

BUFFALO BICYCLES' IMPACT ON REFUGEE AND HOST COMMUNITIES IN UGANDA: A RESEARCH BRIEF

WORLD BICYCLE RELIEF®

BUFFALO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research brief presents findings from an assessment examining Buffalo Bicycles' contribution to improving access to education, frontline service delivery, and livelihoods among refugee and host communities in Uganda. Using a mixed-methods evaluation that combined survey data from 854 participants with school records, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions, the assessment found that bicycles substantially reduced travel time, enabling better educational participation and academic outcomes among secondary students—particularly adolescent girls—while expanding the reach and efficiency of health and other community workers, and strengthening household livelihoods through lower transport costs and improved access to markets and economic opportunities.



80%

INCREASE IN MEDIAN MONTHLY INCOME OF BUFFALO BICYCLE RECIPIENTS

KEY FINDINGS

EDUCATION: Students who received Buffalo Bicycles missed 43% fewer school days over a school term than non-recipients and were less than half as likely to report feeling unsafe travelling to school in the morning.

HEALTH: Buffalo Bicycles reduced community health workers' weekly transport costs by 66%, increased the number of households they could reach in a day, and enabled 63% of workers to transport sick patients to health facilities during emergencies.

LIVELIHOODS: Bicycle recipients experienced an 80% increase in median monthly income and a 50% reduction in median monthly transportation expenditure.

66%

REDUCTION IN COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS' WEEKLY TRANSPORT COSTS

BACKGROUND

Uganda's refugee policy is among the most progressive in the world, going beyond a purely humanitarian approach to promote refugee inclusion, rights, self-reliance, and coexistence with host communities. However, like many rural communities across Uganda, refugees continue to face significant mobility barriers. Long distances and high transport costs limit access to education, employment, and healthcare, despite policies that grant refugees the right to work, freedom of movement, and access to services. While refugee inclusion policies increasingly emphasize access to services and self-reliance, there is limited evidence on how targeted mobility interventions influence educational participation, service delivery capacity, and livelihood outcomes in refugee-hosting contexts.

To improve mobility, Buffalo Bicycles Uganda (BBU) partnered with African Women Rising (AWR), Windle International Uganda (WIU), Finn Church Aid (FCA), International Rescue Committee (IRC), and War Child Canada (WCC) to distribute 2,490 bicycles in the Bidi Bidi, Nakivale, Palabek, and Adjumani refugee settlements between 2023 and 2025. These mobility solutions were integrated into education, healthcare, and livelihood activities to strengthen both refugee and host communities.

Eighteen months after the first distributions, BBU commissioned an evaluation to measure the impact of bicycles on education, healthcare access, and livelihoods. This brief presents the key findings from the comprehensive assessment, highlighting how bicycles have contributed to improved outcomes for both refugee and host communities.

SINCE ITS FOUNDING IN 2005

1 MILLION+

BUFFALO BICYCLES DISTRIBUTED

4,400

BICYCLE MECHANICS TRAINED

WHO WE ARE:
WORLD BICYCLE RELIEF AND BUFFALO BICYCLES UGANDA

Buffalo Bicycle Uganda is a wholly owned subsidiary of **World Bicycle Relief (WBR)**, a non-profit social enterprise that mobilizes communities in rural regions around the world to thrive with life-changing bicycles. We envision a world where bicycles improve healthcare and education outcomes and broaden economic opportunities so individuals and communities can thrive. WBR works globally in underserved markets with millions of people who lack reliable transportation. We aspire for individuals to have access to an appropriate transport option that is affordable, safe, and meets their needs and preferences. Buffalo Bicycles Uganda was established in 2022 to expand these efforts in Uganda.

Since its founding in 2005, WBR has distributed more than 1 million Buffalo Bicycles and trained more than 4,400 bicycle mechanics across 28 countries. Designed specifically for rugged rural terrain, Buffalo Bicycles and their riders are supported by a sustainable local ecosystem of trained mechanics and reliable spare-parts supply chains, ensuring long-term functionality and impact. With a primary focus on education, healthcare, economic development, and gender equity, WBR partners with governments, non-governmental organizations, institutional funders and the communities themselves to deliver sustainable mobility solutions that help unlock opportunity for individuals and their families.

