

# Shantha Bloemen: Mobility for Africa

**SHANTHA BLOEMEN:** I tend to think that especially when we look at Africa in particular, people in some ways need to be more risk prone. I still think we face a huge culture of risk aversion.

**RAMA CHAKAKI:** This is Shantha Bloemen, the founder and managing director of Mobility for Africa, a social enterprise that is providing electric mobility to rural communities in Zimbabwe.

**SHANTHA BLOEMEN:** So I visited many parts of rural Africa, been to many countries, to off-the-beaten rural villages. And it really contrast with my experiences in Asia. So I lived both in Thailand and in China and there, of course, the two-wheeler and the three-wheeler had become a very important enabler for both rural and urban families. It gave them their own transport, their own mobility to, you know, get their kids to school, to use it for income.

And it felt like why couldn't we now take advantage of the fact that we have entered into electric to try and solve this last mile transport crisis in rural Africa.

**RAMA CHAKAKI:** I'm Rama Chakaki, and you're listening to Innovate with Purpose, the official podcast of Expo Live, an innovation programme by Expo 2020 Dubai.

**[INTRO STING]**

**RAMA CHAKAKI:** The idea behind Mobility for Africa was born out of frustration. Having worked in the development sector in Africa and Asia for more than two decades, Shantha was dismayed by the lack of mobility options available, especially for women.

Here's how it's set up: Mobility for Africa provides a fleet of electric tricycles, called a Hamba. People can call or send an SMS to get picked up and driven to a specific location, similar to Uber but the difference is it's entirely run on electric three-wheeler tricycles.

**SHANTHA BLOEMEN:** So essentially we're using three-wheeler e-tricycles in a fleet management system. And we have a battery charging station, where we do battery swapping and the intent is to alleviate the long distances they face, doing lots of things from getting their produce to the markets to getting to their fields to plant their crops.

**RAMA CHAKAKI:** That sounds like a great utility. So tell me Shantha, you started in Zimbabwe, and Hamba has been operating there for a few years now. Can you perhaps tell us a bit more about who has benefited from the fleet the most? I mean, what is the impact you're seeing in the local communities that you've been operating in?

**SHANTHA BLOEMEN:** So, some of the women worked in agriculture, for example, one group last year harvested 32 tons or 32 truckloads of Hamba. Hamba carries three to 400 kilos of onions. With the Hamba, they were able to basically access their fields more quickly and then be able to transport their harvest back to their house and then take it eventually to the market where they sold it.

So their income was significantly higher by having mobility.

This has been extremely useful because many people have benefited then from the transport and logistics services. The women who drive them work in a group of three and they earn a commission, so it also helps to create jobs for them.

Also traders and women in small enterprise.

## **MUSIC**

**SHANTHA BLOEMEN:** So for example, one of our oldest participant works with her daughters and they have a baking business. So they have an underground oven and they make bread buns.

And before they had no real way to get the bread buns to their customers, I mean, they would walk once a day to the school, which was nearly 10 kilometers. And now with the Hamba, they can take buns to the clinic, buns to the school, deliver door to door. And so they've also increased their productivity enormously and now have a much more successful baking business.

**RAMA CHAKAKI:** In rural Zimbabwe, many women deliver their babies at home, because finding transport to a clinic can be a hurdle. So, Mobility for Africa started offering pregnant women and new moms a ride to and from their local health clinics.

**SHANTHA BLOEMEN:** I mean, one woman actually delivered in the tricycle on the way to the health clinic, but the great news was that the baby got there safely and obviously went home healthy, and the mother and the new baby could be dropped home in the tricycle.

RAMA CHAKAKI: That warms my heart. There seems to be a focus on empowering women in the community. Was that a conscious decision from the outset?

**SHANTHA BLOEMEN:** A lot of people have said to me, why focus on rural? Why focus on women? Why don't you be more pragmatic and focus on the existing market and then move down to the women and the rural?

And maybe there is some truth in that, but for me, what drives me and gets me up every day is, the rural women who I've met, who are really strong and amazingly resilient, but who are the priority and who should be our priority.

I don't think I would be driven as much by focusing on just the existing market of people that... farmers or urban populations that can afford a tricycle.

So I may be naive because from a business case, it might be easier to start at the top, but I see it as a pyramid, and we wanted to prove that the bottom of the pyramid, which is rural women, farmers, are a viable market, need this service and are very capable of affording it. And with this investment in transport, will be able to only go up in terms of increasing their productivity and having a really qualitative impact on their lives.

