Kira Town	Kira Municipality	M	20s	Yes (near Blessed Supermarket)	No
67	06/12/21	1400-1500 (1hr)	Opposite Tasha Fuel Station, Mbogo Road 1 (at Busibante Road turning)	Kira Municipality	M	35-40	Yes (Tosha-Busibante)	No
68	13/12/21	1330-1445 (1hr15)	Flamingo Close, Kiwatule	Kira Municipality	M	31	Yes (U-Save Supermarket, Mbogo Road I)	Yes
69	17/01/22	1120-1240 (1hr20)	Outside Devine Village (at his stage)	Rubaga	M	40ish	Yes (Kabaka Anjagala Roundabout)	No
70	17/01/22	1300-1420 (1hr20)	Outside Tugende Rubaga (at his stage)	Rubaga	M	20s	Yes (Kabengo)	Yes
71	17/01/22	1630-1745 (1hr15)	Next to Birus Village, Nateete	Rubaga	M	40-50	Yes (Mackay Stage)	Yes
72	21/01/22	11-1230 (1.5hr)	Kirabo Complex, Bukoto Kisaasi Road	Nakawa	M	29	No	Yes
73	01/02/22	1520-1420 (1hr)	Kirabo Complex, Bukoto Kisaasi Road	Nakawa	M	Late 20s	Yes (Katwe Spare Centre)	Yes
74	04/02/22	1720-1820 (1hr)	Near Passover Church, Kamwokya	Central	M	Late 20s	No	Yes
75	09/02/22	1530-1600 (30 mins)	Kirabo Complex, Bukoto Kisaasi Rd	Nakawa	M	20s	No	Yes (Jumia)
76	11/02/22	1030-1230 (2hrs)	Outside Fraine Supermarket, Ntinda	Nakawa	M	27	No	Yes (Jumia)
77	16/02/22	0930-1030 (1hr)	Java House, Lugogo	Central	M	33	No	Yes (Jumia)

## **Appendix 2. Rider interview guide.**

*Note: While efforts were made to cover all of the major themes listed below, sequencing and selection of specific questions varied between interviews in line with how the conversation proceeded, and therefore did not follow a rigid format.*

### **Personal background (following introduction to research and informed consent)**

- Are you from Kampala originally? If not, ask about arrival and reasons behind this
- Current living situation in Kampala: dependents here and back home?
- Can you tell me a bit about home / family life when you were growing up?
  - Education
  - Jobs between leaving school and starting boda riding?

### **Experiences of boda work, from past to present**

- Can you tell me when and how you first got involved in boda riding? What was the original plan with this?
- How did you initially access a motorcycle? Who was involved?
- How did you get started with joining a stage and finding customers? How straightforward?
- How many bikes have you used since you started, and how have these been financed?
  - What happened to the second-hand ones?
  - What else has changed: different stages? Different areas of the city for work?
- There has been an increase in boda financing companies, like Tugende, WATU: what do you make of this? Good for riders?
- Since starting, what you been able to achieve? Has boda business expanded to renting out? Other enterprises?

### **Current economic activity as a boda rider**

- At the moment, do you have any sources of income other than boda?
- When doing boda work, how many hours per day? How many days per week?
- What share of taking passengers vs. cargo? Which earns most money?
- How is most work accessed or found? At stage vs. through app? Or personal clients?
- On a good day, how much do you earn from riding? And how much did you earn yesterday?
  - How much do earnings change from: day to day; and month to month?
- How do your earnings compare to pre-COVID?
  - What other changes have you seen since COVID? (app companies, # of riders...)

### **Digital work – for digital riders**

- What motivated you to join the apps? Which ones do you have experience with?
- What were the requirements to join? Was it straightforward?

- How have you found the experience so far?
  - How have things changed since you first started?
  - What do you think the position of the app companies now?
- What is your preference between cash and cashless payment options? Why?
- What are some of the main benefits of working for the app companies?
  - How does the company respond when you get a problem like arrests or accidents?
- How does working for the apps compare to the normal model? Advantages / disadvantages?
  - Do you experience less hassle from law enforcers compared to non-digital riders?
  - Is there less idle time? If so, is that a good thing?
- It seems like there are many bodas in Kampala who do not want to join the apps: why do you think that is?
- What are relations like between digital and non-digital riders? Are there any tensions?
  - Have you experienced any hassle from other riders, either on the street or at stage?
  - Would you say there is a 'digital community' of riders?
- Have your expectations of joining the app been met, and are you planning to continue with it?
- There are now other boda opportunities such as working for Jumia and Glovo: what do you think about these?

