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**Citation:** Osei EA and Adu-Gyamfi J (2014) Truck pushers in Ghana: social misfits or urban transporters? In: Roscoe C (ed) Ghana: social, economic and political issues. New York: Nova publishers.

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*GHANA: SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL ISSUES.*  
EDITED BY COLEEN ROSCOE (2014). NEW YORK: NOVA  
SCIENCE PUBLISHERS.

*Chapter 22*

**TRUCK PUSHERS IN GHANA: SOCIAL  
MISFITS OR URBAN TRANSPORTERS?**

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**ABSTRACT**

Literature on truck pushers stereotype these boys as social misfits, criminals and nuisance to society; often regarded as creating streetism. Much consideration has not been given to their contribution to the economy as well as what motivates these boys to go into truck pushing. This chapter outlines research with 30 (20 current and 10 former) truck pushers, 5 customers who patronised the services of the truck pushers were interviewed for their views on the services of the truck pushers. Finally, 5 kayayei (female head porters) at the market were interviewed to find out if the presence of kayayei in the market has affected the business of the truck pushers.

The study found that the services provided by truck pushers especially to petty traders and other shoppers were indispensable because they provide cheap, readily available and customised service. Due to poor urban planning and deplorable road networks in Ghana, many areas are not accessible by motorised transport, hand pushed trucks have become

the most useful and efficient means of transporting goods from the markets to bus terminals and on some occasions to customers' homes and shops. The chapter argues that non-motorised transport to the informal sector cannot be overemphasised; therefore truck pushers should be seen as bridging a gap in urban transportation, instead of the social misfit label attached to them.

## INTRODUCTION

The number of children and young people engaged in income generating activities for their survival and that of their families continue to increase in developing countries. A survey of street youth in the Accra metropolis in Ghana indicated that the growth of street children was 41% annually (Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare, 1998). The report expressed fear that by the middle of the twenty first century the situation would be alarming. Several factors have accounted for the increasing number of youth and children on the street. The most important factor probably could be attributed to economic constraints. The low-income level of the average Ghanaian and the high cost of living does not enable some families to adequately provide their dependants with necessities such as education, good healthcare, food and other basic needs for survival.

As a result, many young people have found it expedient to supplement their family income by engaging in petty trade or carting goods at markets. In other words carting goods is a livelihood strategy by which poor youth can enhance their livelihood opportunities, obtain capital and savings which they invest in education or in developing their own enterprises. In Ghana goods carting is referred to as 'truck boys' or 'truck pushing'. Truck pushing is a common phenomenon in the cities and towns in Africa. Truck pushers can be spotted on busy high streets, at bus termini, markets and other places with brisk business. While on the street, truck pushers face many difficulties including harassment and abuse.

In spite of the enormous contributions made to the economy, the role of the truck pusher has not yet received any significant attention from academics and policy makers. The research on human transportation have mostly focused on female head porters (Apt et al., 1994; Agarwal et al., 1997; Grieco et al., 1994; Grieco et al., 1995) with the exception of Amponsah et al., (1994) that examined factors that influenced traders use of truck pushing services. This chapter describes the different hand pulled/pushed trucks within the market

environment in Ghana and their contribution to the informal sector. The chapter also outlines factors that perpetuate the stigma, harassment and abuse attached to truck pushers.

### **THE INFORMAL SECTOR**

There are various definitions of the concept - 'informal sector' - some of which are given as follows:

- a) Market-based production of goods and services, whether legal or illegal, that escapes detection in the official estimates of the gross domestic product (Smith, 1994 cited in Osei-Boateng and Ampratwum, 2011:4).
- b) Unregulated economic enterprises or activities (Hart,1970).

Ghana's informal sector is estimated at 80% of the total labour force, employing about 92% of women and, 69% of men (Hormeku, 1998). The large scale redeployment of labour in the 1990s as a result of the IMF sponsored structural adjustment programme in Ghana led to the widespread development of the informal sector. Nyamekye et al., (2009) estimate that employment in Ghana's informal sector in the 1980s was twice that of the formal sector. However, by the end of 1990s employment in the informal sector was 5½ times that of the formal sector (ibid). The informal sector is characterised by micro and small enterprises, low wages, and low skill jobs. Rural agriculture and retail traders dominate the informal sector. Informal sector workers are largely self-employed persons such as farmers, traders, food processors, artisans and craft-workers, hair dressers and barbers, truck pushers and head porters etc. Unlike the formal sector, most jobs in the informal sector are not covered by labour regulations. The informal sector has over the years assumed the centre stage in understanding the survival strategies of marginalized and vulnerable groups, particularly in developing countries. This is largely because these groups of people often lack the necessary skills, educational attainment and capital to either enter the formal sector or establish their own businesses.

