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Bicycles Buffer Crisis—Then Accelerate Recovery: Landmark Two-Year RCT in Zambia Puts Mobility Poverty on the Policy Agenda

LUSAKA / CHICAGO — November 25, 2025 - A [groundbreaking study](#) announced today by World Bicycle Relief and IDinsight provides the strongest evidence yet that simple, reliable bicycles can build climate resilience and accelerate recovery in mobility-challenged rural communities—transforming how governments and development agencies think about last-mile transportation. Results from the two-year randomized controlled trial (RCT) in Zambia’s rural Mumbwa District show that when adults gain access to reliable bicycles—supported by local shops, trained mechanics, and spare parts—they don’t just move faster. They earn more, eat better, have access to more services, and recover sooner after economic and environmental shocks.

The study followed more than 1,300 adults and community health workers over two years, a period that coincided with one of Zambia’s worst droughts in four decades. In the first year, households with bicycles maintained income and food security, while the control group experienced a steep decline in living standards. In the second year, the control group only saw slow, partial recovery, while bicycle recipients surged ahead.

In the second year, bicycle recipients’ incomes rose by up to 50% for women, and overall consumption climbed by 29%. Community health workers also used their bicycles six times more often per month to transport patients to health facilities. The data offers rare proof that bicycle mobility can accelerate recovery, build household resilience, and strengthen rural economies.

Key Findings — IDinsight Mobilized Communities Impact Evaluation RCT Endline 2:

- **Bicycles accelerate recovery and growth.** Even after Zambia’s worst drought in 40 years, households with bicycles *rebounded faster* than those without. They turned saved travel time into greater productivity, higher income, and better living standards.
- **Household welfare improved across the board.** Families with bicycles had **29% higher monthly household consumption (~\$47)**—up from **\$33 per month in Year One**—while comparable households without bicycles saw little change.
- **Women experienced the greatest gains.** Women with bicycles earned **48% more income** and saved **70% more** each month than women without. They also grew their household assets by nearly **\$610 more** than non-recipients.
- **Health workers increased access to health facilities.** Community health workers (CHWs) with bicycles transported sick patients **six more times per month** than those without, expanding

access to care and improving the timeliness of service delivery.

- **Income and business revenue grew steadily.** For livelihood group members, average monthly income reached **\$29—36% higher than the control group**—while their small businesses earned **28% more monthly revenue (~\$10)**.
- **Time savings led to productivity gains.** Bicycle users spent **about one extra hour per day** on productive work, reporting shorter, more purposeful trips and less reliance on motorized transport (down **30% vs. control**).
- **Households accumulated more assets and savings.** Asset values grew to **\$602 (+29%)** from Year One's **\$537 (+33%)**, showing that mobility access translates into long-term wealth building.
- **Food security and diet quality improved.** Households with bicycles had **11% higher dietary diversity**, eating more protein-rich foods like meat and fish, and reported fewer periods of food shortage.
- **Psychological well-being strengthened.** Households with bicycles showed a statistically significant rise in life satisfaction and sense of agency, particularly among women.

“This study confirms what we see every day in our programs,” said Dave Neiswander, CEO of World Bicycle Relief. “A bicycle is more than transport—it’s a catalytic tool. It gives people back their time, connects them to opportunity, and builds resilience that endures beyond crisis. When mobility becomes part of the development agenda, people move from surviving to thriving.”

From Evidence to Policy and Scale

This research is built to move decision-makers from evidence to adoption, providing rare, causal evidence that bicycles operate as sustainable and cost-effective last-mile infrastructure for public services and local economies. A complementary cost-effectiveness analysis by IDinsight, grounded in the study's finding that bicycle ownership increases household consumption by \$47 per month, estimates a **14.7x social return on investment over five years**—meaning every dollar invested in World Bicycle Relief's Buffalo Bicycles generates nearly \$15 in social and economic value. As governments, donors, and implementing partners seek proven solutions to strengthen access to healthcare, education, and livelihoods, this study makes one message unmistakably clear: investing in bicycle mobility is investing in building resilience, productivity, and progress.

“Reliable mobility may be the most overlooked driver of progress,” said Jeffery McManus, Senior Economist at IDinsight. “Our research shows that bicycles—when supported by a local service ecosystem—offer one of the most impactful and cost-effective ways to strengthen livelihoods, expand access to care, and build resilience across rural economies.”

For more information or to access the full study, please visit worldbicyclerelief.org/idinsight.

About World Bicycle Relief:

Founded in 2005, World Bicycle Relief mobilizes people through the Power of Bicycles. As a pioneering non-profit social enterprise, World Bicycle Relief has distributed over 940,000 bicycles and trained over 4,100 mechanics to provide greater access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, uplifting communities worldwide. Discover more about our mission, impact, and vision at WorldBicycleRelief.org.

About IDinsight

IDinsight is a mission-driven global advisory, data analytics, and research organization that helps global development leaders maximize their social impact. We tailor a wide range of data and evidence tools, including randomized evaluations and machine learning, to help decision-makers design effective programs and rigorously test what works to support communities. We work with governments, multilateral agencies, foundations, and innovative non-profit organizations in Asia and Africa. We work across a wide range of sectors, including agriculture, education, health, governance, sanitation, and financial inclusion.

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