## MUSIC

**SHANTHA BLOEMEN:** And a lot of people sort of say to me, well, you know, obviously rural carbon emissions from transport are non-existent if everyone is walking and using a bicycle, but I think from a climate justice perspective that that's not good enough.

These communities where we're working are going to face the weather extremes of climate change. They're going to be the brunt of the fact that some people have fantastic mobility, and it wouldn't be fair to exclude them from this exciting opportunity to bring transport solutions to them.

**RAMA CHAKAKI:** The challenge here is two-fold: setting up these services and systems in rural areas where infrastructure, access to technology and access to energy can be difficult. And at the same time, fundraising, especially for a new market, is not an easy feat.

**SHANTHA BLOEMEN:** I have to admit, I came to this obviously with the perspective that... a naive, idealistic perspective that I wanted to change the world. And I was tired of talking about the problems, which I'd done a lot in my years in development, and now I want it to be really practical.

And I thought that would be easier to align with business principles and people wouldn't be so cynical and skeptical to invest. And one of the challenges is that our model is... It requires CapEx up front. It's tricycles, it's batteries, it's hardware. It's not just a digital app or platform.

People want to see the business financial model. They seem to be obsessed by numbers rather than the potential of the impact. So, I'm hoping that now we're moving towards more of a focus on impact investing, that there will be a genuine rethink and more risk taken into just piloting and testing and experimenting.

Especially with climate change, we need to be practical. But practical means not obsessing about a financial model before you've even actually invested in testing the solution.

It's been a challenge to prove to people that we can be sustainable. It can be profitable and we're still building that evidence base.

RAMA CHAKAKI: I know for social entrepreneurs, that can be a long journey. Speaking of your evidence base, how do you measure your impact?

**SHANTHA BLOEMEN:** The storytelling and measuring impact has been built into the design of everything we've done.

We've used qualitative approach, which means good old-fashioned conversations with the women, where we'll invite them together.

We've also invested in quantitative evidence, which obviously was trying to look at the GPS data. We put trackers on the tricycles to measure where people were traveling to? Where were the important places they wanted to go? What were the common routes?

That data of course is valuable. It helps to inform if you're designing transport services, if you're looking at where you should improve roads in rural areas.

## MUSIC

**SHANTHA BLOEMEN:** So we've been focused on also collecting economic data. How have we seen what indicators have moved in the rural health system? How many more mothers delivered at the health clinic?

So we've been really trying to measure as much of that social impact as possible, both with numbers, but also with the stories.

**RAMA CHAKAKI:** Through both anecdotal evidence from the communities as well as the numbers, Shantha was able to show how investing a little money in mobility, specifically sustainable mobility, is a long lasting and far reaching solution. The Hambas provide mobility to rural communities but also opportunities for new jobs, new skills, and new services. All this was kickstarted with the help of the Expo Live grant that they received last year.

**SHANTHA BLOEMEN:** Winning the Expo Live award was extraordinary. It was a miracle in a way because we applied in the first year of our pilot. And not only was the award itself very valuable, financially, it is more than that being part of this community. Knowing that we had an opportunity with Expo 2020, knowing that we had recognition from an amazing group of people, that felt like we weren't crazy and that believed in us, has been so valuable. Because some days you do think, oh, am I really crazy?

**RAMA CHAKAKI:** That's a question all social entrepreneurs ask themselves. That's wonderful to hear, Shantha. So, what's next for you and the team at Mobility for Africa?

**SHANTHA BLOEMEN:** We have a lot of rural communities in Zimbabwe, shouting out to us and asking for us to come. We also have huge demand across the continent. I've had emails from Cameroon, Nigeria. I've got people in Benin that want to partner with us. Zambia, Malawi across the continent.

Having the partners that are willing and interested in what can be a slow journey has been really important. Patience and willing to find out with you what will work, being willing to accept that not everything works and failure is part of the journey.

## MUSIC

There is an African proverb and it says: If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

The problems are big and we need to solve things together, so I tend to see everyone as a potential partner and a strategically.

**RAMA CHAKAKI:** “Innovate with Purpose” is the official podcast of Expo Live, an innovation programme by Expo 2020 Dubai. Innovation can come from anywhere, to everyone.

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