

# Africa calling

A bike changes life up a gear for those struggling to survive, writes **Ella Mulvey**.

Used by millions of people around the globe every day for the pleasure and joy riding brings, bikes are deceptively simple machines that also have the power to dramatically change lives. That power is witnessed daily in Africa, where a bike can help alleviate the worst effects of poverty, even for those living in the most abject conditions.

Last year, I travelled to Kenya and Uganda to work in projects run by OrphFund, a volunteer charity based in Melbourne. Spending most of my time in rural communities, where transport and access conditions are poorest, it was incredible to see the difference having a bike makes for people in these areas.

I quickly discovered that there is no limit to what can be transported by bike: building supplies, livestock and even entire families. In Uganda there is a distinct bike culture; 'boda boda' (bicycle

taxi men) gather on street corners with brightly decorated bikes, complete with tasselled passenger seats and mudflap signs with taglines like 'Love Jesus' and 'Hope for the best'.

In rural Africa, distances are vast and empty. Access to education, food and water, healthcare and business opportunities is limited. All of these basic needs are linked to transport and access conditions, which are poorer in rural regions, so it's easy to imagine the positive impact a bike can have.

Bicycles for Humanity (B4H) is an entirely volunteer-run organisation that firmly believes bicycles can make a big difference. Working on the premise that nearly every Australian household has a spare bike in the garage, B4H collects unused bikes and delivers them in shipping containers to those in need in developing countries.

Photos by Ella Mulvey and Bicycles for Humanity



In Uganda, a woman uses her bike to transport sugar cane.

Matt McCullough started up the first Australian chapter of Bicycles for Humanity in Melbourne in 2009 and it has since shipped about 3,000 bicycles to Namibia and Zambia, with container seven set to depart in the coming weeks.

With the buzz of Melbourne's St Kilda Road traffic behind us, I catch up with Matt and Andy Gild to talk bikes, aid work and Africa.

Andy has been involved in the project for four years. Working part-time as a physio and with some time to spare, she wanted to give back. Having grown up in South Africa, the Bicycles for Humanity project struck a chord; she loves the idea of recycling what we don't need here and empowering others in the process, as well as the "absolute grass roots and transparent approach of B4H".

While there are plenty of charity workers in Africa providing communities with money, food, education and medication, the team at Bicycles for Humanity believe that a key factor to survival is time: if you can save

people time, you go a long way towards helping alleviate their poverty.

If you are walking three hours a day, just attending to the necessities of surviving, it eats into the time that could be used to create business. These extra hours saved can be the tipping point. According to Matt, "People think poverty is about money and food, but the real kicker is that surviving can take so much time."

**"People think poverty is about money and food, but the real kicker is that surviving can take so much time."**

By Matt and Andy's reckoning, in Africa you can travel twice as far on a bike, move twice as fast and carry four times the load. By providing people with a bike, Bicycles for Humanity free up time in people's lives, and in turn open up opportunities.

This could mean the difference between a child going to school and staying home to work, a farmer getting to the market or a healthcare worker reaching more patients with greater supplies. It is also proven that a family can lift their income with a bicycle – according to studies in Africa (Uganda and Tanzania) and Sri Lanka, a bicycle can increase the income of a poor family by as much as 35%.

While I was in Kenya I spent time at the Heart Spring Children's Village. The orphanage was built with the support of OrphFund, in answer to a call for help by a local of Kager Village, Tom Muga. In the 80s, the area was hit hard by AIDS, resulting in a generation of orphaned children. There are now over sixty orphaned children living on Tom's property and attending school there. In this remote area, children can spend up to three hours a day walking to and from school. Because of the time it takes, most children do not attend school and stay at home caring for their grandparents or working at the farm.

Aid workers have become a part of the landscape in Africa and their presence has been subject to much debate. While foreign aid has brought medication, resources and emergency relief to the developing world, saving millions of lives, there is concern that corrupt officials have become major beneficiaries. Ghanaian economist George Ayittey estimates corruption accounts for 80% of aid given to Africa, and likens the situation to pouring water into a leaky bucket.

The reality is, the situation is complex – 'Africa' encompasses many countries, each with very different problems – and the best way to help those in need is to support projects run by the local people. Smart aid means empowering people to lift themselves from poverty by providing them with the information, the freedom and the institutional means to do so.

Vital to the success and sustainability of Bicycles for Humanity's work is its partnership with the Bicycle Empowerment Network (BEN); while B4H delivers the bikes, BEN works at the other end.



B4H volunteers prepare bikes for shipping.



Kids at Kenya's Heart Spring Children's Village find it hard to spare the time to go to school.



Established by Australian Michael Linke, BEN converts the shipping containers into workshops, and trains locals in bike maintenance and business skills so they can run community-based bike shops.

It would be useless to send bikes to Africa if there was no ongoing mechanical support. Without the skills and knowledge in the community to fix the bikes, in around 12–18 months in this harsh environment they will have stopped working, and are likely to be abandoned.

Beyond the ongoing servicing of bikes, the workshop provides employment, skills training, capability building and economic stimulus for the area in which it is established. The workshop is central to the success of the B4H project in Africa. It is an outstanding example of smart aid, and there are now 25 Bicycle Empowerment Centres across Namibia.

"While the bikes provide an immediate and practical solution to the transport issues which contribute to the cycle of poverty, the larger benefits of the bike workshop to the community cannot be understated," says Matt.

Many of the bikes are given away to Home Based Care workers – health workers who travel to patients homes, and work at the coal face of the HIV/AIDS crisis – and others are given to orphans of that same crisis. The rest of the bikes are sold, which provides seed funding to the small business that the bike workshop becomes.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

You can help the Bicycles for Humanity project by donating bikes (there are collection points in Victoria, Western Australia and New South Wales), but just as important are donations to help pay for the container and shipping costs. Bikes need to be in good nick (or easily fixed) and preferably a mountain bike or hybrid.

Bicycle Superstore has partnered with B4H to act as a collection point for bikes from its dozen stores in Victoria and New South Wales; see [www.bicyclesuperstore.com.au](http://www.bicyclesuperstore.com.au) for store locations.

If you are able to fundraise to help the B4H project, you can set up a page on their website and become an Everyday Hero. Those who have helped in the past have run marathons, iron man races, and made bike trips across America to raise money.

To donate, fundraise, or find out where and when you can drop off a bike, go to the Bicycles for Humanity website at [www.bicyclesforhumanity.com](http://www.bicyclesforhumanity.com).

To help Tom Muga educate orphans in Kenya, take a look at [www.orphfund.org](http://www.orphfund.org), contact OrphFund and ask to donate to Tom directly.

Andy explains that selling the bikes is a key to the project's sustainability. Setting a price on the bike establishes its value, and if an object has a price associated to it, it will be appreciated and cared for differently.

Matt believes the B4H program is special as it allows people to donate in a very personal and relatable way. "With donations to other charities you may be unsure about how those funds are sliced up, but if you give us your bike, you know how it will be used," he says.

"My feeling is that if you love riding your bike, Bicycles for Humanity offers a chance to pass on that love to others less fortunate; it's a great cause that should resonate with all bike riders."



**Bicycles For Humanity .com**

After farewelling Matt and Andy, I head down a nearby busy city street, and pass the glassed window of a shop displaying their famously decorated cakes. Suddenly I am acutely aware that there has never been a greater distance between the richest and the poorest countries – but a bicycle can lessen that distance. ✱