### **HUMAN TRANSPORTATION IN GHANA MARKETS**

Transportation in Ghana and other markets in Africa are done by a combination of both motorised and non-motorised transport systems. Goods are transported into the market by motorised trucks but within the market off-loading of goods and onward transportation of retailed goods is done by head porters (females) and hand pushed trucks (males). The structure of the truck pushing team is hierarchical: those who load and off-load goods; truck pushers and head load carriers. A beginner enters the business independently as a head load carrier. These are usually young boys between the ages of 8 – 12 years. These boys carry light goods on their head to short distances usually, within the market or to the lorry termini. Another way of becoming a truck pusher is by becoming an apprentice -known as truck mate - to a truck pusher. The apprentice assists his master by pushing the truck to reduce the pressure and weight of the load on him. A truck mate is allowed by his master to push light loads into the market and its immediate environment. This is how the training goes until one becomes strong enough to embark on long distances as well as push heavy load.

In the second stage the youth use hand pushed/pulled trucks and trolleys to convey goods of customers to their destinations. Those involved at this stage are made up of males from the ages of about 13 years and above. They usually do not carry goods on their heads. It is believed that carrying of goods on the head is feminine or for young immature boys. Very fragile goods are usually conveyed on the head by some males but the few males who may be persuaded to carry the goods on their heads charge either double or triple the fare they would have charged using the truck. Even when they do this, they are always on the look-out not to be seen by colleagues else they would be teased and regarded as engaging in women's work. This action of the boys may be explained as a mechanism to demonstrate their masculinity in an area (market) which is usually the domain of females. Traditionally, it is women who carry goods on their heads. Therefore, these adolescent boys and young men in this category would like to stress on their masculinity by not carrying goods but rather by pushing or pulling them on the trucks.

The third level of the pushers and at the apex of the truck pushing team is those who load and off-load goods. This category consists of young men usually above the age of 21 years who are usually well built with large muscles and participate in activities that require much energy and stamina. A few people from the second stage of truck pushers move into the third level, which is regarded as the 'seniors' in the market.

Here they are stationed at the market and they load and unload goods from vehicles, which are then transported by the truck pushers and head porters.

Most truck boys are stationed at particular sections within the markets while few of them float within the market or at the lorry termini. Truck boys usually work in groups in contrast to the female head porters (Amponsah et al., 1994). The size of the group depends on the type of truck or trolley. What is referred to as the 'four tyres' usually has the largest group because its loads are usually bulky in nature. The different types of trucks are presented later in this chapter.

A truck pusher can acquire a truck to operate by purchasing one from the manufacturers who are usually electric welders and carpenters. One can also rent a truck from dealers and pay at the close of the day's work. However, before any dealer rents his truck out to a truck boy, he makes sure he knows the truck boy or someone known to the dealer has introduced the truck boy. This is done to guarantee the safe return of the truck.

There is another procedure to acquire a truck to work with. This involves the situation where a truck boy rents his truck to another truck boy to convey specific loads. He takes a percentage - termed as 'share' - of the fare charged for each load.

## **TYPES OF HUMAN TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM IN GHANA MARKETS**

Wheeled non-motorised transport has become indispensable in the informal public transport system in Ghana. The conveyance of goods using this means is done through a range of hand pushed/pulled trucks and trolleys as well as head load carriage. In Ghana there are a number of trolleys and trucks used to transport retailed goods. These include:

- The four tyres truck
- The two tyres with/without basket truck
- Wheelbarrow

The four-tyres as the name indicates use four inflated wheels just as that of a motorised vehicle on either a wooden or metal frame. The load is carried on the frame and can be used to carry both light loads and heavy ones. The four tyres have a metal bar – "steer" - which is used to control the direction of the truck. It also has a miniature brake by the side of the metal frame and a pedal hanging on top of one of the back tyres which is pulled to restrict

movement of the truck. An example of an empty and a loaded four tyres truck is below.



Empty 4-tyres pushed truck.



Loaded 4-tyres pushed truck.



Empty metal 2-tyres.



Loaded metal 2-tyres.

The two-tyres have two wheels and the frame is either made of metal or wood. Most wooden trucks have smaller wheels whilst presently almost all metal ones use bigger inflated tyres. Within the two tyres there is a sub-classification: two tyres with baskets and two tyres without baskets. The two tyres without baskets are used to convey packed goods such as bags of sugar, maize, and cartons of beverages.

The two tyres with basket has a big cane basket fixed on the frame of the truck. This is used to convey mostly unpackaged goods such as oranges, plantain, and yam among others.



Empty 2-tyres with basket.



Loaded 2-tyres with basket.

