



The Langa Bicycle Hub: mobilising transformation through community- based research

Photo: Sujeeth Potla, [Unsplash](#)

When Mzikhona Mgedle founded the [Langa Bicycle Hub](#) in 2020, the goal was simple. He wanted to create a place where people from Langa could learn to cycle and fix their bicycles. As COVID-19 drove innovation, bicycles emerged as the best way to transport food and medicine to bed-ridden residents across the township. A coping mechanism evolved into a new source of informal job creation. **Mzikhona Mgedle, Diana Sanchez-Betancourt, Andrea Teagle and Timothy Stanton** reflect on the potential of collaborative research to improve mobility and public spaces.

Langa is strategically located in the Cape Town metropolitan area. The central position has the potential to enhance mobility and infrastructure of public spaces. Yet, residents still have major mobility challenges. Many of the area's recreational facilities – parks, libraries, cultural centres and sports facilities – are also still dysfunctional. Mobility constraints reinforce inequalities and social injustice, limiting access to employment and economic opportunities. But some are looking to change this.

Mzikhona Mgedle (29), founder of the Langa Bicycle Hub, is one such local change agent. He says several companies and individuals now provide deliveries by bicycle in Langa, which connect supermarkets and informal traders with their

customers. During a 'walk and talk' workshop organised by the bicycle hub and the HSRC, Mgedle explained how, for instance, the local Boxer Supermarket supports the community and also benefits from bicycle deliveries. It created employment for a local woman who is in charge of trolleys and bicycles in the store. The scheme can more than halve the time it takes to deliver groceries to homes.

For many residents, bicycles are both a source of income and a means of transport within and beyond the township. Mgedle and others often travel more than 35km daily, risking traffic accidents and robbery. On one occasion, while attempting to steer clear of muggers, Mgedle was fined R2,000 for cycling on the highway.



The Langa Bicycle Hub has increased access to bicycles in Langa. Photo: Andrea Teagle

A platform for mobility and public spaces

Mobility is closely linked to public spaces. Inefficient transportation systems, dilapidated public infrastructure and a lack of safe spaces to socialise, play or gather in our townships are apartheid legacies that reinforce inequality. The lack of bicycle lanes, walkways and functional social and recreational spaces means that children, particularly, are constantly exposed to danger. Many children need to cross major roads and unsafe streets on their way to school. Improving existing infrastructure and considering “[school walking buses](#)”, which have been successful in other parts of Cape Town, are therefore crucial initiatives.

Mgedle believes that a mobility and public spaces platform, driven by Langa stakeholders, would be a promising mechanism for community improvement, particularly if it were linked to the [Active Mobility Forum](#) created by the City of Cape Town in 2022.

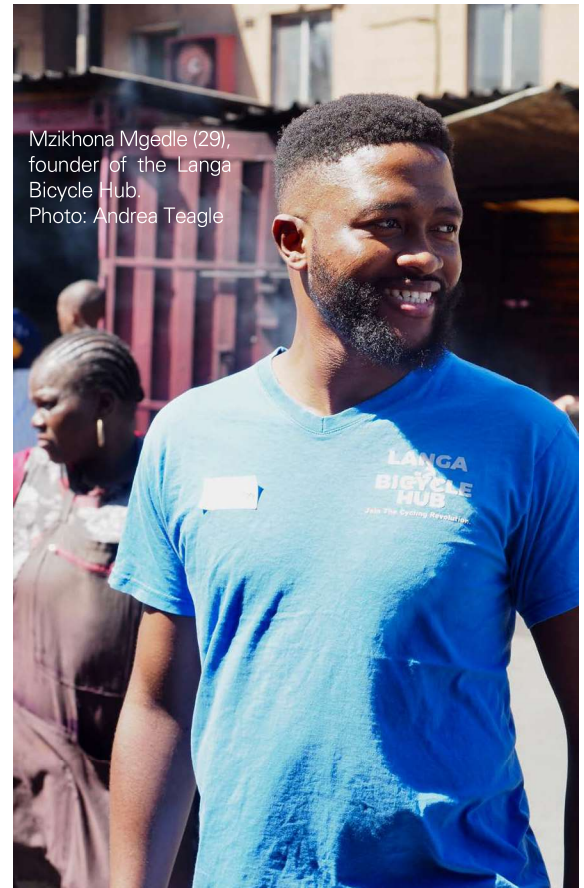
“Activism, local agency, networks and knowledge, provided through research, offer a great opportunity to really transform our township,” Mgedle says.

Building relationships to address mobility challenges

The mobility work that the HSRC is undertaking with the Langa Bicycle Hub falls under the Langa Turning 100 Project, which we [wrote about](#) in a previous *Review* article. The HSRC and Langa NGO iKhaya have embarked on a series of strategic community-based research activities to document the past and identify current challenges. As Langa moves into its next 100 years, the aim is to build collaborative relationships between HSRC scholars and local activists that enable transformative research.



Most Langa residents rely on taxis as their primary mode of transport.
Photo: Andrea Teagle



Mzikhona Mgedle (29), founder of the Langa Bicycle Hub.
Photo: Andrea Teagle

To explore these issues, Mgedle and his team have hosted workshops and walkabouts, reviewed literature on mobility forums in other contexts, and conducted small surveys to understand the mobility experiences of Langa’s most vulnerable residents, such as disabled elders.

Participants included park managers, transport experts, cycling enthusiasts, community activists, researchers and representatives of residents’ organisations working within the sector. Importantly, taxi operators were also included. They are often excluded from these difficult conversations, despite having been the backbone of transport in Langa for decades.

The power and challenges of community-based research

Prof Tim Stanton, a visiting scholar involved in the project, points out that researchers and their institutions are increasingly committing to [collaborative, equity-focused community development](#) and civic action through active, and often multilateral, community partnerships. By [working collaboratively](#) across differences, partners not only stand to benefit individually but can also – through discovering new ways of being and knowing – produce new value and/or systemic change.

The HSRC's Langa study is a pilot demonstration of the kind of collaborative, impactful scholarship the council wishes to undertake in township communities, Stanton says. A general challenge for community-engaged research is identifying and partnering with relevant community organisations.

Related [challenges](#) include identifying the role and community perception of the research partner, involving residents in the research project, and agreeing who "owns" the project and the data collected. In addition, the research partner needs to avoid being perceived as partisan to any one community group or point of view.

Researchers and their partners in Langa have historically grappled with [unequal power relations](#) and defining the researchers' role. However, local residents and change agents like Mgedle have indicated that this project, although brief, has yielded useful information for Langa's second century of development.

How Langa's future will unfold is in the hands of community actors. A foundation has been laid for continued, collaborative problem-solving and increased social impact. "The future of mobility belongs to all of us if we can imagine it collectively, design it transparently, and execute it inclusively," Mgedle says.



Participants at the Talking Streets Workshop, organised by the Langa Bicycle Hub and the HSRC, on 7 March 2023. Pictured: the HSRC's Diana Sanchez-Betancourt, the MEC for mobility in the Western Cape Ricardo Mackenzie (centre right) and Michael Ndiwalana (right). Photo: Andrea Teagle

This article is the second of a two-part series by Diana Sanchez-Betancourt, a senior researcher in the HSRC's Developmental, Capable and Ethical State division; Mzikhona Mgedle, the founding director of the Langa Bicycle Hub; Andrea Teagle, a science writer in the HSRC's Impact Centre; and Prof Timothy Stanton, the founding director of Stanford University's Overseas Studies in Cape Town.

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