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How the United Nations can contribute to road safety

Transmitted by the FIA Foundation

Introduction

Over the last quarter century motor vehicle traffic has more than doubled and is forecast to grow even more. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) motor vehicle kilometres are expected to increase in the industrialised countries by 40% by 2020 – and across the world as a whole by 86% over the same period. The extraordinary popularity of motor vehicles (cars, trucks and motorbikes) has ensured their place as a defining technology of the twentieth century. They remain unchallenged as the transport choice of millions providing positive benefits to society in terms of personal mobility and economic development.

Today, however, as we begin a second century of motorised transport, we face the significant challenge of responding to the adverse societal impact of motor vehicles caused by pollution and road traffic injuries. The environmental challenge is already well understood and a broad range of policy measures are being applied to reduce vehicle emissions and pollution. The UN, for example, has already established a Global Initiative on Transport Emissions involving the World Bank and United Nations Environment Programme. But, in contrast, road traffic injuries have not been given a similar degree of attention by the international community. For example, it was not mentioned even once in the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development agreed in Johannesburg in September 2002.

And yet today road traffic accidents are killing more than a million people annually and causing many more serious injuries. Developing countries account for over 80% of these road traffic deaths and injuries worldwide at an economic cost of at least US\$70 billion. As levels of motorisation rise across the world's regions it is certain that death and injury rates will grow also. The World Health Organisation (WHO), for example, forecasts that road traffic injuries will have climbed from ninth to third place in the global disease burden by 2020.

Action to reduce this dramatic rise in casualties should now be a significant priority for the UN, particularly since experience from the industrialized countries shows that many road traffic deaths and injuries are preventable. The WHO's dire forecasts can be avoided if governments and the UN act now to anticipate the safety implications of the inevitable growth in road traffic. But road safety is still largely ignored by the international community and the UN lacks a mandate for clear action. Why is this?

Why is Road Safety Ignored?

Most of the time road traffic deaths and injuries remain almost invisible to society at large. Hundreds of thousands of traffic accidents, remain scattered individual events, tragic to those involved, but not newsworthy; unlike train or aircraft crashes, which, in contrast, are almost always treated as sensational media events. That is why the daily burden of road traffic deaths and injuries are all too easily overlooked. But there are other even more important reasons why road safety is ignored.

Firstly, people want mobility, but the level of safety that should be available to support the transport system is frequently treated as a secondary issue by both user and producer alike. As a result safety requirements are often literally an afterthought and not integrated into the design of our road transport systems.

Secondly, road safety is a multi-disciplinary challenge that requires a high level of co-ordination between different stakeholders. Transport planners, medical services, police, engineers, teachers, and a variety of industries all have a role to play in road safety. All these groups need to be involved in defining prevention strategies that are both cost effective and politically feasible. This is not an easy task for governments and policymakers.

Thirdly, the road user is often viewed as at fault for being involved in a crash, or simply a victim of fate. Blaming the victim, however, is an attitude that can easily discourage investigation and action to develop measures that can make crashes less likely and their consequences less severe.

Fourthly, there is a persistent failure to locate proper responsibility for road safety at national and international levels. In contrast to other transport modes, such as aviation, responsibility for safety on the road is highly diffused among very different agencies and decision-making centres. This lack of responsibility inhibits the development of road safety management strategies that need to be applied both within countries and at a world level.

Promoting a 'Systems' Approach to Road Safety

The failure to allocate responsibility for road safety within public authorities is also partly explained by traditional thinking about accident causation. Early approaches to road safety tended to concentrate on the road user (both drivers and pedestrians) as the primary source of error resulting in accidents. Responsibility, therefore, rested with the individual and the government's role was limited to trying to minimise driver mistakes through a combination of training and rule enforcement.

In recent years, however, a more advanced approach to road safety management has been developed. This recognises that, the driver, the vehicle and infrastructure are three components of a **dynamic** system. Within this system safety is a **shared** responsibility. The "systems" approach thus seeks to identify **all** sources of error contributing to vehicle crashes. It offers the potential to uncover systemic weaknesses that are dormant within the system and the design of countermeasures that can mitigate the consequences of crashes. It also recognises that a degree of road user error is inevitable and should be 'tolerated' by making the system as a whole more 'forgiving'.

In order to reap the rewards of a systems approach, however, a better organisation of responsibility for road safety is required. There is considerable potential, for example, in using the concept of the '**lead agency**' to better co-ordinate prevention strategies at the country level. But what is desirable at national level is also needed at the international level. However, as the Johannesburg Summit demonstrates, road safety remains unrecognised as an important contributor to the goal of sustainable development. This lack of a well-defined mandate is a major reason why today there is no systematic effort to develop a coherent global road safety action programme.

That is why the FIA Foundation now believes that it would be useful for the United Nations to undertake a review of its current road safety activities at a world level.

Global Road Safety – Who Does What?

