



While we were not witnesses to the hassle and rigor involved in the packing of a huge 40ft container with bikes donated in love and care by many, we did see some evidence in the old scarves and socks holding the pedals to the handlebars. Also many of the bikes had served the previous owners well as they upgraded them in various ways.

The first ruckus involved the particulars of the BSC, first on the Adsum Foundation side, with e-mails sailing back and forth to the agent in Madagascar and around the world. Then not until the ship was about to berth in Fort Dauphin was it discovered that there was a destination address fault, so the e-mail missives were now directed this way and to those who control and can amend such things. This wasn't resolved for a month.

Meanwhile Tafisoa, Satraha's book keeper and staff manager, along with two others in her team, sallied back and forth from Ambovombe 114km west over the Matsinjo pass, and Fort Dauphin. While in Fort Dauphin they scoured the city for any trucks capable of carrying a container of that size. Seven were visited, but only an East Indian merchant and a European businessman were willing to carry the load. As time went on, the container having been cleared for exit, the European transporter backed out, as did the Indian. Auximad agents who had long worked with this Asian man, joined in the plea that he take the job, which he finally did after first upping his ante. Thus on the third trip of the team to Fort Dauphin the container finally cleared customs, on Monday, 6 February, but not until Thursday afternoon did the loaded truck make its way out of the port. Taky and Andry headed to the bus station and got the last seats on the last bus of the day heading west. Hoavy, their partner, accompanied the container truck. When they arrived at Ambovombe the truck had just cleared Amboasary, but one hour later was stuck up the mountain at Andranovato where one axle sunk so deeply into the soft surface that the opposite side was lifted off the road and the truck nearly tipped over. This stretch of road had failed earlier and was recently patched, but not rigidly. It was most likely the risk of this mountain road that froze all of those Fort Dauphin trucks not wanting to make the trip.



Now Tafy and others searched Ambovombe for a cable or chain to pull the container truck out and located a possibility but in the end, the Asian who had worked with Satraha before, offered his 4x4 to carry the chain, which a truck of his coming from Fort Dauphin could use with the container truck. Three Satraha men accompanied the 4x4, also bringing a hot meal to all on the container truck. On arriving they witnessed the truck just pulling itself out of its predicament, having worked with spades all night leveling the road beneath.



Arriving in Abb the truck, not able to make the turn to the drop location due to it having a westerly access, drove all the way to the large round-about called Eight roads - circled that and headed back east, now on its way the container caught and severed a low powerline serving the Treasury! Thankfully no one was hurt, but the brass from the Treasury wanted to put Hoavy, the passenger, in jail. Fortunately there was an electrician finishing up at Ambondro about 30km west of Abb, he would repair the break on his way home to Fort Dauphin and Satraha would pay the bill. Three hours later, at 1p.m the truck was free to continue to the lot. All of the bikes were unloaded from the container still on the truck, three large rooms of the house were packed with bikes.



Now the roads westward, all of packed earth, were a mess after recent rains, stalling all truck traffic. So it wasn't until Wednesday 22th of March that a truck was willing to carry bikes westward. This was packed to the gills with 150 bikes and made a straight path to Tsihombe arriving late at night. Thus it wasn't seen and unidentified in the city. All bikes were unloaded into the large bedroom downstairs the next morning, Thursday. Bikes were then moved outside to the large south veranda, 20 at a time, for selection. These were replenished by the minute as the bikes thinned. Many of our health team and about as many of Literacy trainers and local trades-persons were able to benefit from these.



A week later on the 28th another truck was procured to carry the last 50 bikes, (100 remained in Abb to be distributed to teachers of both regions of Literacy training.) This truck had first to be repaired, it was ready at 2pm, fueled up and clunk - it wouldn't start! The truck had to be replaced by another and it was late by the time 50 bikes had been stacked in the front of this long lorry. 10 tonnes of cement were also in the back to be delivered along the way. The cement didn't get delivered before the truck was stuck in deep sand on a side road south of Amboagnaivo, breaking a half axle. Fortunately they were carrying a spare and fixed that through the night and arrived back at Ambondro in the morning and at Tsihombe by noon.





