

When users pay, roads improve: Case for tolling



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IN MANY countries, including Zambia, the expansion of the national tolling programme has generated debate. Some road users feel there are too many toll stations along key routes, perceiving them as both an inconvenience and an extra financial burden. While these concerns are understandable, it is important to view tolling through the broader lens of national development. Far from being an unnecessary obstacle, the programme delivers tangible, long-term benefits that outweigh short-term inconveniences.

One of the most significant benefits of a national tolling programme is its ability to generate sustainable, dedicated revenue for road infrastructure. Unlike general tax revenues, which must be shared among various national needs such as health, education, and security, toll revenues are specifically earmarked for road construction, rehabilitation, and maintenance.

This ensures that roads receive consistent investment

without relying solely on unpredictable budget allocations or foreign aid. Well-maintained roads reduce vehicle operating costs, shorten travel times and improve road safety. The programme creates a cycle in which users directly contribute to the upkeep of the infrastructure they depend on, leading to better quality roads over time.

In developing economies, government budgets are often stretched thin. By shifting part of the cost of road maintenance to toll revenues, the national budget is freed up for other critical sectors. This "user-pays" model ensures that those who benefit most from road

for the steady rollout of new roads and the timely upgrading of existing ones.

This is particularly important in regions where economic activity is growing quickly, as transport networks need to keep pace with trade, agriculture, and industrial expansion. By speeding up road development, tolling supports economic competitiveness both domestically and in cross-border trade.

Good roads are safe roads. Potholes, worn-out markings, and damaged guardrails contribute to accidents and fatalities. With toll revenues, authorities can invest in continuous maintenance,

Toll stations serve as strategic points that help regulate traffic flow. The presence of trained staff, surveillance cameras, and lighting at toll stations discourages criminal activity such as vehicle theft, illegal trafficking, and highway robberies.

In some cases, collaboration between tolling authorities and law enforcement allows stolen vehicles, contraband goods, or other illegal activities to be detected in transit. This makes tolling not only a revenue tool but also a contributor to public safety and national security.

Toll stations often create both direct and indirect economic opportunities for communities nearby. Direct jobs include toll collectors, security staff and maintenance personnel (General duties). Indirectly, surrounding shops, markets and service providers benefit from increased traffic.

Moreover, improved roads attract investment to rural areas, making it easier for farmers to transport produce to markets and for manufacturers to distribute goods. Over time, this can transform the

economic profile of regions once considered too remote for major investment.

The tolling programme spreads the cost of road upkeep among all who use the roads, including foreign trucks and transit traffic passing through our country. Without tolling, local taxpayers would shoulder most of the burden for road damage caused by heavy vehicles engaged in cross-border trade.

By charging all road users fairly, whether domestic or foreign, the tolling system ensures that the cost of maintaining infrastructure is distributed equitably. This is especially important for countries like Zambia, which serve as key transit corridors for regional trade.

Toll revenues can be reinvested into modernising road networks to reduce congestion and emissions. Well-maintained roads support smoother traffic flow, leading to lower fuel consumption and reduced vehicle wear and tear.

In some cases, toll funds also support the development of bypasses around congested

urban centers, improving air quality and reducing noise pollution in populated areas.

The national tolling programme often includes strict monitoring, reporting, and auditing processes. This transparency helps build public trust, as stakeholders can see exactly how toll revenues are collected and spent.

The accountability mechanisms in place reduce the risk of funds being diverted away from road projects, ensuring that contributions from road users directly improve the infrastructure they rely on.

Good roads are the backbone of national competitiveness. They lower transportation costs for businesses, make tourism more attractive, and strengthen the country's position as a regional trade hub. A strong road network enables faster delivery of goods, more efficient public transport, and better connectivity between urban and rural areas. Over time, the benefits to the economy far outweigh the initial inconvenience of passing through multiple toll stations.

While the presence of

many toll stations can feel inconvenient, the bigger picture tells a different story. A national tolling programme is not merely about collecting fees; it is about creating a self-sustaining system that keeps the country's road infrastructure in excellent condition, supports economic growth, enhances security, and ensures fairness in cost sharing.

By re-investing toll revenues into road development, maintenance, and safety measures, the programme guarantees that the very people who use the roads, transporters, and businesses enjoy better, safer, and more efficient travel. In the long run, the benefits of a national tolling programme far outweigh the inconveniences, making it an essential pillar of sustainable infrastructure development.

To learn more about the NRFA's operations, please visit the agency's official website at www.nrfa.org.zm or contact NRFA Customer Care Centre by dialling 700.

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infrastructure, drivers and transport operators, also play a direct role in funding it.

Without tolling, governments might have to rely on loans or higher taxes to fund road projects, leading to greater debt burdens or broad-based tax increases that affect even those who seldom use the roads.

A national tolling programme provides a predictable income stream, enabling the government to plan and execute road projects faster. Rather than waiting years for funding approval, toll revenues allow

regular resurfacing, and modern safety features such as road signage, lighting, and speed calming measures.

In addition, some key roads are equipped with weighbridges, ensuring that commercial vehicles do not exceed legal weight limits. This reduces road damage and the risk of accidents caused by overloaded vehicles, ultimately protecting both infrastructure and lives.

Security is another often-overlooked benefit of the National Tolling Programme.

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