METHODOLOGY

The assessment used a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys from 854 individuals (students, community workers, and entrepreneurs), analysis of 687 school records, and qualitative insights from 29 key informant interviews and 7 focus groups with community stakeholders. Quantitative data on the education sector were obtained from student participants who had bicycles and from a comparable non-bicycle-using student group to facilitate comparative analysis. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analysed using thematic content analysis. Findings were triangulated across data sources to strengthen interpretation and confidence in results.

KEY FINDINGS - EDUCATION SECTOR

Through partnerships with Windle International Uganda (WIU), Finn Church Aid (FCA), and War Child Canada (WCC), BBU has distributed 1,920 bicycles to secondary-level students across the Bidi Bidi, Adjumani, and Nakivale refugee settlements since November 2023. Bicycles were delivered to 19 schools under a school ownership model. Under this model, the school owns the bicycles, which are assigned to students based on mobility constraints, gender and vulnerability, with girls prioritised because they are disproportionately affected by poor education, health and development outcomes. When a student graduates, the bicycle is reallocated to another student. This creates a reusable fleet of bicycles that can serve multiple cohorts of students over time. As a result, more students are able to benefit from the same asset. Within each school, a Bicycle Supervisory Committee (BSC) is established to oversee bicycle use and management. The BSC is responsible for bicycle allocation, monitoring usage, coordinating preventive maintenance and facilitating access to spare parts.

This assessment surveyed 298 bicycle recipients and compared their experiences with those of 303 students who did not receive bicycles, providing insights into the impact of improved mobility on students' education and daily lives. Among bicycle recipients surveyed, 53% were female, with an average age of 18.8 years. The majority (78%) were from refugee communities, while the remaining respondents were from host communities.

IMPACT ON STUDENTS' MOBILITY AND PRODUCTIVITY

Mobility patterns

Bicycle usage among the 262 recipients that still owned their bicycles was universal for the last one month prior to the assessment, with 100% of boys and girls reporting that they rode their bicycles to school. Furthermore, 98% reported using their bicycles daily or on most days of the week. These high levels of daily use demonstrate that bicycles are not occasional assets but essential mobility tools that facilitate access to school. In comparison, 100% of the 303 non-recipients primarily walked to school.



"Due to long distances, the learners without bicycles reach school when they are already tired and they cannot focus and concentrate in class and at times doze off during lessons which led to poor academic performance." (BSC representative, Nakivale SS)

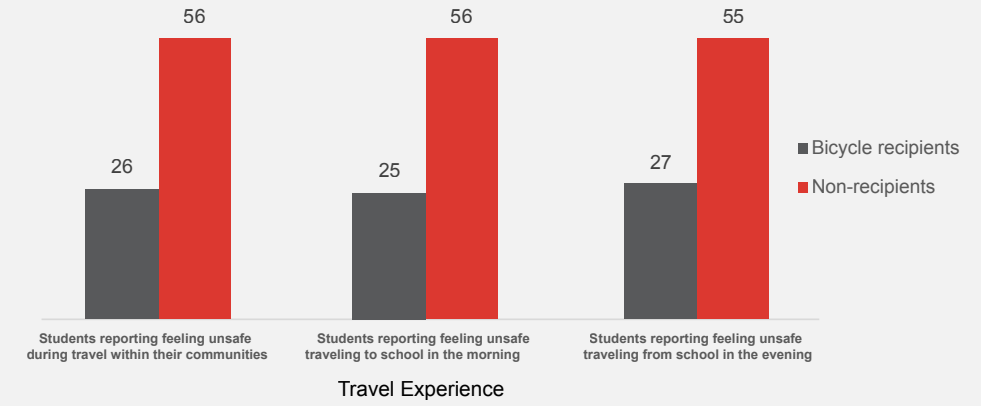
Productivity and time use

86% of bicycle recipients reached school within one hour, compared with 35% of non-recipients. Average travel time for recipients was 46 minutes compared to 87 minutes for non-recipients, representing a 41-minute (or 47%) reduction per trip. This reduction in travel time, observed among both female and male students, translated into approximately 1.4 hours saved per day, 6.8 hours per week, and nearly 90 hours over a standard 13-week school term.

Improved travel experiences

Bicycle usage substantially improved students' perception of safety during travel to school and within their communities (see figure 1). Non-recipients were more than twice as likely to report feeling unsafe travelling to school in the morning compared with recipients (56% vs 25%).

