

Ghana's road traffic problems have deep and spreading roots

By [Festival Godwin Boateng](#)

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Much has been written about the crashes, congestion and pollution on Ghana's roads. Road injury is among the [top 10 causes of deaths](#) in the country. One report suggests that about [\\$230m is spent annually](#) on emergency and trauma care associated with motor accidents alone.



Ghana is struggling to curb a surge in car accidents. [Shutterstock](#)

The heavy traffic jams don't just undermine [productivity](#), they also contribute to [respiratory diseases](#) and [environmental damage](#).

What's not so well known, though, is the way systemic factors have moulded the road transport sector into its present problematic form. Inherited colonial systems and externally imposed policies, combined with local conditions, have entrenched the sector's problems.

I [set out to investigate](#) the colonial, neocolonial and imperial roots of Ghana's road transport misery, using media, scholarly and institutional sources of information. Building a safe and sustainable road transport sector requires understanding the root causes of the present problems.

Impact of history

When Ghana's economy tumbled in 1983, the military government at the time approached the [International Monetary Fund](#) and the [World Bank](#) for help. The help came with the condition of "[structural adjustment](#)" of Ghana's economy. Most developing countries that applied for support from the World Bank and IMF were made to sign on to similar programmes.

Structural adjustment reforms involve a series of economic interventions. But in Ghana – and elsewhere – the underlying idea was that governments should no longer provide public goods. Privatising many government enterprises would reduce spending and balance the budget, along with making markets more competitive.

These reforms affected road transport in Ghana in untold ways. First, the withdrawal of the state created room for the private sector to be even more involved in transport service delivery.

However, while the *tro-tros* (minibuses) and *okadas* (motorcycles) offer flexible and generally affordable services, high [unemployment and lack of labour protections](#) in the sector allow vehicle owners to exploit drivers by imposing high daily revenue targets on them.

These factors, together with the general level of hyper-competition in the commercial passenger transport sector and police corruption, create conditions for dangerous driving behaviour to thrive.

Read more: [Why fines and jail time won't change the behaviour of Ghana's minibus drivers](#)

Structural adjustment also contributed to the heavy importation of old used cars in Ghana. [Research](#) shows that prior to the IMF and World Bank measures, car importation volumes were [modest](#).

The liberalisation of the economy reversed the trend and opened the floodgate for heavy importation of cars. But only a few of imported cars in Ghana are brand new. The [majority](#) are often second-, third-, fourth-, and even fifth-hand cars. [Research](#) has shown that ageing vehicles are not just highly polluting, they are also highly prone to malfunctioning and, therefore, crashes.

Traffic congestion is another persisting road transport problem in Ghana. It too, has colonial and imperial roots. The reforms attracted enormous private capital investments to Ghana. The problem, however, is that Ghana's elites have failed to dismantle, and have actually deepened the discriminatory pattern of spatial investment constructed by the British colonial government.

This pattern of spatial investment which favours the south has led to the development infrastructure to support businesses to make profit in that part of the country. And since investors usually want to establish businesses at places where infrastructure exist for them to maximise profit, almost all the investments structural adjustment attracted were directed to the already developed southern industrial enclaves—particularly [Accra](#), [Tema](#) and [Kumasi](#)

Read more: [Poor policies, not drivers, are to blame for Ghana's road transport miseries](#)

This on its own should not have been a problem. But, once again, the Ghanaian authorities have retained the imperial planning laws and systems that separate home from work. This land-use pattern compels more travelling to the cities where businesses, jobs, services and trade are concentrated. The result is that, in places like Accra, drivers and passengers can be held up on the road for as long as [three or four hours to travel a few kilometres](#).

Congestion reduces productivity, causes environmental pollution and induces fatigue while driving. [Research](#) has shown

that Ghanaian drivers, particularly working-class drivers, often resort to aggressive driving and speeding to make up for lost time in traffic.

What the evidence considered suggests, overall, is that road transport miseries in Ghana need to be understood in the context of the historical, global and local socio-economic developments, and factors that have entrenched the transport sector in its present form. These kinds of reflections are important because they reveal the deep and spreading roots of road transport miseries in the country.

Towards reforms

My study proposes interventions that could tackle the myriad of factors that have entrenched a heavy reliance on cars, dangerous driving and unduly long travelling times.

Such interventions could include:

These interventions and others, at a wider societal level, would do more to improve road transport experience in the country than the current public policy of declaring "[wars](#)" on so-called undisciplined drivers.

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