#### **Digital work – for non-digital riders**

- We have seen a rise in digital boda work, with riders joining apps like SafeBoda and Uber. What are your views on this?
  - Why not joined yet? Interested in joining or planning to? If not, why?
  - Impacts on own business
- What do you think makes some riders join? What potential benefits are there?
  - Any big differences between those who ride for the apps vs. traditional riders?
  - Any perceived benefits of being digital?
- Tensions or divisions between digital and non-digital? Or within the sector more broadly?

#### **Challenges, politics and regulation**

- What are some of the main challenges you face in this work?
- What is the relationship like between law enforcers and boda riders?
  - Are they ever positive? Are the ones you know or are familiar with?
  - What are your views on fines: how official are they? Which riders pay more?
- What have you done to try and solve or minimize these challenges?
  - Do you think boda associations play a positive role? Are you a member?
  - What or who is your main form of support in the sector?
- Is there any individual or organization that supports and speaks out for boda riders in KLA?
- What are your views on how politicians and those in power treat boda riders in this country?
- What do you think about the government's new plans to organize bodas in Kampala?
  - 1) CBD exclusion zone. 2) Registration, either through apps or directly with KCCA
  - What kind of government action do you personally think would help most of all?

- I'd like to end by asking how you feel about your work as a boda rider. Are you happy with this work, how do you think it could be improved, and what are your plans in the next 5-10 years?

*If time / nature of the interview permitted it, the following table was used to record information about interviewees' operating costs:*

<b>Item (if applicable)</b>	<b>Per day</b>	<b>Per week</b>	<b>Per month</b>	<b>Per year</b>
<i>Fuel</i>				
<i>Airtime / data</i>				
<i>Target payment</i>				
<i>Stage fee</i>				
<i>SACCO</i>				
<i>Motorcycle license (PSV)</i>				
<i>Driving permit</i>				
<i>Insurance</i>				
<i>Loan repayment</i>				
<i>Routine maintenance (including oil)</i>				
<i>Major repairs</i>				
<i>Fines / police fees</i>				
<i>Association fee</i>				
<i>Cooperative fee</i>				
<i>Food at work</i>				
<i>Other (specify):</i>				



### Appendix 3. List of key informant interviews (KIIs)

#	Position	Date
K01	Motorcycle fleet owner	10/11/20
K02	Academic, Makerere University	23/09/21 and 24/02/22
K03	Academic, Makerere University	27/10/21 and 17/02/22
K04	Academic, Kyambogo University	28/10/21
K05	Independent researcher	02/11/21
K06	General Secretary, Kampala Central Stage Owners Association	04/11/21
K07	Senior official, Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU)	11/11/21
K08	Staff member at ACTogether Uganda	12/11/21
K09	Chairman, KAMBE	16/11/21
K10	Acting Country Manager, Bolt	19/11/21
K11	Acting Chairperson National Physical Planning Board and Paratransit Consultative Forum	22/11/21
K12	Journalist	26/11/21
K13	Former Country Head, Uber	29/11/21
K14	Transport Planning Engineer, KCCA	01/12/21
K15	Journalist and Executive Director, Hub for Investigative Media	03/12/21
K16	Academic, Bremen University	07/12/21
K17	Journalist, The Observer	08/12/21
K18	Treasurer, Kira Town Boda Boda Association (Kira Division)	13/12/21
K19	Chairman, KAMBE Kampala Central Division and Treasurer, Regional Office	14/12/21 and 12/01/22
K20	Relative of former divisional leader for Boda Boda 2010	14/01/22
K21	Chairman, SOT Boda and former SafeBoda employee	18/01/22
K22	Senior Operations Manager, SafeBoda	02/02/22
K23	Chairman, Smart Bodas Co-op and Division Chairman, KBA Ffena Kawempe	03/02/22
K24	LC1 Chairman, Kaggo, Mbuya	04/02/22
K25	LC1 Chairman, Kisowera Zone, Kawempe	05/02/22
K26	LC1 Chairman, Nkrumah Zone	07/02/22
K27	LC1 Chairman Nakivubo Rd + LC3 Central Division	08/02/22
K28	Journalist, The Observer	09/02/22
K29	Executive Director, Platform for Labour Action	10/02/22
K30	Lawyer, Ortus Advocates (and high-profile commentator on economic affairs)	10/02/22
K31	LC1 Chairman, Contafrika, Kamwokya	12/02/22
K32	LC1 Chairman, Kabalagala Central Zone + General Secretary, NRM Entrepreneurs League, Makindye	14/02/22
K33	Senior official, Ministry of Works and Transport	15/02/22
K34	Former Field Investigation and Collections Officer, Vuga Boda Yo Ltd.	17/02/22
K35	Former high-ranking security official	23/02/22