The last type of truck is the wheelbarrow. It is used to convey both packaged and unpackaged goods.



Empty metal wheelbarrow.



Loaded metal wheelbarrow.

A form of wooden wheelbarrow is also found at some markets in southern Ghana, used to convey packaged goods.



Stationed wooden wheelbarrow.



Loaded wooden wheelbarrow.

There is a clear gender division in the organization of the portering market. In Ghana, head load portering is culturally regarded as women's work; portering by men almost invariably involves the use of hand pulled trucks or wheelbarrow. Similarly, female porters tend to deal in loads being transported over short distances and lighter loads whilst their male counterparts, the truck boys, offer services covering much longer distances and involving heavier loads.

### **CONTRIBUTION OF TRUCK PUSHERS TO THE INFORMAL SECTOR**

The design of settlements and markets account for the persistent use of portering in Ghana. The designs and human traffic density of markets and trading areas favour this easy passage of human transport including hand pushed trucks and trolleys as compared to motorised transport. Portering therefore plays a critical role in the informal system. The petty trading nature of the economy does not only generate a complex array of motorised transport services, but also demand for the portering function (Agarwal et al., 1997; Apt et al., 1994). The extensive petty trading environment ensures plentiful supply of smaller transport loads, which is economically unwise to hire a taxi to deliver. The fares charged by truck pushers are considerably very moderate compared to the motorised transport system therefore petty traders frequently use truck pushers. A trader noted in an interview that three or four petty traders with not many goods club together to hire one truck. This reduces the fares that each one would have paid if they had hired individual trucks. The trader explained that this is advantageous to the traders because it reduces their expenditure and increases their profits. Truck pushers therefore provide an indispensable service for traders especially those in the poor and the middle-income brackets. The significance of their job is really felt during the era of frequent fuel shortages in Ghana when many motorized transport cannot function.

Other customers who patronise the services of truck pushers argue that in addition to the affordable fares, truck pushers are also able to convey goods to destinations that motorised vehicles cannot reach. A trader who patronises the services of truck pushers in an interview said:

the services of the truck pushers have kept some of us in business. We cannot afford the services of taxi most of the time and

even taxis cannot bring my goods to my trading destination because of the poor roads in my area. How would I have brought my goods to my area without the truck pushers?

The settlement patterns of many suburbs in the capital city especially Accra New Town, Kotobabi, Nima and its environs, Tema New Town, Ashaiman and its environs are not well planned therefore greater parts of these areas cannot be accessed by motorised vehicles. Accordingly, it is more convenient and appropriate to use the hand pushed trucks since they are smaller and can use foot paths. Further, the layout of markets in Ghana itself warrants the use of human transport because the vehicles that bring goods into the market cannot have access to all the individual stalls and stores. There is therefore the continuous need for the services of truck pushers in order to complete the distribution network.

Also truck pushers fill a vacuum created by the reluctance of most Taxi and commercial van (popularly known as tro-tro) drivers' to pick passengers with loads. These drivers complain that the goods are too heavy and will weaken or damage their vehicles or that the vehicle owners have even warned the drivers not to use the vehicles to cart goods. A section of the taxi and tro-tro drivers also complain that loading and unloading the goods delay their time and therefore reduces their chances of getting passengers they are competing for with other drivers. Hence, passengers with goods have to rely on the services of truck pushers to get their goods home. The services of truck pushers are therefore indispensable and without them the informal sector will struggle dearly.

## **PROBLEMS FACED BY TRUCK PUSHERS**

Truck pushers encounter a myriad of problems in their business ranging from personal and vehicular accidents, verbal and physical harassment and intimidations from their customers and senior colleagues. Truck pushers compete with vehicles and pedestrians for the same space on the road. There are instances where truck pushers hit pedestrians, hit and damage vehicles or they themselves are hit by vehicles. When this happens they will have to bear the cost. As one truck pusher said "we have to pay for the cost of damage that happens to the goods of the customer". One other respondent recounting his experience said that when he ran his truck into a stationery vehicle and damaged its headlight, he was nearly sent to court but for the intervention of

his elder brother who paid the cost of replacing the headlight. Even when truck pushers are knocked down by vehicles, the best insurance they normally get is for the driver to take them to hospital and pay the hospital bills, but most drivers just drive off after hitting them. Accidents from human transporters are quite high. For example, Grieco et al., (1995) reported that 60% of the traders interviewed had experienced an accident when using non-motorised transport (i.e. truck pushers and head porters).

