

# Cycle path to Africa

While studying Management at LSE, writes **Merlin Matthews**, I became Dr Bike, a Students' Union society handed down through the generations, teaching people to fix their bikes in exchange for beers on Friday evenings. I started off as "Nurse Bike", complete with greasy lab coat, getting trained up by my predecessor. Bikes were, and still are, a great way to get around London; super fast, cheap and with no rushing for the last tube or walking to the bus.

**A**lthough my original plan was to do the "city slicker thing" after graduating, LSE broadened my horizons and I became interested in a more alternative path. While I was supposed to be revising for my finals, I was actually involved with the first anti-road protest "tree village" in Blackburn, in the north of England, and with underground Swampy, the environmental activist, in Exeter, in the south west, along with some other lovely LSE folk. I also recall marching against student fees, a current topic once more. Suffice to say, my motivation for studies was not super hot, although the jazz-playing Max Steuer's course on the Economics of Social Policy was a notable exception.

A Haitian student who was a regular attendee of Dr Bike approached me for some advice and help about starting up a bike factory in Haiti as she had seen the need for cheap, pollution-free transport for the masses. I decided it was such a good idea that I would like to help, having given up on the city slicker career path.

I soon realised that millions of bicycles are thrown away or left to rust in the UK, while millions of people in developing countries such as Haiti are forced by lack of transport to walk up to four hours per day, to school, work or fetching water. The original idea for my charity, Re~Cycle, was to get a flow of bikes established in the UK, then spend most of my time in Haiti running the workshop and doing other "social work". Over time, I realised that I would be of more use to the Haitians and people in other countries if I spent most of the time in the UK, fundraising, sorting out the bikes, shipping them over and so on.

Getting off the ground as a charity turned out to be a bit of a struggle as there is a catch-22 situation

of needing a track record to get funding. The first really big break came when Re~Cycle discovered that a US charity, the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), had been doing very similar work in Haiti for ten years. As they were a non-profit organisation, we decided to work with them and learn from their extensive experience. The ITDP asked if we would like to send a container of our bikes to South Africa, if they paid for the transportation, which gave us our track record. Re~Cycle and ITDP then helped to set up an independent South African charity, Afribike, which delivered Phase 1 of their government's nationwide bicycle programme, Shova Kalulua (Pedal Easy) – setting up 11 workshops, with a focus on the regions of KwaZulu Natal and the Northwest Province.

Re~Cycle has so far sent 36,000 bikes, tools and spare parts to all over Africa, where partner organisations refurbish and distribute them. The different partners have different focuses, from AIDS outreach workers to training the end users.

In my earlier, scruffy days, I would occasionally name-drop LSE for credibility for Re~Cycle, which I have to say does actually work! In 2001 I did a year's

study at the School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE) in Bethnal Green, East London, set up by Lord Michael Young, who also set up the Open University and the Consumers' Association. On the first day, we sat in a circle and the ice-breaker was two minutes to interview the person sitting next to you. The man sitting next to me had actually started Dr Bike at LSE – talk about serendipity!

I can say without a shadow of a doubt that if I had not attended LSE, I would not have ended up where I am now. The charity has continued to be an LSE thing, with our first website built by an LSE friend and the majority of current trustees being LSE people.

The charity is now looking for a trustee treasurer, help with marketing and some high-profile patrons, as well as bike storage in London and people to do sponsored bike rides. Any African organisations that might like to run a bike project should also get in touch. ■



**Merlin Matthews** (BSc Management 1995) is founder of Re~Cycle, a charity which ships unwanted bikes to Africa and teaches local people maintenance skills (see [www.re-cycle.org](http://www.re-cycle.org)).

