



Bicycling Empowerment Network Namibia

Stories of our people

The Bicycling Empowerment Network Namibia started with the aim of distributing affordable second hand bikes from Western charities to disadvantaged people in Namibia, Southwest Africa, in order to improve access to employment, education, healthcare and social opportunities. BEN Namibia's founder and director, Michael Linke, introduces some of the individuals the organisation has reached in its first few months

There are days at the Bicycling Empowerment Network Namibia's headquarters in Windhoek when we forget what the organisation is all about. Our headquarters is a 390 square metre warehouse where we have up to 450 second hand bikes from UK and European charities stored,

a workshop where five trainees refurbish the bikes, and a showroom that fits around 70 completed bikes, ready for sale. It's not unusual to simultaneously have groups of five or ten workers from local factories looking over our stock, a bunch of local kids with almost impossible requests to repair their beaten-up

BMX's, farmers on visits to town wanting bikes for their workers, invoices due for payment, funding applications due for submission, customers returning bikes with small problems that were overlooked by our trainees and visitors from government, aid agencies or the local sport cycling community just wanting to know what we're up to.

On days like this we think the organisation is about wheels and brakes, money, budgets and headaches. But it's good for us to remember why the organisation started: people.



Selma, a home based care volunteer with a new bike delivered by BEN Namibia. BEN Namibia also provided her with a reflective sash, which will make her visible to cars at night and, unlike lights, will never run out of batteries which she could not afford.

Namibia is a big country with only 1.8 million inhabitants, the second least densely populated country in the world. It was a German Colony from the late 1800s until the first World War, then a South African colony until independence in 1990. It still lives with the legacies of the apartheid system—per capita black education, healthcare and infrastructure spending was a fraction of that for whites. The divisions in opportunities this system created will affect the country for generations.

HIV/AIDS and poverty are the two biggest problems facing Namibia, and the two issues feed into each other to create a vicious downward spiral. Staggering infection rates of around 30 percent in some regions are eating away at the very fabric of communities. Yet Namibians are resilient people, they have to be to survive the often harsh, dry conditions of their country, and the grassroots responses to these problems are extremely heartening. Initiatives that have originated from community based organisations have mobilised thousands of volunteers in response to the AIDS crisis. Thousands of orphans and vulnerable children are being cared for by members of their own communities. Trained volunteers are walking long distances in remote areas with bags of medical and sanitary supplies to provide care and counselling to people with the disease in their homes. One of BEN Namibia's objectives is to mobilise these volunteers with bicycles, extending their range, increasing their time spent with clients and providing a positive incentive to volunteer.

We also aim to help welfare organisations and individuals start their own small businesses, whether that be selling and servicing bikes, creating mobile shops with special bike trailers, or transporting home-produce to market. Then there are the thousands women and children who walk miles every day to collect firewood, water, or to get to school who could benefit enormously from bike ownership.

BEN Namibia only began operations in May 2005, but our reach is growing rapidly. Below are some of the stories of the people we've connected with so far.

Mr Elephant

Nakashimba Elephant, who refers to himself simply as Mr Elephant, doesn't know how or why his family name was chosen, but there's nothing slow and lumbering about the proprietor of the 'DRC' squatter camp's bicycle shop. The squatter camp is only seven kilometres from Swakopmund, Namibia's best known local holiday destination, but might as well be a million miles from the German bakeries and Italian gelaterias that feed the tourists. People live in shacks made from wrecked car panels, pieces of driftwood from the beach and old asbestos sheeting—



Mr Elephant outside his bike shop as BEN Namibia directors Glenn Howard and Michael Linke deliver the first consignment of bikes.

anything to keep out the mist that regularly rises off the Atlantic ocean and engulfs the coastal town.

The camp takes its name from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country where huge numbers of people have been displaced through decades of war. For the hundreds of people in Namibia's DRC camp it is not war that has forced them to live this desperate life, but poverty. Making enough money to buy food for one's extended family is hard enough, but paying rent for a shack with running water and electricity in the nearby township is almost impossible. Namibia's unemployment rate is estimated at upward of 35 percent, and the way forward is widely seen as small enterprise development, but in a place like DRC the resources to start a small business are extremely hard to come by.



Meme Gudrun tests a prototype bicycle ambulance made by BEN Namibia. Meme Gudrun and other home based care volunteers gave resounding approval for the concept of the ambulance and provided vital feedback for its development.

Mr Elephant began in the bike business two years ago. Those people fortunate enough to have work in Swakopmund need some way of getting there and back. He noticed the few that could afford a bicycle had big problems when they broke down. The only bike mechanics in town were simply not affordable—even if they offered discounts on servicing the new parts they supply priced most camp dwellers out of the repair.