Searching for road safety among the programmes of the UN Economic and Social Council need not take very long. A programme for road safety does not exist. Looking for specialised agencies dedicated to road safety, like those established for maritime and aviation safety (the International Maritime Organisation & the International Civil Aviation Organisation), will also prove disappointing. No such agency exists. However, with perseverance one finds a range of road safety related activities that are already being undertaken by United Nations agencies and other multilateral institutions. The problem is that these activities are so deeply embedded (usually in sub-sectors of transport divisions), that the real world importance of road safety remains almost totally ignored by the international community.

The following is a brief survey of those UN agencies and other international bodies that are the most active in road safety at an international level.

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)

The UNECE, one of five UN regional bodies, has 55 member countries mainly from Europe, but also including Canada and the USA. Its Inland Transport Committee plays a major role in international road safety through the following important working parties:

- **Working Party on Road Traffic Safety (WP.1)**

WP1 deals with a wide range of traffic safety issues and is responsible for updating legal instruments such as the 1968 Vienna Conventions on Road Signs and Signals, and Road Traffic. It also collects statistical data and monitors national road safety policies of its members. Periodically it promotes a region-wide road safety week (the fourth week being planned from 5 April 2004).

- **World Forum for Harmonisation of Vehicle Regulations (WP.29)**

WP.29 has been developing vehicle regulations dealing with safety and the environment under two international agreements adopted in 1958 and 1998. The 1998 agreement established the Global Forum with a membership extending beyond European countries to include, for example, Australia, China, Japan, Korea, South Africa and the USA. It seeks agreement on common vehicle technical regulations including key aspects of vehicle safety such as crash test standards and design requirements for seat belts etc. Work is also currently underway on the key topic of pedestrian protection.

The World Health Organisation (WHO)

The WHO's Department of Injuries and Prevention has recently promoted road safety as a major area of work. It has adopted a 5 year strategy for Road Traffic Injury Prevention and is implementing this in several pilot countries. The WHO has also designated World Health Day 7 April 2004 to the theme of road safety and is preparing the World Report on Road Traffic Injury Prevention.

The World Bank

The Transport Sector of the World Bank includes a Roads & Highways Group that is responsible for road safety. Some 14% of total Bank lending is for transport and 60% of this amount is on highways and rural roads. The Bank is, therefore, a significant source of funding for road investment. It has a strong interest in road safety and helped to launch the Global Road Safety Partnership (see below) through its Business Partners for Development programme.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

On behalf of its membership of 30 industrialised nations the OECD Transport Directorate carries out policy analysis on a range of roads safety issues. Within its Road Transport Research programme it publishes reports on best practice found within its member states. It also supports the International Road Traffic Accident Database (IRTAD) which records accident data supplied by OECD members.

The European Conference of Ministers of Transport (ECMT)

This annual Ministerial Conference brings together 43 European countries and 6 Associate Members (Australia, Canada, Japan, Korea, New Zealand and the United States). Over the last fifty years the ECMT has provided policy recommendations and reports on a wide range of transport issues, and has a working group on road safety. It publishes reports, collects data, and organises round table meetings for its member states.

The Global Road Safety Partnership (GRSP)

The GRSP was established by the World Bank to create a partnership between business, government, and civil society to promote road safety. It has adopted ten focus countries in which the GRSP facilitates implementation of a range of road safety projects. It is not a funding agency but brings together some key donor agencies including governments and the World Bank, NGOs, and private sector companies. It also publishes policy reports and advice on road safety topics.

Association Mondiale de la Route (AIPCR)

The AIPCR (World Road Association) was established in 1909 to facilitate international co-operation in road engineering, road policy and network management. Its 22nd quadrennial World Road Congress will be held in South Africa in October this year. Road safety is included within its 'Strategic Themes' and managed by a Technical Committee. Its work includes safety audits, road design standards, enforcement, user behaviour and education. AIPCR has 105 affiliates from 130 countries.

Similar activities can be found in some parts of the multilateral system, particularly in transport divisions of the other UN regional bodies and in some of the regional development banks. For example the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) has developed 'Guidelines on Road Safety Action Plans' and the Asian Development Bank has a number of important road safety projects particularly in China. A range of other NGOs also contribute to road safety, particularly at a country level.

Is This an Adequate Response to the Road Safety Challenge?

From this brief review of international road safety activities it is clear that these efforts are of high quality and valuable. However, the FIA Foundation believes that taken together they do not represent action on a scale that is sufficient to tackle the rising tide of road traffic deaths and injuries worldwide. The Foundation would suggest that:

- **Road safety actions are most intensive in the industrialized countries, especially Europe. This effort should now be extended to newly industrialised and developing countries.**

Transport Ministers in the European Union (EU), for example, already benefiting from relatively well-resourced national transport systems and from participation in the EU's own common transport policy, will also be involved in the UNECE traffic conventions and vehicle standards. They will also benefit from policy research and recommendations from the OECD and the ECMT. At least partially as a result of these actions over the last twenty years road traffic deaths and injuries in Western Europe have significantly declined.

