WHY MOTORCYCLE SAFETY MATTERS

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Featured piece by Healthy People Rwanda on the 2025 Call for Proposals Funding Priority

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INTRODUCTION

Road traffic crashes take over 1.19 million lives worldwide every year, and Africa bears the greatest burden, with almost 20 deaths per 100,000 people, the highest rate in the world. Every hour, 30 people lose their lives in crashes (WHO, 2023).

In Rwanda, motorcycles are more than just a means of transport, they are a lifeline. They provide affordable, fast, and flexible mobility, sustain household incomes, and contribute significantly to the national economy. Their ability to reach every corner of cities and rural areas has made them indispensable. In Kigali alone, 38% of all trips are made by motorcycles (Ministry of Infrastructure, Rwanda). However, this dependence comes at a cost. Motorcycle taxis ranked the second most affected in road fatalities in Rwanda*. These preventable deaths are a growing public health crisis. Ensuring the safety of motorcycle transport is no longer optional; it is a critical investment in human lives, economic productivity, and sustainable mobility.

This challenge is not unique to Rwanda. Across Africa, the same pattern emerges, motorcycles empower communities but are also at the center of tragic loss. The UNRSF 2025 Call for Proposals recognises this urgency and offers an opportunity to support bold, transformative initiatives that make mobility safer and more sustainable for everyone.

Photo Credit: Healthy People Rwanda

THE CHALLENGE:

In Africa, motorcycles are a source of income generation for many. However, their ability to cut travel time and make places with limited accessibility more reachable also increases the number of crashes, as more users and passengers are exposed to the risks associated with this mode of transport. Across East Africa there are millions of motorcycles, including approximately 181,000 in Rwanda, over close to 2.3 million in Kenya* , and over 1.5 million in Uganda*. These numbers exclude illegal and unregistered operators.

The East African region continues to face challenges ranging from a lack of, or incomplete, policies that do not address all five pillars of road safety, to poor education of individual road users. Gaps in policies, compliance and enforcement result in issues such as the use of non-standard and uncertified helmets, illegal operations, infrastructure gaps, lack of standards, failure to use PPE, transporting children on motorcycles without helmets, and limited knowledge about road safety.

In Rwanda, more than 3,200 motorcycles were involved in crashes, and this number increased by 29% in 2023*. In Kenya, motorcycles account for 35% of road fatalities*. Rwanda has made significant progress in improving road safety, achieving nearly a 100% helmet compliance in the EAC region. However, the use of uncertified helmets and confusion about helmet standards, often based on appearance, continue to pose serious risks and can have severe consequences*.

“An observation conducted by Healthy People Rwanda under the Tuwurinde project on motorcyclists and passengers wearing helmets revealed that 57% were motorcycle taxi drivers and 43% were passengers or clients. More than 71% of the drivers wore their helmets appropriately compared to 44% of their passengers. The finding highlights the gap in the lack of education on the responsible use of helmets.”

*Rwanda National Police: https://police.gov.rw/media/news-detail/news/gerayo-amahoro-campaign-improves-road-security-in-rwanda/
*As per Rwanda’s Ministry of Infrastructure 2021 records.
*The conversation: https://theconversation.com/ugandas-boda-boda-bikes-are-deadly-polluters-study-models-how-going-electric-could-save-lives-253166
*Rwanda National Police: https://police.gov.rw/media/news-detail/news/gerayo-amahoro-police-up-against-high-motorcycle-bicycle-accidents/
*https://www.transaid.org/knowledge-centre/report-a-fare-price-an-investigation-into-the-health-costs-of-motorcycle-taxi-crashes-in-kenya/
*HPR – https://www.hprwanda.org/blogs/building-a-safer-future-insights-from-dr-innocent-nzeyimana-s-presentations-at-safety-2024-in-in

THE SOLUTION SPACE:

The complex challenge of motorcycle safety requires a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach rooted in the Safe System approach, which acknowledges human error. This approach focuses on reducing the severity of crash-related injuries. Participating UN Organisations (PUNOs) and their partners should adopt this human-centred design.