## **Appendix 4. Overview of survey modules**

### SECTION A – SCREENING

### SECTION B – INFORMED CONSENT

### SECTION C – PERSONAL BACKGROUND

- Upbringing, education, former work
- Entrance into boda sector
- Information about respondent's boda stage (if applicable)

### SECTION D – MOTORCYCLE ACCESS

- Specific questions depending on whether respondent is: a full owner; in the process of becoming an owner; or renting

### SECTION E – CURRENT BODA ACTIVITY AND EARNINGS

- Working practices and routines
- Income
- Perceptions of boda work

### SECTION F – EXPENSES

### SECTION G – DIGITAL EXPERIENCES

- Specific questions depending on whether *former* or *current* digital rider
- Joining requirements
- Commissions and cashless
- Pros and cons
- Perceived impacts on wider sector
- Plans / future use of apps

### SECTION H – CHALLENGES, REGULATIONS AND GOVERNANCE

- Main problems of boda work
- Experiences with street-level authority
- Attitudes towards government regulation and recent proposals for reform
- Attitudes boda associations and sectoral leadership

## Appendix 5. Defining a boda stage within the context of a survey sampling strategy

The stage represents the most basic organisational within the Ugandan boda industry, but that does not mean it is straightforward to either define or sample within the context of a survey.

There are two main reasons for this.

First, comprehensive and accurate lists of Kampala's boda stages do not exist. Although KCCA carried out a stage 'enumeration' exercise in 2020 as one of the first steps in an (ultimately ill-fated) streamlining programme, which involved compiling a record of all 'officially recognised' stages across the City of Kampala, the resulting list of 579 units vastly underestimated the actual number of *de facto* stages in operation – and crucially, excluded *all* stages within the CBD. Moreover, the criteria through which the 579 were classified as 'officially recognised' were far from clear, raising serious questions about the provenance and subsequent validity of this list for the purposes of research use.

Second, despite how boda stages are portrayed within the fairly limited academic literature that touches upon them, they are not homogenous structures organised in a uniform way. Aside from varying drastically in size (ranging from perhaps 10 to upwards of 100 members), some stages have internal committees and leadership hierarchies, whilst others do not; some require daily or weekly contribution fees from members, whilst others do not; some have relatively close links with local government offices, whilst others do not; and some have the same members present day in day out, whilst others do not.

Another complicating factor from the very specific perspective of this study is that while many digital boda riders are also members of a stage, this is not always the case. However, rather than staying constantly on the move between jobs and burning costly fuel in the process, stage-less digital riders in fact engage in what we might think of as 'stage-like' behaviour whereby they congregate in particular sites on a relatively routine basis. These are definitely not stages in the conventional sense, but they function in similar ways.

With these starting points / complications in mind, I went about designing the survey sampling strategy. Because I wanted to achieve a balanced sample of *currently* digital riders and *formerly* digital riders – as close to a 50/50 split in this regard as possible – it was important that I found a way of selecting respondents that did not overwhelmingly exclude one or the other category. I also thought it important to use the same means to identify and select riders, regardless of whether they were currently or formerly digital, in order to ensure that the overall sample population had been arrived at in a systematic and consistent way; i.e. I wanted to

avoid sampling currently digital riders one way (e.g. by hailing them through an app), and formerly digital riders another (e.g. by turning up to a boda stage).

Taking these considerations into account, I decided to proceed on the basis that we would select *all* riders for the survey from stage or 'stage-like' sites, meaning we could use the exact same protocol to approach potential respondents at their places of work. This meant that rather than only targeting stages that, for example, had an organised committee or featured on the KCCA list, we targeted sites where boda riders gathered on a routine basis – regardless of whether such sites qualified as a stage in any official sense. It is worth underlining at this point that the objective of the survey was not to sample riders from 'proper stages', but to sample currently and formerly digital riders in a way that: a) did not compromise the methodological integrity of the sample; and b) reflected the actual ways in which riders in Kampala station themselves between jobs.

How did we do this in a rigorous way?

