

Uganda's 'Uber for motorcycle taxis' shows it pays to be safe

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When Silver Tumwesigye, a sharply-dressed Ugandan motorbike taxi driver known by his nickname 'Silverstone,' had an accident six years ago it was a double blow.

First he had to pay for surgery for his head injury and weeks of hospital treatment, then he suffered months of no income as he recovered at home.

Motorbike taxis, known as "boda-bodas" in Uganda and elsewhere in East Africa, are an affordable and effective—but dangerous—way of cutting through the traffic clogging Kampala's streets.

Now a startup, dubbed "Uber for motorcycle taxis" after the popular ride-sharing company, hopes to make them safer and more reliable.

Silverstone survived his accident but the loss of his daily income of around 20,000 shillings (five dollars, six euros) threatened his family with destitution.

"I was so worried—not about me, but about my children, my wife," said the 36-year-old father-of-four. "I struggled to pay the rent and school fees."

Close to 40 percent of trauma cases at Uganda's main Mulago Hospital are the result of boda-boda accidents, according to a joint study in 2010 by the hospital and the country's Makerere University.

Like similar services in other developing world urban hubs like Jakarta, SafeBoda hopes to ease traffic in the Ugandan capital connecting customers with a registered driver nearby with the tap of a finger.

The company has enlisted 75 drivers at 20 "stages"—the boda-boda version of taxi ranks—since its launch in November. Each receives driving lessons, motorcycle maintenance and customer service training, and a first aid course taught by the Uganda Red Cross Society.

Drivers pay a membership fee of 10,000 shillings a week and are given a smartphone, a bright orange reflective vest and helmet, and a spare helmet for customers.

"The boda-boda industry got a bad name," said SafeBoda's 28-year-old co-founder Ricky Rapa Thomson.

"We want to say we are safe bodas. We should create a good reputation that will lead to more business, so we make more money and become more successful," said Rapa, who has been a boda driver for four years and also runs motorbike tours of the city.

Rigorous vetting

It was on one of his tours that a visitor from Britain suggested meeting 30-year-old Belgian social entrepreneur Maxime Dieudonne, to help him develop an app to increase safety and provide better service.

Rapa teamed up with Dieudonne, Scottish development economist Alastair Sussock, 29, and the Rwanda-based mobile tech company HeHe Labs to create SafeBoda.

Sussock said the start-up conducts a "very lengthy process of driver training and multiple interactions and recommendations for drivers".

"The recent issues in India with Uber, with one of the drivers accused of raping a passenger, shows the challenges on background checks or lack of any checks," he said.

Sussock said that while this made SafeBoda different from Uber, Lyft and other apps which allowed drivers to sign up very easily, it ensured a "higher quality of drivers".

Rigorous vetting means there are now 250 boda-boda drivers on the SafeBoda waiting list. Silverstone plans to join up, saying that his accident taught him the hard way that safety pays.

The SafeBoda app is also evolving and will soon add another Uber-like touch, allowing customers to rate drivers.

The company hopes to have at least 1,000 boda-bodas across Kampala by the end of the year, before expanding regionally, and perhaps even farther.

"There's a couple of other countries like India that could be really interesting," said Sussock.

For the last six years Juma Katongole, 32, has ferried passengers around Kampala's notoriously potholed roads. He joined the SafeBoda programme soon after its launch.

The father-of-four has gained three new regular customers and reckons he takes home an extra 10,000 shillings a day.

"In the future I'm planning on building a house because I'm still renting," he said. "I'm happy and customers are also happy with SafeBoda, they appreciate it," he said.

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