The Safe System approach integrates safe road infrastructure, safe vehicles, safe road use, multimodal transport and land-use planning, and post-crash response. These components work together through interdependent measures and actions, including:

- Legislation: Effective motorcycle safety depends on strong and harmonised legislation. Borderless travel across Africa means that riders often cross from one country to another, making harmonisation critical. Countries should align with UN Regulation 22.06 for helmet standards. Such standards can only be effective if governments adopt and enforce them. Legislation should also address passenger limits and make helmet use mandatory for all riders and passengers.
- Enforcement: Promising strategies include onsite checks for responsible helmet use, alcohol testing, licensing reforms with both oral and practical assessments, specialised training for public transport riders, demerit point systems to encourage safe behaviour, and the installation of speed cameras and speed governors for public transport. Leveraging technology for enforcement can strengthen compliance and follow-up. Strong enforcement saves lives.
- Education: Community-based awareness campaigns must go beyond helmet use, emphasising certified helmets and the need to replace damaged helmets. Road safety education can be integrated into school programmes from an early age. Engaging motorcycle cooperatives and rider associations, as seen in Rwanda, for peer-to-peer education and training is also highly effective.
- Technology: Innovation in technology offers great potential. This includes visibility gear such as reflective vests for riders and passengers, improved helmet sizing for better fit, and smart helmets with integrated communication or crash detection systems, which can also help close data gaps in transport safety.
- Safe Vehicles: Vehicle design matters. Measures include promoting the use of child seats, restraints, and proper footrests for transporting young passengers to ensure stability and protection. Encouraging features such as Anti-lock Braking Systems (ABS) on motorcycles can significantly reduce the severity of crashes.

Photo Credit: X/Healthy People Rwanda

Photo Credit: Ministry of Infrastructure during the launch of the Tuwurinde campaign.

Photo Credit: X/Healthy People Rwanda. HPR's Motorcycles & Helmet importers training.

- Infrastructure: African transport systems must account for all road users, including vulnerable ones. Designing forgiving and safe road environments is key. This includes building designated motorcycle lanes in congested areas, dedicated bicycle lanes, pedestrian walkways, safe school crossings, speed calming measures with clear markings, improved road maintenance, especially on high-traffic motorcycle routes, and ensuring adequate lighting.

All five pillars are interconnected and emphasise a human-centred approach that prioritises saving lives. PUNOs can inspire and support country-level efforts to transform road safety across the region.

HEALTHY PEOPLE RWANDA IN ACTION

Healthy People Rwanda (HPR) (www.hprwanda.org) is driven by a clear and urgent mission: to reduce preventable injuries and deaths and to build healthier, safer communities across Rwanda. Since its founding in 2013, HPR has combined evidence-based advocacy, community engagement, and systems-level collaboration to tackle two interconnected challenges: public health and road safety. Its vision aligns closely with Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 3 (health), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), SDG 11 (sustainable cities), and SDG 13 (climate action).

Beyond its community impact, HPR builds human capital by equipping staff, local partners, and international volunteers with skills and knowledge, fostering life-changing experiences through community service and multidisciplinary partnerships.

At the heart of HPR's road safety strategy is the fight against motorcycle related injuries and fatalities, one of Rwanda's most pressing transport safety challenges. Through the TUWURINDE ("Let's Protect the Head") project, co-financed by UNRSF and FIA Foundation, HPR partnered with the Ministry of Infrastructure (MININFRA) and the Rwanda Standards Board (RSB) to deliver systemic, high-impact interventions. Through this initiative, HPR:

- Led evidence-based helmet advocacy, resulting in government action by MININFRA and RSB to develop and adopt the national helmet standard RS 576, aligned with ECE 22.05 standard.

Photo Credit: X/Healthy People Rwanda. UNDRSW 2025

Photo Credit: X/Healthy People Rwanda. First aid training at St Joseph Integrated technical school.

Photo Credit: X/Healthy People Rwanda. Launch of helmet testing lab.

- Built national capacity for helmet testing by procuring and donating a helmet testing machine to RSB, enabling market surveillance and import inspection by RICA.
- 33 stakeholders, including RSB staff, police officers, students, lecturers, helmet importers and inspectors, were trained in RS 576 testing methods.
- Five national awareness campaigns, using radio, community theatre, and school programmes, raised awareness of helmet safety and correct helmet use.
- Researched motorcyclists' and the public's perceptions of helmet standards, market dynamics, and willingness to pay for higher-quality helmets.

Yet HPR recognises that helmet standards alone cannot ensure road safety. Through its broader TRANSSAFE project, the organisation promotes the Safe System approach, addressing risks across the entire transport ecosystem. This includes assessing pedestrian safety in school zones using iRAP methodology and strengthening post-crash care through the training of lay responders in first aid, bleeding control, and rescue techniques. These interventions aim to protect all road users, including motorcyclists and their passengers.

A CALL TO ACTION

Motorcycles carry lives, not just passengers. Across Africa, millions depend on them for income, mobility, and essential services, but at a heavy cost: preventable deaths and injuries. We urge governments and development partners to make motorcycle safety central to road safety strategies. Quality helmets, safe riding practices, and better infrastructure are life-saving investments, not luxuries. This is a pressing public health issue. Strong collaborations among UNRSF, NGOs, local groups, and enforcement agencies can scale proven solutions.
ACT NOW: Invest in safety programmes, establish and implement helmet standards, educate riders, and build safer roads.