Now there being a paucity of buses, this truck also had passengers for Tsihombe, and one with a cell phone called ahead proclaiming “we’re now leaving Ambondro carrying a load of Steve’s bikes”. This word was broadcast all over Tsihombe which accounts for the large crowd waiting at the house when the truck arrived. Taty was alone dealing with this situation, while we half-dozen in the office and 30 compound workers were all unaware. Many of us had been waiting to set aside bikes for workers up north, and those distantly afield, but by the time word got to us that the bikes had arrived, there was not a usable bike remaining that hadn’t been claimed. The demand is just too high, for while Asian bikes are available they have weak frames which rapidly crack and break from the rocky roads, but most of these “new” bikes, are of sturdy Raleigh and British construction.





Now the challenge faced by many of these bikes is their having a Schrader valve (car type) when most pumps out here only work with presta, the standard bike valve. Also many of the tires are not repairable with local vegetable latexes—the white sap of various trees and vines found in the forest along the trails, but we found that a product available in a squeeze tube called Fox rubber cement repairs them.

Saturday, after the 150 had been distributed for two days, I was heading north out of Tsihombe and came upon two of the bikes about to descend onto the Soavelo road heading west. One was carrying a passenger and the “driver” was cautioning his passenger on how to sit. He’d rigged a sturdy carrier to the back. The other bike was carrying a load of something westward. One of our workers came upon me about 6km north on his new bike, as I was repairing a broken chain, and helped with the repair. Many of the Literacy and health teams received bikes, but more yet still hope. Fortunately one of the office staff had been able to acquire a man’s Raleigh for another worker, but I told him of a more urgent need and he released it to me for Ambonearivo living up in Ankorokoroke of the Jafaro commune who has an old wrecked bike gracing the ceiling of his one-room hut, having a frame of multiple welds, which has not been repaired in the 7 years I’ve known him. I believe it’s un-repairable. He has been foremost in my heart to provide a strong bike. So this Raleigh was it. Dame Ombasoa living about 12km from Ambone agreed to take it up with his bike; now his didn’t have a rear rack but we’d had one built for the blue Raleigh, so he rode the latter strapping his own to the carrier with strips of inner tube. The rear wheel of his rolled behind and the removed front wheel was strapped to its frame.

Many of these bikes are already carrying goods to distant weekly markets, and one daily distributes his mother's fresh baked loaves of bread to clients in Tsihombe. Our health team who have new bikes, those who work afield are very pleased, for they have been walking miles from village to village distributing remedies, calling back on them twice and a third time accompanied by an overseer to revisit the participants for the 4th time. Transportation has been the biggest problem until now. None of those bikes are just sitting, if not being used by the owner it's borrowed by another, many carry grade and high school students from outlying areas into the schools in Tsihombe. Limbe fetches fish from the coast 30km south as the taxis down there are only once a week and don't return until 5pm which is too late for fresh fish. These are raced to Tsihombe by bicycle in the cool of the early morning. Lahiniriko fetches wood in the forest to sell in town. Other's carry gunnies of charcoal from the rural area. Those from the Talaky southeast and those from Namotaha and Ankiletoka about 20km north bring green vegetables to market in Tsihombe. I only knew one man who had a bike doing this green run from the north, but now there are a number, all newly supplied. Ox-carts carry several people or the sick, but bikes are the rural taxi. More often it's women who are the passengers.



There's probably no better help to the local commerce in terms of transportation than these bikes. For there are no motor taxis, and very few motored or motor-cycles, these are owned by the wealthy. The bike is for the common person, making him and her wealthy.

We echo the thanks of the hundreds you've helped out with bikes, all have found an owner and none remains.

Tafy—who put in so many days, and overcame so many challenges, but says she's willing do it all over again if need be.



Many Thanks,
Steve, Tafy and the Satraha team.