Using the Power of a Public Opinion Poll + Digital Advocacy to Accelerate Road Safety Legislation in India

India Case Study / Dec. 2015

The Problem
The roads of India are a dangerous place. According to the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) most recent Global Status Report for Road Safety, more than 200,000 people were killed in road crashes in India in 2013. Five million are estimated to have become disabled in the last decade and approximately 500,000 are injured each year. This crisis continues to drain the country of three percent of its GDP annually, and the problem is so severe that the Supreme Court of India has declared road crashes a National Emergency.

Since 2013, the SaveLIFE Foundation (SLF), an organisation focused on improving road safety and emergency care across India, has worked to pressure policy makers to develop a comprehensive road safety law that would provide safer streets for drivers and pedestrians. India’s current omnibus law, the Motor Vehicles Act of 1988, has many shortcomings; in its most recent report the WHO evaluated the law based on five risk factors – enforcing speed limits, prevention of drunk driving, safety of children, use of seat belts and helmets – and found it lacking in four out of those five areas.

The Policy Challenge
Given the deficiencies of the Motor Vehicles Act of 1988, the organisation implemented a strategy to advocate for comprehensive road safety legislation in 2013. At the time, most organizations were

Survey shows people wary of unsafe roads

By Mall Today Barcena in New Delhi

There is little uncertainty over the obvious: India has a chronic problem of road safety. A recent survey by the SaveLIFE Foundation in New Delhi found that 95 per cent of drivers believe that increased enforcement of traffic violations will improve road safety, while 98 per cent of residents believe that increased enforcement of seat belt use during commutes. About 90 per cent respondents believe that the road is more than a lane.

Unsafe Indian roads are a matter of concern for three out of five people, shocking and 90 per cent favour forming a Bill. In the past decade, more than 1.4 million people have been killed in road accidents in India. The legislation to give safe roads to people is long overdue. Without a comprehensive Bill, the road is just a lane.

According to the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) most recent Global Status Report for Road Safety, more than two million people were killed in road crashes in India in 2014.
advocating to amend the Motor Vehicles Act of 1988, but SLF focused on bringing attention to the need for a more comprehensive law. By late 2014, the organization had convinced policy makers to introduce omnibus road safety legislation and they invited SLF to help draft it.

While drafting of the bill represented major progress, policy maker support and subsequent passage in Parliament remained uncertain. SLF believed they had public opinion on their side, but they needed a credible way to demonstrate that support to Parliament and sway Parliamentarians to support this legislation, which was much stronger than the previous law. With the legislation at a critical juncture, SLF strategized about how they could measure public opinion and use it to keep pressure on policy makers to vote the bills into law.

**The Tactics**

SLF decided to conduct a public opinion poll to help rally support for the legislation in Parliament. Public opinion polls, or surveys, include carefully designed questions to the public, or segments of the public, with the answers intended to measure the opinions of a population. To be credible, polls must be carried out in a neutral and unbiased way, preferably by an independent third party. When implemented in this way and disseminated effectively, they can produce data that is very powerful in swaying decision makers.

Save Life Foundation created a range of infographics to highlight the poll results on social media.

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**Respondents strongly favor the road safety provisions in the Road Transport and Safety Bill, 2014**

81%
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New Delhi, December 3rd, 2014 – In a poll jointly commissioned by SaveLIFE Foundation and the Global Road Safety Partnership (a hosted project of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies), with support from Bloomberg Philanthropies, the general public has expressed strong support for the Road Transport and Safety Bill, 2014. The report titled, “Road Transport & Safety Bill 2014: Public Satisfaction Survey” was released earlier today by former Union Home Secretary Mr. G.K. Pillai in the presence of several families affected by road accidents. The Poll conducted by international research agency Kadence Research covered 12 cities with a total of 38% respondents belonging to rural touchpoints.

81% of all respondents “strongly favor” passing of the proposed road safety Bill and 90% believe that passing the Bill will be an important accomplishment for the Indian Parliament.

In the past decade, more than 12 lakh people have been killed in road crashes in India. This translates to over 380 deaths a day, equivalent to a jumbo jet crash. Survey findings also revealed that 3 out of 5 respondents feel unsafe while travelling on Indian roads as drivers, pedestrians or passengers.

In addition to showing overall support for the Bill, 96% of the respondents also favor several specific provisions in the Bill. These include making it mandatory for all drivers to be trained before getting a license, protection for children during commute, increased electronic enforcement and heavy penalties for not complying with traffic laws, and making it mandatory for all two wheeler riders to wear helmets.

Mr. G.K. Pillai, Trustee of SaveLIFE Foundation stated that, “India’s sole road safety law, the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, has not been able to keep pace with the exponential growth of motor vehicles in the last two decades and consequent increase in road fatalities. It is time that India gets a road safety law which is comprehensive, inclusive, protects Vulnerable Road Users and provides a structured approach to Road Safety”.

The press release Save Life Foundation released to launch the poll results

Poll shows overwhelming public support for new Road Safety Bill

81% respondents strongly favor the passage of the Bill. 90% believe passing the Bill will be a major accomplishment for Parliament.

Key highlights
- Protection for children during commute: 97% of respondents said they would favor protection for children during commute in the new law.
- Reforming Regional Transport Offices: 96% of respondents say they favor reforming RTOs to make it easier, more efficient and corruption-free to obtain a driver’s license.
- Increasing penalties: 91% of respondents believe that increased penalties for road safety violations will improve road safety

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Survey findings indicate that 3 out of 5 respondents currently felt unsafe while travelling on Indian roads. The results show strong public support for the bill, with 81% of all respondents “strongly favoring” passage of the proposed road safety Bill and 90% indicating they believe that the Bill’s passage would be an important accomplishment for the Indian Parliament. In addition to expressing overall support, 98% of the respondents also favor several specific provisions in the Bill – including mandatory training for all drivers, protection for children during commutes, increased electronic enforcement and heavy penalties for not complying with traffic laws, and mandatory helmets for all two wheeler riders.

Based on the analysis of the data, SLF packaged and disseminated the results widely. First, they created infographics that summarized the report, drafted press releases that showcased the results in a compelling way, and developed social media messages that specifically targeted policy makers and influencers as well as the general public. They then used the SLF website, Facebook, and twitter to disseminate those materials and messages. On Twitter, they used the hashtag #roadsafetybill, and at the SLF website, users could share the poll results through more than 30 apps and social media platforms.

Through this campaign, millions of people – including key target Parliamentarians and influencers – mobilized around the draft of the new road safety bill. In addition to giving supportive policy makers the evidence they needed to publicly champion the bill, the survey also allowed SLF to advocate with the opposition by demonstrating the public’s clear support for the issue.

SLF timed their poll – the “Public Satisfaction Survey” – to coincide with the public release of the initial draft of the Bill, while it was waiting to be introduced into Parliament.
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The Wrap-Up
The clear facts and statistics about widespread public support for the new legislation, presented through the polling and dissemination process, helped to assure policy makers that they were making an informed decision in moving the bill forward. SLF plans to conduct additional polls in the future to build the evidence base for their advocacy efforts.

In April 2015, the Transport Ministry released a diluted draft of the original Bill, based on some internal opposition to the strong language in the draft. However, SLF and many other road safety advocates, reacted strongly to that weaker version with vocal public protests. As a result, the Bill was taken back by the Transport Ministry for re-drafting and improvements. The new version, likely to be released during this session of Parliament, is expected to be much closer to the earlier draft that was demonstrated by the poll to have the strongest public support.