Given that unbiased lists of stages do not exist – let alone those concerning 'stage-like' sites – I took the decision to independently map out *all* stages and stage-like sites in each of our six survey zones, and then use the resulting lists as the basis for randomly selecting ones to sample from. The approach was inspired by Muhib et al.'s (2001) paper on 'venue-based' sampling, a technique developed to survey hard-to-reach and hidden populations in North America (although boda riders in Kampala are by no means hidden, their mobility *does* make present challenges from a sampling perspective) that is methodologically superior to simply visiting a part of town and approaching the first site of interest / relevance that you come across. In basic terms, the technique involves going to a particular place (whether a street, a block or a neighbourhood) at a purposefully selected time of day, staying there for a certain number of minutes or hours, and recording which 'venues' your target population either visits or congregates at. From this information, it is then possible to generate a list of sampling sites that is grounded, up-to-date, and – vitally – free from the institutional biases of 'official' records.

Achieving this was only possible with the crucial involvement of Geoffrey Ndhogezi, who carried out the bulk of this mapping work with support from myself. Visiting each of the six predetermined zones, Geoffrey systematically visited and rode along each street, lane and alley, recording the location of any stage or stage-like site using a GPS tracker app on his smartphone. We had careful discussions in advance of this exercise to establish what *not* to record (e.g. single riders who appeared to be stopping temporarily at a certain point), and we also carried out some of this early work together so we could see what sorts of challenges the exercise threw up, and talk through how we could best manage them.

The resulting mapped zones, used as the basis for random site selection in the next stage of the sampling strategy, are presented in the following graphics.

*Zone 1. Kawempe*



Source: original GPS points recorded by Geoffrey Ndhogezi and plotted using Google Earth

*Zone 2. Nasser Road*



Source: original GPS points recorded by Geoffrey Ndhogezi and plotted using Google Earth

### Zone 3. Bugolobi



Source: original GPS points recorded by Geoffrey Ndhogezzi and plotted using Google Earth

### Zone 4. 'Downtown'



Source: original GPS points recorded by Geoffrey Ndhogezzi and plotted using Google Earth

*Zone 5. Makindye*



Source: original GPS points recorded by Geoffrey Ndhogezi and plotted using Google Earth

*Zone 6. Kololo*



Source: original GPS points recorded by Geoffrey Ndhogezi and plotted using Google Earth

## Appendix 6. Additional material on riders' payments to street-level law enforcers

### *Estimating expenditure*

To provide an original estimate of riders' expenditure on police 'fines', our boda survey asked a series of specific questions about experiences with law enforcement, eliciting information about both the nature and quantity of payments during arrest. Using earlier qualitative interviews as a way of exploring how to probe such issues within a more structured format, we opted to first ask respondents about their *most recent experience* of being stopped and charged by an officer whilst working before gathering further detail about that particular episode. Assuming it had taken place within the past 12 months – as the survey was implemented towards the very beginning of 2022, enumerators used 'last year' (i.e. 2021) to provide respondents with a concrete frame of reference – the survey then asked, 'How many times in the last year would you say you have been stopped like this – for any reason?'. From these data points, it is possible to calculate an approximate overall fine amount for each rider in 2021 without having to rely on the more abstract alternative of simply asking how much they paid in fines over the past year. By initially grounding riders' thoughts in their most recent experience of arrest and developing a fuller picture of what that involved – which specific force the officer belonged to, for example, or what the stated reason was for being stopped – the survey not only generates valuable data about the specific context and nature of respondents' most recent payments, but also provides a more accurate basis for estimating all such 'expenditure' in 2021 than would have otherwise been the case.