It is undisputed that there are some criminals in the market, including some of the truck pushers. Due to the fact that most truck pushers socialise at the same place with the criminals, drug peddlers and addicts, they are all branded as criminals. In view of this, when the place is raided by the security agencies from time to time to flush out the criminals, they target any young male on sight. It is only after screening them that the innocent ones are released but by then the innocent might have taken some “*hot coffee*” (a term used by the truck pushers to describe police brutality and beating). Sometimes some innocent ones are detained until their relatives bail them. Grieco et al., (1994) discovered that truck pushers were at increasingly risk of their trucks been confiscated by the metropolitan authorities. In the 1980s the Peoples’ Militia issued some sort of identity cards to the truck pushers so that they could be identified easily. However, this practice died out after the exit of the militia from the market. It is probably time for the market authorities to introduce some sort of registration and identification system for the truck pushers.

Truck pushers occasionally get into trouble with their customers. Some customers regard patronising the services of the truck pushers as doing them a favour. Some customers on reaching their destination reduce the charges of truck pushers with no apparent reason by not paying the agreed fare, because they think they are doing truck pushers a favour by patronising their services. Some even regard them as second class people who have no right to express their opinions over issues. Darko (1998) recounted an incident in her work when a truck pusher expressed his opinion over an issue with his customer. Since the customer did not like the truck pusher’s comment, she warned the truck pusher to either keep quiet or lose some amount from the agreed fare to be paid for his services.

Other conflicts between truck pushers and their customers occur when customers intentionally conceal their destination from the truck pusher in order to elicit lower charges. When the truck pusher decides to charge extra on discovering that the destination is farther than initially given, conflict becomes inevitable. The traders in the market also create problems for the boys at times

by refusing to pay them promptly for services rendered. They ask them to go and come back later for their money and when they return the customer tells them to go and come again. Some refuse to pay the charges for days while others argue that they have already paid. Since there is no issuance of receipt the truck pusher either has to forfeit the fee or argue his position strongly, which usually results in hot exchange of words and fight on some occasions.

In spite of the significant contribution of truck pushers to the informal sector they are mostly perceived negatively. Most truck pushers acknowledge that society sees them as deviants and vagabonds and therefore a nuisance to society. Some studies have documented this. For example, Korboe (1997) have noted that even other street children in Kumasi have described cart-pushers as “*abrasive*”, “*dirty*”, “*irresponsible*” and “*vagabonds*”. This perception is fuelled by the often ‘dirty’ appearance of truck pushers; due to the arduous nature of their job they are often sweaty and thus tend to wear tattered clothes when at work. Coupled with most of them living in shanty areas with no proper bathing facilities, they tend to take a quick wash which does not get rid of the bad odour from the day’s hard work. The bad odour from sweating and their irregular bathing and grooming contributed to the public perception that tuck pushers were dirty. In an effort to improve the appearance of truck pushers, market administrators in conjunction with the local authorities have constructed fee paying toilets and bathhouses that are used by the truck pushers and other workers in the market. The availability of these facilities have enhanced the physical appearance of most truck pushers.

Notwithstanding the problems and the negative perception of truck pushers, most of them view the portorage business as a short term employment to accrue sufficient savings to sponsor their education or invest in a more lucrative and less arduous occupation. Among the truck pushers, there were full-time and part-time truck pushers. The part-time pushers were those who were either in school or apprentices in a trade. For the pupils in the junior high schools, their ability to work and attend school simultaneously was made possible through the shift system in some public schools whereby some students attend classes at different times of the day. They usually worked half day during the weekdays and full day on weekends. During the weekdays, pupils who are in school between 7:30am to 12:00pm i.e. on the morning shift, go to the market to work after classes. When they are in the afternoon shift, they worked in the morning and attend school between 12:30pm and 5:00pm. For those boys in day secondary schools and the apprentices, their work is mainly during the weekends and those students in boarding schools work

during vacations. The full-time truck pushers worked 7 days a week and these were boys who had dropped out of school and were also not in apprenticeship.

## **CONCLUSION**

Sen's (1993) capability approach explains that human beings possess inherent capabilities which make them to aspire to achieve self actualisation. It is in this vein that some people undertake jobs, no matter how odd or difficult they may be so they can gather the needed resources and skills to develop their capabilities to the fullest. The high unemployment rate, low income levels, high population growth coupled with the high illiteracy rate have rendered a large proportion of Ghanaian youth poor. This has pushed most of the youth to migrate to the cities in search of greener pastures, but with no skills and qualifications most of them find work in the informal sector carting goods. Truck pushers frequently face both harassment and abuse from their customers and security agents due to the perception that truck pushing is a social misfit. However, truck pushing has evolved as a response to the survival needs of poor young people and the haphazard nature of housing and settlement patterns. The service rendered by truck pushers as urban transporters to their customers is indispensable and they play an important role in the goods distribution network without which informal sector traders will greatly suffer.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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