FIGURE 1: TRAVEL SAFETY EXPERIENCES



BICYCLE IMPACT ON SCHOOL OUTCOMES

Attendance

Bicycle recipients missed fewer days on average (0.93 vs. 1.21 days) in the week before the assessment. School administrative records reinforce these findings. Over the course of a full term, bicycle recipients on average missed 43% fewer school days than non-recipients (3.2 vs. 5.7 days). These results demonstrate that modest weekly reductions in absenteeism accumulate into substantial improvements in school attendance over time.

"Due to Buffalo Bicycles, there has been improved school attendance because learners come without worrying about the distance. They attend all lessons from morning to evening." (BSC representative, Nakivale SS)



Mobility-related barriers are a major driver of school absenteeism among students who had not received bicycles. Nearly half (50%) of non-recipients identified distance as a key reason for missing school, while one-fifth (20%) cited lack of transport. In contrast, bicycle recipients did not report distance as a barrier to school attendance. This finding suggests that bicycles effectively addressed mobility-related constraints that previously hindered students' ability to access education.

Improved punctuality

By reducing travel time and transport-related delays, access to bicycles improved students' punctuality and ensured they arrived at school in time, enabling them to participate fully in lessons and maximize their learning opportunities. The vast majority (92%) of non-recipients reported arriving late to school at least once in the preceding week, significantly higher than the 56% of recipients who reported the same. Additionally, recipients were late one day on average compared to three days for non-recipients. Even among those who were late, recipients recorded fewer late days compared to non-recipients, indicating that bicycles supported both punctuality and consistency.

"Learners would walk from 6 am and reach here at half past 8 am… but with bicycles at least we see learners by 7:30 already in school waiting for the time for lessons to start. So, in short, punctuality has also improved and attached to that, the performance of these learners for the past two years has also improved." (Focal Teacher, Yangani SS)



92%

OF NON-RECIPIENTS REPORTED ARRIVING LATE TO SCHOOL AT LEAST ONCE IN THE PRECEDING WEEK

Academic performance

Academic-related outcomes further reinforce the role of bicycles in supporting sustained school engagement. Nearly all (97%) of recipients reported that their academic performance had improved since receiving and using Buffalo bicycles.

Self-reported academic results from the previous term, validated by administrative school records, showed significantly better performance among bicycle recipients compared to non-recipients. Overall, 78% of recipients achieved a "Moderate" performance level, compared to 63% of non-recipients. Girls performed at comparable level with boys, demonstrating that bicycles supported equitable academic improvements across genders.

"Most of the students who received bicycles come early, and they no longer miss the morning lessons unlike before. They are always in school, attend class regularly, and their performance improves." (Teacher, Valley View SS)

97%

OF RECIPIENTS REPORTED THAT THEIR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE HAD IMPROVED

Multi-dimensional and multiplier impacts

Beyond school-related outcomes, students also reported reduced physical fatigue and improved physical fitness. Moreover, nearly 40% of students reported using Buffalo Bicycles to participate in or travel to other locations for extracurricular activities such as sports, debate, or drama clubs. Qualitative insights reinforce these findings, with teachers consistently reporting positive changes in learner energy and participation.

"You see them joining clubs and debates because they no longer worry about the long walk back." (Teacher, Yangani SS)

Alongside increased feelings of safety while travelling, female bicycle recipients reported that bicycles made them feel empowered (53%), independent (17%), and proud (27%).



"Before the bicycles, girls used to wake up very early, like at 5 am you find them already on the way walking to school, which was dangerous to them. The men would harass. But with the availability of the bicycles, they no longer move very early in the morning." (Mother, Highland SS)

Bicycles have also benefited other students, with 87% of recipients reporting that they had carried others on their bicycle while travelling to school. Moreover, 52% highlighted family transportation benefits, indicating broader household-level impacts, including use of bicycles to travel to healthcare centres and markets, as well as for fetching water, among other activities.

Partner Perspective - FCA

"FCA field teams have observed that the bicycles have given the girls greater independence and flexibility in managing their education, family responsibilities, livelihoods and access to essential services. In Nakivale and Oruchinga Refugee Settlements, some of the girls previously walked long distances to school, often arriving tired and sometimes late for classes. This quiet often resulted into reporting late to school but also presented potential high risk to the girl child. With bicycles, they were able to make the journey more quickly and with less physical strain, helping them attend school more regularly and arrive ready to learn. Overall, there was improved attendance, retention and learning conditions following the bicycle distribution. In two Nakivale secondary schools, we found that there is an 88% reduction in absenteeism among girls.



