

Under African skies

Driver training has long been recognised in European transport circles as not just a 'nice to have', but as a main bearing in the engine of safety and economy. It needs tailoring to the transport environment, though. As a contrast to the UK, Ian Norwell has been to see what it takes to survive on the industrial highways of the southern African country of Zambia

Transaid, the UK-based transport charity that operates in a number of African countries, aims, in its own words, to "transform lives through safe, available and sustainable transport." And that is just what it is doing, with the support of corporate members drawn from the UK logistics and transport industry. When a group of four of these had come to see progress, the author tagged along.

The need for safe transport is being driven by not only Zambia's domestic economy, but by those of the eight countries that border it. A copper belt in the north generates the heaviest of traffic, with heavy mining equipment heading up country, and ingot carriers running south. The weapon of choice here seems to be the 56t gvw seven-axle 'interlink'. A regular three-axle tractor with two tandem-axle trailers and two fifth wheel couplings, it has a ruthlessly efficient look to it. Like all LGVs in Zambia, these need run with no tachographs, although many are geo-tagged for security against theft.

Zambia's main roads are almost all single carriageways and, although in generally good condition, they are dominated by truck and bus traffic, with cars in a minority.



Roads generally consist of long straight sections between bends, so daytime vision is good. There are relatively few potholes - the UK has nothing to crow about here - but when they do appear, they tend to be of a ruinous nature; holes 20 inches deep are not unusual. Buckled wheels and broken springs are the price paid.



In the capital Lusaka itself, the road surface is poor, with extraordinary carriageway collapses looming up without notice. The traffic environment features major crossroads and intersections that are not governed by traffic lights, and much of the traffic obeys the 'nose-first-goes-first' rule.

Out of town, drivers need to be very aware that the slim and broken hard shoulder - not wide enough for even a car to pull off the highway properly - is also littered with pedestrians of all ages, as well as cyclists who may be going in either direction. Local communities also treat the trunk roads running through their district as a marketplace. Stalls pepper the landscape, selling charcoal, maize, and just about anything else.



The proximity of unprotected humans to heavy, fast traffic was remarked on by the whole party. Tragically, 350km north of Lusaka, we came across the inevitable result: a long black truck tyre mark and the body of a small child under a sheet by the side of the road. It was clearly a very recent event, as police were not yet on scene. Women were running towards the spot as news spread. We wondered why there was no sign of the truck. The exact circumstances we cannot guess, but with children as young as three walking to school on these roads, they must become inured to the wind blast of heavy trucks, and develop a deadly familiarity with it. At night, these roads are unlit.



Entry levels of driving skill and vehicle sympathy here are sometimes painfully low. It's not unknown for the ageing trucks on the training fleet here to need their gearbox cases splitting for repairs once a week – sometimes twice – such is the punishment they take. But that's no reason not to train; we all started somewhere.

The ITC (Industrial Training Centre), with which Transaid partners, has a base in Lusaka. The ITC has the widest possible remit, and will take a trainee who can't even ride a bicycle. As well as the class C and C+E licences, it also gives tuition for classes A and B, motorcycles, cars and vans, as well as FLT's. The not-for-profit operation, the only government-approved heavy truck and bus trainer, aims at high standards. A certificate from it carries weight with employers, we were told. But for those with less time and money, there are other quick and dirty alternatives.

SPARE VEHICLES NEEDED

The ITC training fleet is certainly not overflowing with chassis. It consists of just over half a dozen category C two- and three-axle rigids, one C+E tractor-trailer combination, and a solitary 12 metre PSV (courtesy of Stagecoach).

Lloyd Mbasela, acting director at the ITC, says: "We are naturally very grateful for the assistance from Transaid and their corporate members for the expertise and the vehicles we have received. But we know that we could do so much more with just a little extra help."

Similarly, any UK petrochemical fleets with a fuel tanker trailer that has become too expensive to recertify might consider that there are large numbers of fuel tankers on Zambia's main roads, so the need for training is great.

ITC's latest acquisition, a retired Volvo FM tractor donated by the



STEALTHY ASSASSIN

Malaria kills one child every 70 seconds worldwide, and of those 1,219 daily deaths, 90% are in sub-Saharan Africa. In Serenje district, Zambia, Transaid has been helping to get bicycle ambulances into rural communities to transport sick children. In severe malaria, speed is of the essence.

While training a bicycle ambulance rider may have a comedic sound to a UK driver-trainer dealing with C+E candidates, it is deadly serious here. In the rainy season, when mosquitoes and malaria are at their worst, many rural roads are washed out and impassable even to 4x4s. A bicycle with a single-axle trailer and its occupants can ride around the quagmires, often through lightly wooded land, to seek help.

With the project nearly over, and a new drug deployed, the provisional results are dramatic. In a population that would normally have expected 39 deaths over the period, there have been just two. Transaid's chief executive Caroline Barber says: "The challenge now is to secure scale-up funding to spread the benefits much wider."

UK's Malcolm Logistics, was officially handed over during the trip by its commercial director, Alan Thornton. He observed: "Having visited them, and seen with my own eyes how it will be helping train new drivers here, it's quite a humbling experience." **TE**

Ian Norwell donated his travelling and writing time to Transaid, which marks its 20th anniversary this year. Also, his author fee was donated to Transaid by the publishers of Transport Engineer