

GHANA

The woman who built bikes out of bamboo

Bernice Dapaah turned giant grass into bicycles for rural Ghanaian students, saving hours of walking and creating green jobs.

WHERE	Kumasi, Ashanti Region
WHO	Bernice Dapaah, who builds bamboo bicycles in Ghana to help students reach school
WHEN	2009 to today

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

In rural Ghana, many children walk three hours each morning to reach school. They walk under the hot sun on dusty roads. By the time they sit down, they are tired. Many drop out before finishing their studies.

Bernice Dapaah knew this long walk well. She grew up near Kumasi with her grandfather. When she was small, she walked for miles each day. Then her grandfather gave her an old bicycle. It saved her hours and changed her life.

Stronger than steel

Bernice finished college in 2009. Most graduates looked for office jobs in the city. Bernice wanted to help rural students instead. She also wanted to give local young people steady work.

Metal bicycle frames were costly to import. But giant bamboo grew wild in the nearby forests. Bamboo is a fast-growing grass. It absorbs bumps on rough dirt roads better than metal. By weight, it is stronger than steel.

> **We wanted to come up with an idea that would also create employment for other youth.**
>
> BERNICE DAPAAH, QUOTED IN THE GUARDIAN

10	2009	3
new seedlings planted for each stalk cut	year the workshop started	hours saved on daily walks to school

Training young builders

People doubted the idea at first. Friends said grass could never carry a grown adult. But Bernice gathered young craftspeople and built her first working frame. The team treated the bamboo against insects and wrapped the joints in natural fiber.

The bikes turned out light, smooth and tough. Bernice set up workshops near Kumasi. She hired rural women and young people who had no other jobs. They learned to cut, shape and build each bike by hand. Over half the builders were young women.

Riding into the future

The team also cared for the land. For every bamboo stalk they cut, they planted 10 new seedlings. Bamboo grows quickly and holds soil together. It produces clean air and prevents erosion along riverbanks.

Through her school program, Bernice donated bikes to students in remote villages. Children who once walked three hours now ride in 30 minutes. Attendance rose, and grades went up. Families saved money, and girls stayed in school longer. A bike of grass had opened the road.

How it unfolded

- **1990s** Bernice walks miles each day to reach school until her grandfather buys her a bicycle.
- **2009** Bernice finishes college and starts building bamboo bicycle frames in Kumasi.
- **2013** The United Nations honors the initiative with a climate award.
- **Today** Workshops train local builders and supply bamboo bikes to students and riders worldwide.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Bamboo bikes are not a novelty here. They solve three real problems at once: long walks to school, rural unemployment, and plastic or metal waste.

For every bamboo plant harvested, the builders plant 10 more seedlings. The bikes heal the soil while carrying students to class.

OUR TAKE

You do not need rare materials from across the ocean. Look at what grows outside your door.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 Use what grows nearby

Bernice did not wait for imported steel. She built with fast-growing bamboo from nearby forests.

Try this: Solve one problem today using tools or items you already have at home.

2 Remember your own hurdles

Bernice remembered walking hours to school, so she built bikes for the next generation of students.

Try this: Reach out this week to someone facing a struggle you once overcame.

3 Give more than you take

For every single bamboo stalk cut down, her workshop plants 10 new seedlings.

Try this: When you finish a project, leave the space or system cleaner than you found it.

4 Train others to grow

Bernice trained rural women and young people to craft bikes by hand, giving them lifelong skills.

Try this: Spend twenty minutes this week teaching one useful skill to a teammate or neighbor.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

The humblest plant can carry the biggest dreams.

Sources

CNN
Bamboo bikes turn around fortunes for working women in Ghana (2014)

The Guardian
Ghana's bicycle which is creating jobs while it saves the soil (2015)

World Economic Forum
Bernice Dapaah - Young Global Leader profile

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the core facts and differ slightly on details. Timing: The initiative was founded in 2009 and registered as a social enterprise, winning UN and international awards starting in 2013. Plant ratio: CNN, The Guardian and UNFCCC confirm the policy of planting 10 bamboo seedlings for each stalk harvested. Childhood commute: Bernice's long walk to school as a child and her grandfather buying her a bicycle are reported in multiple interviews (including Goodnet and Royal Academy of Engineering profiles). The quote is from Bernice Dapaah speaking to The Guardian in 2015. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.