88%

REDUCTION IN ABSENTEEISM AMONG GIRLS AFTER THE BICYCLE DISTRIBUTION - FCA

The impact extends beyond convenience: having reliable transport means girls can make better use of opportunities that would otherwise be limited by distance and the cost of transportation. For older girls who are providers in their households, being able to move more easily between home, markets and other places of work can directly support their income-generating activities and household wellbeing. For breastfeeding mothers who are continuing their education, the bicycles have been particularly valuable. They can travel home to breastfeed their babies and return to school within a shorter period, helping them balance childcare and education without missing significant learning time.

FCA values its partnership with BBU because it has provided a practical and sustainable solution to everyday mobility challenges in refugee settlements, helping girls go further in their education, livelihoods, healthcare access and daily lives."

***Robert Bahenyangi**, Humanitarian Response Manager, FCA*

KEY FINDINGS - SERVICE DELIVERY

In September 2024, BBU, in partnership with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), distributed 223 Buffalo Bicycles to Community-Based Health Workers (CBHWs) and Protection Officers (POs). Out of the surveyed 38 bicycle recipients, 39% were women and 61% were men. CBHWs use the bicycles to provide health education, disease surveillance, and community health services, while POs support child protection, gender-based violence (GBV) response, and conflict resolution. Approximately 20% of all bicycle recipients were surveyed as part of this evaluation.

MOBILITY PATTERNS

Buffalo Bicycles are the primary mode of transport for both CBHWs (89%) and POs (92%). Prior to bicycle distributions, CBHWs predominantly relied on walking (62%), with the remainder using hired motorcycles (boda bodas) and bicycles.

Before receiving bicycles, CBHWs covered large, scattered villages primarily on foot. This constrained the number of households they could reach and limited timely follow-up of pregnant women, children due for immunisation, and emergency cases.

CBHWs lived an average of 3.4 kilometres from their attached health facilities with minimal variation by worker type. This distance was substantial enough to make walking to and from the facilities time-consuming, but manageable for cycling, confirming bicycles were appropriately matched to actual facility access needs.

Regarding travel times, the results showed that before receiving Buffalo Bicycles, reaching health facilities took an average of 44 minutes. This reduced to an average of 17 minutes after bicycle receipt, representing a 27-minute average saving or 61% reduction from pre-bicycle times.

61%

REDUCTION IN TRAVEL TIME TO HEALTH FACILITIES AFTER BUFFALO BICYCLES

IMPROVED SERVICE DELIVERY

CBHWs and POs report multiple impacts related to service delivery.

Coverage

Coverage improved significantly, with nearly 90% reporting decreased travel time to communities, as a result 87% reported reaching more households. Moreover, over three-quarters (78%) reported improved ability to reach distant locations.

"Before I received the Buffalo Bicycle, when I was going for home visits, I would cover like two to three households, but when I received the bicycle, in a day I can cover six or more households."
(Community worker, Yumbe)



Improved service quality

For many CBHWs—particularly women—reduced fatigue enabled longer and more meaningful interactions during household visits. Two-thirds (66%) reported spending more time with clients, as reduced travel allowed more meaningful interactions and improved service quality.

Responding to emergencies

Bicycle access substantially improved CBHWs' responsiveness to emergencies and strengthened referral pathways. More than three-quarters (78%) reported responding more quickly to emergencies. Over half (52%) reported increased referrals to health facilities, while 60% were better able to attend meetings with supervisors and 48% reported submitting reports more promptly. Supervisors emphasized the importance of rapid response:



78%

OF CBHWs REPORTED RESPONDING MORE QUICKLY TO EMERGENCIES

"If we have an emergency in the community, we mainly reach out to the community worker who is attached there and currently they can ride there and support us very fast and then give us feedback without any excuse." (Supervisor of CBHWs, Twijiji HC III)

63%

OF COMMUNITY BASED HEALTH WORKERS HAD USED THEIR BICYCLE TO TRANSPORT SICK PATIENTS TO A HEALTH FACILITY

Use of Buffalo Bicycles as ambulances

Nearly two-thirds (63%) had used their bicycle to transport sick patients to a health facility, averaging five emergency trips per health volunteer over a six-month period. Lending or borrowing bicycles for health-related transport was also common, with an average of 6 instances reported.