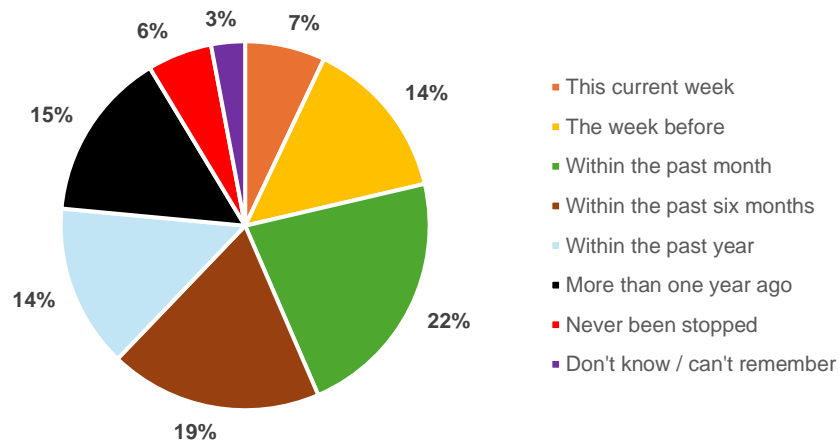
### *Data on most recent arrests*

The following charts provide a basic sense of what boda riders' most recent arrests looked like, with a few notable insights emerging. First, of the 370 riders surveyed, 76% reported being stopped on at least one occasion in 2021, while almost half the sample (44%) had been stopped at some point within the past month. Second, 'breaking curfew' and 'riding misbehaviour' were the two most commonly cited reasons for being stopped, with the former clearly reflecting the timing of data collection (and possibly also the suggestion from some riders that COVID-19 measures have been (ab)used by officers as a vehicle for additional extortion – see also Young, 2020). Third, Kampala's CBD appears a particular hotbed of police activity, with almost three-quarters of riders' most recent arrests taking place inside the city centre. Respondents would often talk about this geographical feature of police activity during



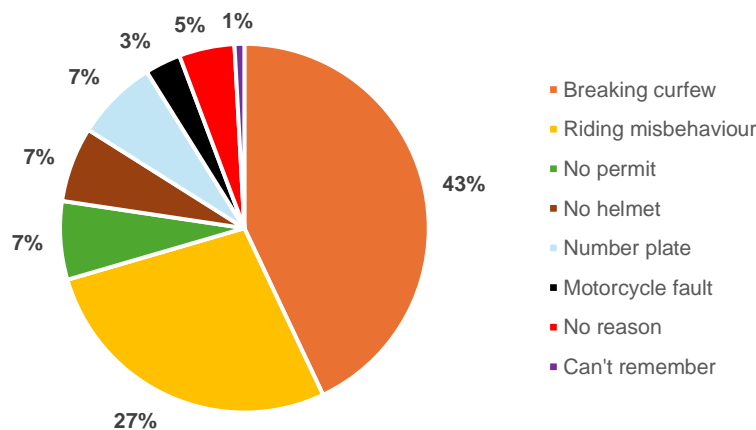
interviews,<sup>296</sup> with some even suggesting they would occasionally avoid entering the city centre in order to minimise their risk of arrest and subsequent lost earnings.<sup>297</sup> Fourth, although members of the Ugandan police force were most frequently identified as the arresting officer (63%), the data also reveal that traffic police, KCCA and even military are all involved too.

*When were riders most recently stopped and charged?*



Source: survey data (n = 370)

*What was the reason given?*

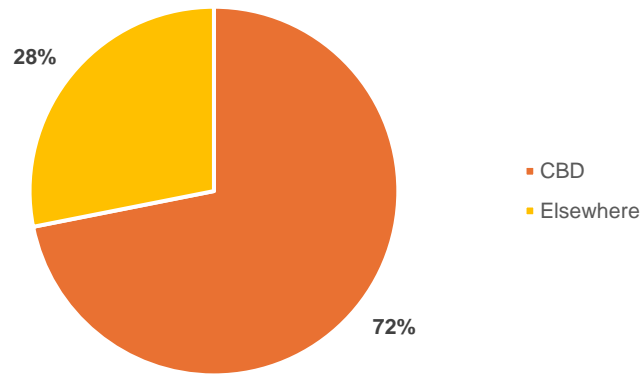


Source: survey data (n = 338)

<sup>296</sup> Focus group with current digital riders, 9 December 2021; focus group with former digital riders, 9 December 2021

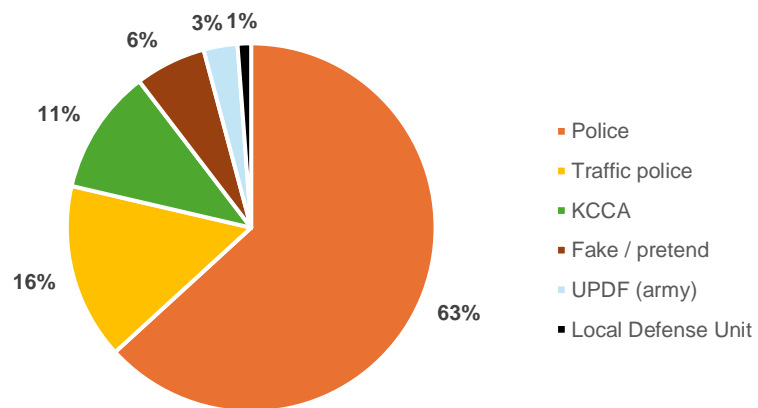
<sup>297</sup> See Omulo (2021) for an interesting report on the similar concentration of police-boda encounters in Nairobi's CBD.

Where did it happen?



Source: survey data (n = 338)

What kind of officer was it?



Source: survey data (n = 337)