

Street auto mechanics: providing relief to the struggling motorists of Port Moresby

by Busa Jeremiah Wenogo

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Filling a gap – informal auto mechanics provide invaluable services to Port Moresby's motorists
(Credit: Busa Jeremiah Wenogo)

If you are a motorist who regularly drives around Port Moresby chances are that you would have come across a group plying their specialised trades along Croton Street. At first glance they may raise suspicion among onlookers and passersby because of the way they are dressed or how they conduct themselves. However careful analysis will reveal that this group of people provide an affordable and alternative automotive service to thousands of struggling vehicle owners in the city who can't afford to have their vehicle undergo regular and much needed service/checks by recognised automotive workshops, like Ela Motors and Boroko Motors. Getting to know these talented individuals, one would be surprised to hear their encounters with an array of clients, ranging from Members of Parliament, public servants, taxi and bus operators, down to your average motorists. The influx of cheap vehicles to the city means that these individuals play an important role in ensuring workers get to work, and school children are picked up and dropped off from school.

The services provided by this group range from attending to automotive mechanical repairs, automotive air conditioning, and tinting of car windows. Procurement of parts and other mechanical needs from nearby auto shop outlets means that minor work can be done within minutes, or an hour or so, depending on the diagnosis. While waiting you can share a joke or two, or even a smoke. Once the job is done, with the exchange of phone numbers you gain both a friend and a trusted personal auto mechanic.



These self-starters commonly referred to as “street auto mechanics” are a mixed bunch, comprising auto mechanics who turned their backs on their stable jobs because they were not earning enough to make ends meet in the city, and self-taught and graduate mechanics. Depending on the type of job and the customer, these street auto mechanics can fetch up to K300-K400 a day on average. If your vehicle runs out of air-conditioning, you can have it refilled in no time by one of the many “street motor vehicle air-conditioners”. This group of tradespeople are visibly seen standing along the pavement with gas cylinders and air pressure gauges hung on standing structures, usually nearby fences. For the price of K150 these guys can fill up your gas and attend to other related issues. For those motorists who don’t feel comfortable moving around with clear glass windows, you can always approach one of the many “window tinters” to fix your worries for a cost of K20 per window. They are usually mobile, but you can’t miss them given they are always seen with tinting film in their hands. The tinting film normally comes in different colours so if you are lucky, you can choose your preferred colour for your car windows.



While the services these street mechanics offer are a relief to struggling motor vehicle owners, first time customers must be wary of “con auto mechanics”, who are untrained and known for deceiving unsuspecting clients. Experience dictates that prospective clients must look beyond the ragged, stained clothes and grubby hands, which can be deceiving at times. Step out of the car and talk to them. Test their knowledge against what you know from your research to see if they know what they are talking about. Aside from this, check to see if the person you are talking to has his own tools. If he starts asking others for tools, watch out! You might just be dealing with a con. Only genuine auto mechanics will have all the tools they need for their work. Better still, speak to a friend who is familiar with their dealings so that they can recommend a genuine auto mechanic that they know.

Operating in a public place without proper recognition comes at a cost for these “street auto mechanics” and their colleagues who refill gas and tint car windows. Because they usually operate on the side of the road, they often fall victim to heavy handed tactics of the authorities, such as the Police. In such situations, they stand to lose money or their tools, and compromise their and their families’ survival for the next day or so. It is a precarious working environment for these men, and space to operate is a big concern. The National Capital District Commission (NCDC), or the National Government for that matter, should look at identifying a space where these “street auto mechanics” can operate. These are potential small- and medium-sized

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enterprises (SMEs). Street auto mechanics themselves should come together to form a union body or group to lobby the government for recognition of their services and to get assistance to use their talent and skills to become successful entrepreneurs in specialty areas.

Owning and operating a vehicle in the city is a seriously expensive exercise. Aside from the constant increases in the price of fuel, prices for automotive parts, from the most basic to the more specialised, are now becoming dearer. Yet, to ensure smooth and continuous operation of the vehicle, vehicle owners are left with no choice but to ensure that their vehicles are given the attention they deserve. At various stages in a vehicle's life there will come a time when the owner will have to dig deep into his/her pockets to get the vehicle into top gear again. When that time comes, at least for Port Moresby residents, a visit to one of the Croton Street "street auto mechanics" is a cost effective option.



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