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# Road safety: the global health issue that's been ignored for too long



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In countries like Vietnam and India, unique incentives – along with fines – are encouraging safer behavior for drivers and pedestrians alike

**Sue George**

Globally, road injuries are the top cause of death among people ages 15 to 29 – claiming upwards of a million lives a year. What's more, 90% (pdf) of the world's road deaths and serious injuries take place in low and middle-income countries, according to the United Nations (UN).

This global health emergency is finally starting to get the attention it deserves. We're in the midst of the UN's Decade of Action for Road Safety, which lasts until 2020; and in April, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution to improve road safety.

But Dr Kelly Henning, leader of the Bloomberg Global Road Safety Program at Bloomberg Philanthropies, says there are two primary challenges to reducing road fatalities. First, despite recent efforts to raise the profile of road safety, the issue isn't broadly appreciated. Second, progress requires several sections of government to work together. As she notes: "It is about health, but also involves [action from] traffic police and road engineers, so it requires a lot of political attention."

This isn't new or surprising information. Back in 1998, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) pointed out the importance of global road safety. Recognizing that cooperative efforts must stretch beyond those between nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the IFRC, the World Bank and the UK government's Department for International Development created the Global Road Safety Partnership (GRSP) one year later.

"There needs to be a partnership between governments, civil society and the private sector," says Dave Elseroad, the Global Advocacy and Grants Programme manager at the GRSP, hosted by the IFRC. "Many large corporations are good at road safety – they may have large fleets [of vehicles], [and] know about moving goods and services. The government has an important role in legislating; civil society is important, too, in ensuring road safety."

Elseroad points to specific measures that can alter road users' behavior and make things safer. Beyond seatbelt laws for front and rear seats, he notes that appropriate speed limits based on road usage – like when cars, buses, donkey carts, bicycles and pedestrians all share the same space – are crucial.

Also key: actually carrying out the law. Vietnam, for instance, successfully reduced its rates of death and serious injuries due to stronger enforcement of motorcycle helmet legislation. In 2007, the country was no stranger to traffic safety issues: roadway accidents killed about 14,000 residents, with 60% of those being motorcycle riders.

As described in *Millions Saved: New Cases of Proven Success in Global Health*, Vietnam's motorcycle helmet laws, including a heavy fine for nonwearers that would cost a rider more than the price of a helmet, were introduced that same year. Prior to the legislation, few people wore them – and afterward, usage skyrocketed. What else helped spur use? A public awareness campaign, the creation of headgear more suitable for tropical climates and free helmets for children.

When Vietnamese police began to strictly enforce the new laws, the number of helmet wearers increased and the number of head injuries after accidents decreased. In just three months, according to data sampled from 20 hospitals around Hanoi, there was an 18% reduction in rates of death and serious injury – with 1,557 lives saved and 2,495 severe injuries prevented. By 2009, helmet use doubled to 95% of riders, according to a recent report by Bloomberg Philanthropies, and remains at more than 90% today.

Other ongoing programs include those in Mumbai, India, where a range of road safety improvements are under way. The city was one of 10 selected in 2015 to receive funding and support from Bloomberg Philanthropies to improve road safety. Mumbai is also taking stricter action on traffic violations, thanks to a government resolution issued 31 December 2015.

Today, Africa has one of the highest rates (pdf) of road deaths, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). To that end, the NGO Amend uses customized programs to improve road safety in 12 nations across the continent. Amend's executive director, Jeffrey Witte, says the organization has gotten results with seemingly small interventions, such as using reflectors on school bags.

"Children who are more visible are less likely to be hit," Witte says. "We sell [the bags] at cost and work with partners who buy them – perhaps adding a logo – and give them away." Some 75,000 of the sacks have been distributed in 10 countries: Tanzania, Ghana, Senegal, Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique, Botswana, Malawi, Namibia and Zambia. But scaling up has so far not proved possible, Witte admits.

Despite challenges and drawbacks, road safety continues to improve all over the globe. "We know what works. It's a matter of having the political will and getting on with it," Elseroad says. As Henning puts it: "We are starting to see momentum."

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