"These bicycles have changed the health of the families because, as I said, here [it] is not easy. So when the person feels sick and needs to go to the health facility, they call the VHT with the bicycle to support them with transportation." (Community leader, Yumbe)

IMPACT ON COMMUNITY WORKERS WELFARE

Beyond enhancing work-related mobility, Buffalo Bicycles have produced broader benefits at the individual and household levels among service workers. Transport expenditures declined substantially by 66%, falling from an average of UGX 8,513 (US$2.27) to UGX 2,921 (US$0.78) per week.

At the household level, community workers reported that bicycles contribute to improved income-generating opportunities and reduce mobility constraints, with particularly notable benefits for women. These benefits were closely linked to bicycles' ability to transport agricultural produce, bulk goods, and water, particularly in areas inaccessible to other forms of transport. In addition, intra-household sharing of bicycles extended these advantages further, enabling their use for schooling and other essential travel needs when not required for official duties.

Partner Perspective - Africa Women Rising

"Bicycles have become an important means of transporting agricultural produce, water, firewood, taking maize or millet to the grinding machine or other household goods. AWR staff have observed that bicycle recipients can cover longer distances more easily, their households spend less on transportation, are able to make more frequent trips to markets and service points, and have improved ability to respond to household needs and pursue income-generating opportunities.

It has increased the social capital since the bicycles are shared within households or communities, extending their benefit beyond the original recipient. In some cases, bicycles have helped people respond more quickly to emergencies or urgent health needs within the community.

Bicycle access is valuable because mobility is closely linked to self-reliance. A bicycle is not simply a means of transport; it can be a productive asset that reduces transport costs, saves time and expands people's access to livelihoods and essential services. The partnership with Buffalo Bicycles Uganda has provided practical mobility solutions that complement livelihoods and resilience programming."

***Anena Proscovia Ruth**, National Program Director, African Women Rising*



KEY FINDINGS - ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Between November 2024 and May 2025, BBU supported communities to acquire bicycles through the Incentivised Sales (IS) model, enabling groups of smallholder farmers and small business owners to purchase one Buffalo Bicycle at market price and receive two additional Buffalo Bicycles. This model reduced the effective cost of ownership and helped address financial barriers to bicycle access. Through this model, groups acquired 91 Buffalo Bicycles through direct purchase, while an additional 178 bicycles were matched and funded by BBU. A total of 269 smallholder farmers and business owners participated in the incentivised sales model in Palabek settlement during this period. Of this, approximately 45% of participants were female and 54% were male.

To understand livelihood-related impacts, the evaluation surveyed 215 participants engaged in livelihoods, including 155 who acquired bicycles through BBU's IS model and 60 from the AWR cohort. The AWR bicycle recipients serve in a range of frontline roles, including program monitoring, outreach, community sensitisation, and educational mentoring. All AWR bicycle recipients were refugees, while most (69%) incentivized sales participants were from the host communities. The average age was 40 years, with most (38%) participants falling within the 30-39 age range.

MOBILITY PATTERNS AND BICYCLE USAGE

Mode of transport, travel distance, and time saving

Before the Buffalo Bicycles, 86% of all surveyed participants walked as their primary mode of transport, with only a small minority using other bicycles (8%) or motorbikes (6%). After receiving Buffalo Bicycles, 97% of participants cycled as their main mode of transport. This represents an 85-percentage-point shift from walking to cycling, demonstrating near-universal adoption of bicycles. This impact was evident across genders, with the vast majority of women (97%) and men (96%) reporting bicycles as their primary mode of travel. Gender differences in transport access before the program were significant, with males walking more (94%) than females (81%), indicating that women relied on alternative modes of transport, such as hired motorcycles (boda bodas). After bicycle distribution, these differences disappeared completely.

57%

REDUCTION IN AVERAGE TRAVEL TIMES REGARDLESS OF GENDER OR ROLE

Participants face an average commute of 7 km to access markets, with no significant differences across genders or participant groups, making walking challenging. Bicycles provided equal and uniform mobility benefits regardless of gender or role, dropping average travel times from 123 minutes to 53 minutes (a 57% reduction, saving approximately 70 minutes per trip). Furthermore, usage was consistent, with participants cycling about 80% of all workdays, demonstrating that bicycles were not occasional assets but a core mode of daily transport that substantially improved work-related mobility and time efficiency.



Average transport expenditure

Bicycles have substantially reduced transport costs across all groups by 50%, with median weekly spending falling from UGX 20,000 (USD $5.3) to UGX 10,000 (USD $2.7). This results in annual savings of approximately UGX 520,000 (USD $139), a highly significant amount relative to participant incomes.