Mr Elephant cobbled together some tools and second hand parts from discarded bikes and began offering a repair service from his shack, teaching himself bike mechanics along the way. With his lively personality and prompt service he soon became well known in the nearby official township, and even wealthy residents of the town have started coming to him to repair their old bikes. He expanded his shack, still using recycled materials, but it grew to a size where he could begin displaying bikes for sale. The trouble was he didn't have the capital to buy new ones, and could only find occasional second hand bikes for sale locally.

When BEN Namibia met Mr Elephant, he'd already done all the hard work of starting a community bike shop. He just needed a little help to make it to the next level. We supplied him with 15 bikes on consignment, which he quickly sold. Another 15 followed, and now Mr Elephant is on his way to building the capital to buy the bikes from BEN Namibia up front. He has an additional source of income, and can now afford to employ other local people to do bike repairs. And the atmosphere at the DRC camp is already changing, there is a buzz of hope emanating from Mr Elephant's shop.

We knew we were onto a good thing after we'd delivered the first consignment of bikes. Mr Elephant was smiling from ear to ear as he told us, 'My heart is very happy. The people here really need these bicycles'.

Meme Gudrun

Meme Gudrun is one of the 740 volunteers that make up the TKMOAMS volunteer home-based care team. TKMOAMS, which is an Oshivambu acronym that stands for 'God save us from this terrible disease, AIDS', is based in the northern city of Oshakati. It was founded by Dianne Shikongo, a nurse from the Oshakati state hospital, who was in daily contact with the despair of sick people unable to find places in the overcrowded wards, and could see first hand the strain placed on families dealing with a disease they feared because of social stigma and medical ignorance.

Meme Gudrun's small rural community is like hundreds of others in northern Namibia, with a large proportion of people infected and a growing number of orphans. When she began her home based care visits three years ago, the social taboos against even speaking about AIDS were enormous, 'The people used to throw rocks at us when we first started, they thought we would bring more AIDS to their villages.' Meme Gudrun's calm demeanour and ability to discuss the disease frankly have helped educate dozens of people and have broken down taboos, the first step

in dealing with the disease.

Meme Gudrun walked long distances to see her clients, so a bicycle donated by a Dutch Rotary club through BEN Namibia had a huge impact. 'I see a lot more people now, and at the end of the day I am not so tired'.

BEN Namibia aims to provide all of TKMOAMS volunteers with bikes, and the tools and training to maintain them, over the next three years.

John Stephanus

John is one of BEN Namibia's trainee mechanics, part of a dedicated team that refurbishes our second hand bikes. We pay our trainees a mixture of cash and credit towards buying bikes, which they're then free to use or sell. It says a lot about John that despite not having a lot himself, he gave the first two bikes he earned to his younger brother and an uncle who had paid for his schooling. We recently began offering our trainees computer training to broaden their skills, and gave each the opportunity to develop his own web page on the BEN Namibia site. Here's what John wrote:

"My name is John Stefanus, I was born in 12.12.1985 in Oshakati. I completed my school in 2004, then I moved to Windhoek in 2005 to look for a job so that I can get money to further my study. Because I'm from a poor family, my mother is dead when I was six years old and I don't know where is my father. Let me say I don't know who is my father. That's why it is very difficult for me to go to institutes because there is no money. I stayed five months in Windhoek without getting any job and one day I met Mr. Michael Linke the director for BEN Namibia, a new non-profit company. Then he told me to go to BEN Namibia warehouse so that I can start a school for bike mechanic and this was for free. This is my fourth month with BEN Namibia. We use to fix bikes this changed my life too because I use to get some money to buy my needs. In my life I want to become a professional bike mechanic so that I can go and



John Stephanus came along for the ride to deliver and assemble 27 new bikes donated to home based care organisations by Rotary Leusden, the Netherlands.

work in bike shops in Germany and the UK so that I can get more experience and when I will be back I can start my own bike shop in Oshakati so that I can help my fellow Namibians who are suffering by the killer disease HIV/Aids by donating bikes like what BEN Namibia did."

The Condom Man of Mariental

Very little is known about the Condom Man, except that several years ago he took it upon himself, with no payment or organisational support, to distribute free condoms and HIV/AIDS literature from the health centre in the town of Mariental to people in the surrounding communities. Reports to BEN Namibia from various sources confirmed that the Condom Man had been sighted on numerous occasions, walking up to 25 km per day to do his work. BEN Namibia was able to donate a bicycle, patch kit and pump to help Condom Man further his range and reduce his burden, and a sympathetic trucking company delivered it to the health centre. Unfortunately we have not had the opportunity to monitor the success of the donation, and don't plan to make a habit of such informal arrangements, but are confident that the bike was put to good use.

For more information about BEN Namibia visit www.benbikes.org.za/namibia or email michael@benbikes.org.za