

Cart for all seasons

A new hand-cart designed by Arnold Wendroff may be the solution to most transport problems people face in the rural areas. The cart has already won the hearts of many, but still needs to be popularised countrywide. *Chinduti Chirwa* talked to the brains behind the invention and reports

The Livingstonia hand-cart, just like its designer, sounds very remote to many Malawians. But if government, the private sector and donor community can accept and popularise its use, it is one single product that can solve many transport hiccups currently facing the rural masses, particularly women.

The wooden hand-cart which uses ordinary bicycle wheels, and is capable of carrying a 100 kg load, is a brainchild of 58-year-old American medical sociologist Arnold P. Wendroff. It draws its name from Livingstonia Technical College which accepted the design and built the cart.

The first six carts which were on display at the college's pavilion during the recent 125th anniversary celebrations of Scottish Missionary work in Malawi, at Muzu Stadium, drew huge crowds of people who expressed interest in this simple but effective means of transport.

President Bakili Muluzi, who was the official guest at the celebrations, and Zambia's former president Kenneth Kaunda, were both impressed with the cart after Wendroff explained to the two dignitaries how it works. Both Muluzi and Kaunda placed orders for the cart.

Wendroff, who worked in Malawi as a Peace Corps Volunteer at Livingstonia Secondary School and then at Donasi Science Centre in 1967, was particularly struck by transport problems in the rural areas during his four-year stay at the home of Malawi's famous traditional medicine man, the late Chikanga, at Thele in Rumphi from 1986 to 1989 studying traditional medicines for his doctorate degree.

Says Wendroff: "I could see

transport problems faced by people in the villages and I really felt sorry, particularly for the women who shoulder the burden of attending to family needs. The women have to carry everything from firewood, thatching grass, farm produce and water on their heads."

Wendroff said: "All along I believed that there must be a solution to this problem but I did not know what that solution could be until I went back to the United States in 1989. One day, I was helping my friend with some work using a hand cart and this struck me to be an appropriate solution to the transport problems facing rural Malawi."

When Wendroff returned to Malawi in 1992, his mission was to convince government, the commercial sector, nongovernment organizations and the donor community to take up the new vehicle and popularise it so that local carpenters could be making and selling such carts at affordable prices.

But he had a shock waiting for him. He laments: "There has not been any positive response from anyone. There has been lots of letters from various government departments, NGOs and many others saying it is a great idea but nothing happens."

Says he: "It is important for people in government to realise the crucial role this hand cart can play in the poverty alleviation programme currently being undertaken. The biggest handicap to the economic struggle in the rural areas is lack of simple means of transport and this hand cart is a revolutionary idea that can bring relief to the rural masses and boost the country's economy."

Wendroff attributes the lack of enthusiasm on the idea to the



Cart as ambulance: A man is taken to hospital on the cart

western orientation that the country's intellectuals have had. A hand-cart has extensively been used and with positive results in the Eastern world. But the idea is being belittled in the West. He says:

"The donor community in the west goes for grandiose projects instead of these simple projects which affect the daily lives of the common man and woman."

Western donors prefer Land Rovers which an ordinary man cannot afford to buy. Says Wendroff: "From the cost of one Land Rover, they could use that money to produce so many hand-carts which the ordinary villager could afford to buy," he said.

The hand-cart is at present estimated to cost K2,400 and is useful in various sectors of rural life such as in agriculture, commerce and domestic.

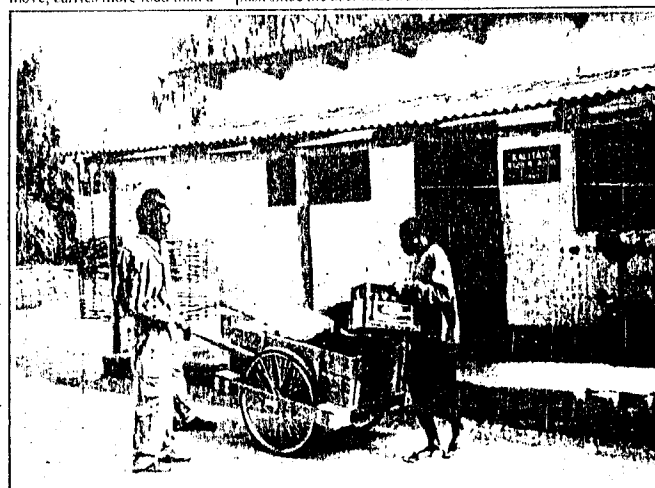
Wendroff said when he drew a blank from government and private sector, he decided to give the idea to Livingstonia Technical College and provided the initial capital for starting the project. Soon after the college started making the carts, the project attracted attention

from local carpenters as well as villagers who have come to realize that it can be a real solution to their problems.

The hand-cart is more appropriate and cheaper than the wheelbarrow. It is also easier to move, carries more load than a

wheelbarrow and an average user can move 100kg load at a distance of one kilometre in 11 minutes while a distance of 5kms can be covered in one hour, explained Wendroff.

He said it is easy to pull or push since the user does no lifting, as the load is balanced over wheels. The cart is also easy to produce since it is made of local wood and easily available and affordable ordinary bicycle tyres. He said his wish is that local carpenters should produce these carts.



Cart as small lorry transporting groceries



To the maize mill: Can carry so many baskets



On hire: Carrying grass — Pic: Courtesy of Arnold P Wendroff