These cost reductions were consistent among both AWR bicycle recipients and IS participants, indicating that bicycles provided financial relief regardless of role or work intensity. Gender differences in savings were minimal and not statistically significant. Qualitative data shows these savings stemmed from a reduced reliance on paid transport (such as boda bodas), while enabling women to efficiently manage multiple productive and household activities.

"Before the bicycle, I spent 5,000 UGX ($ 1.4) per day for transport to do my work so in a week I could spend 25,000 UGX ($ 6.9), but now there is no transport cost anymore." (Incentivized Sales participant, Palabek)

SHORT-TERM INCOME EFFECTS AT INDIVIDUAL AND HOUSEHOLD LEVEL

Bicycles reduced transport costs, improving access to markets and farmland, and enabling recipients to transport goods without paying for motorized transport.This translated to higher incomes, reported by 92% of all respondents, with minimal differences across gender. Among all surveyed bicycle recipients, median monthly income increased by 80%, rising from UGX 50,000 (USD=$13.33) to UGX 90,000 (USD=$24.00)

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AWR recipients doubled their median income, and IS participants recorded a 67% increase. Both women and men saw significant gains in median income levels, with women reporting 58% higher median income and men 80%.

Household-level benefits were also evident, as bicycles supported multiple livelihoods and domestic activities beyond the primary user.

"This bicycle has brought many positive changes in my family because it has eased the movement to my farmland. Before the bicycle, it took me 1 to 2 hours walking but now, I can reach my garden within a short time. I'm able to save some money and reduce transport costs even though I have opened a big garden compared to before receiving the bicycle." (Incentivized Sales participant, Palabek)



TABLE 1: MEDIAN INCOME EARNED PER MONTH, BY GENDER

	RESPONDENT CATEGORY		GENDER		
VARIABLE	AWR bicycle recipient (n=60)	Incentivised Sales Participant (n=155)	Female (n=82)	Male (n=133)	OVERALL
BEFORE BICYCLE ACQUISITION/RECEIPT MONTHLY INCOME	UGX=30000, USD=$8.67	UGX=60000, USD=$16.00	UGX=47500, USD=$12.67	UGX=50000, USD=$13.33	UGX=50000, USD=$13.33
AFTER BICYCLE ACQUISITION/RECEIPT MONTHLY INCOME	UGX=60000, USD=$16.00	UGX=100000, USD=$26.67	UGX=75000, USD=$20.00	UGX=100000, USD=$26.67	UGX=90000, USD=$24.00
CHANGE IN INCOME (AFTER – BEFORE)	UGX=30000, USD=$8.67	UGX=40000, USD=$10.67	UGX=27500, USD=$7.33	UGX=40000, USD=$10.67	UGX=40000, USD=$10.67

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Buffalo Bicycles have provided essential, multi-dimensional support for mobility, productivity, education, and household wellbeing across refugee and host communities by significantly reducing travel times, transport costs, and physical fatigue. These improvements have contributed to meaningful outcomes, including enhanced educational access for students, improved reach and efficiency of service delivery among community workers, and improved welfare for farmers and entrepreneurs. Bicycles therefore serve as a powerful enabler of mobility, safety, economic empowerment, and educational opportunity.



Scaling these benefits requires expanding access to bicycles for those who need them most. Government adoption of bicycle mobility initiatives, such as Buffalo Bicycles, could ensure that students benefit from reliable access to bicycles while supporting long-term sustainability. Similarly, expanding bicycle ownership among community health workers and other service providers could significantly improve service delivery, with the potential to contribute to improved community-level health outcomes and broader social benefits.

BBU will continue partnering with governments, NGOs, and the private sector to scale bicycle access and uptake. Alongside distribution efforts, BBU will strengthen the supporting bicycle ecosystem through mechanic training, improved availability of spare parts in local markets, and investments that ensure bicycles remain functional and impactful over time. To date, BBU has deployed nearly 15,000 Buffalo Bicycles through localized distribution networks across districts in Uganda, extending mobility solutions to underserved communities and supporting improved access to education, health services, and economic opportunities.



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For more information about the evaluation, please contact **Winnie Sambu**, Associate Director for Research and Evaluation, World Bicycle Relief, at **wsambu@worldbicyclerelief.org**.

For inquiries about **Buffalo Bicycles Uganda**, including partnership opportunities to expand bicycle access in underserved communities, please contact **Robert Okello Omach**, Managing Director, Buffalo Bicycles Uganda, at **romach@worldbicyclerelief.org**.

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