Transport Ministers from developing countries, in contrast, have almost no equivalent fora or decision-making bodies to turn to for advice or regulatory standards. At best they may have access to World Bank transport project lending, and some advice from the WHO and the GRSP. Currently the UN regional bodies do not provide anything like the level of activity that Europe enjoys with the UNECE. Of course, national resources for road safety in developing countries are usually very limited. Meanwhile road traffic deaths and injuries continue to rise rapidly.

- **Current international road safety efforts are poorly coordinated.**

There is no single focus for international road safety activities. No individual ministerial meeting and no internationally agreed reference points or accepted goals. Mechanisms for inter-agency and regional cooperation remain weak. Overall the UN systems greatest effort in the field of road safety remains almost exclusively concentrated in the important regulatory activity of the UNECE. However, at present this primarily benefits industrialised countries or countries in transition from the European region.

- **The United Nations could do much more to help governments avoid, or at least mitigate, the predicted rise in road traffic fatalities and injuries.**

Given the rapid levels of motorisation now occurring in many regions of the developing world the forecasts by the WHO of a substantial rise in road traffic deaths and injuries seem highly plausible. Experience from the industrialised countries, particularly after their periods of growing motorisation, demonstrate that it is possible to develop countermeasures that will reduce fatality and injury rates and promote road safety. At the international level, however, more needs to be done to provide leadership to countries to develop effective road safety action programmes.

A New United Nations Initiative on Global Road Safety?

The FIA Foundation believes that now is the right time for the United Nations to consider a new international initiative on road safety. We believe that the starting point should be the adoption of a global 'lead agency' for road safety. Such an approach works well at national level and could also be influential at the international level. Creating a 'lead agency' would not require substantial new funds or bureaucracy, but rather seek to make better use of existing resources and institutions to promote global road safety. Better co-ordination will bring its own rewards.

A 'lead agency' could have the following tasks:

- Promote best practice in road safety 'systems' management with an emphasis on cost effective strategies designed to meet the varying needs of developing countries and regions;
- Bring together the multi-disciplinary skills and expertise of the relevant multilateral agencies such as the UNECE, World Bank, WHO, and the GRSP;
- Co-ordinate common systems for national road traffic injury data collection and dissemination with national lead agencies;

- Promote evidence based road safety policy research;
- Establish targets and benchmarks at country level with national lead agencies.

A lead agency could also provide a much needed political focus for road safety. Accepting responsibility for road safety requires political decision and action.

At present Ministers of Transport, or Health almost never meet to discuss road safety. In this sense the current efforts to promote road safety by multilateral agencies operate in a political vacuum. A lead agency could, however, provide a focus for political direction perhaps through periodic joint meetings of Ministers of Transport and Health. Such meetings could result in internationally agreed goals to stimulate national road safety activities. An example at the European level was the 1999 London Ministerial Conference (organised by the UNECE and WHO Regional Office for Europe) which adopted the Charter on Transport, Environment and Health. A follow-up conference is planned to be held in Budapest on the 23rd–25th June 2004. Once again this exclusively European process warrants extension to a global level.

A lead agency may also be able to integrate road safety issues into other policy areas. There is certainly potential to encourage synergies between transport and environmental policies. For example, demand management measures to ease congestion and to promote fuel economy, will also tend to reduce speed and the number of crashes. The trend towards environmental audits of major road transport infrastructure investments could be also supplemented with similar safety assessments.

Possible Options for a Lead Agency

There are a number of options as to how the ‘lead agency’ concept could be applied. Possible approaches include:

- **A United Nations Interagency Taskforce**

In the past the UN has used the creation of Interagency Taskforces to give focus to areas of policy that require fresh impetus and direction. Given the multidisciplinary nature of road safety management, a taskforce would have the added benefit of drawing together the different skills available within the multilateral agencies; for example, the infrastructure and planning experience of the World Bank, the public health dimension provided by the WHO, and the technical and traffic regulatory expertise of the UNECE. It could also encourage participation from other specialised agencies, such as UNICEF and the UNDP which currently do not have an active involvement in road safety.

- **A Global Role for the UNECE Working Party on Road Traffic Safety**

An alternative to a Taskforce would be to extend the mandate of the Working Party on Road Traffic Safety (WP1) of the UNECE to a global level. A clear precedent for this already exists since 1998 when the Global Forum for Harmonisation of Vehicle Regulations was established. The Global Forum is already working at a world level with participation drawn from beyond the usual membership of the UNECE. In parallel it could be possible to draw up a new agreement to establish a ‘Global Forum for Road Safety’, building on WP1s existing work on road traffic conventions. The UNECE would also be well placed to work more closely with its sister UN regional bodies (UNESCAP, ECLAC, UNECA, and ESCWA). This would be important to ensure regional priorities are strongly included in any global road safety action plan.

- **An International Mandate for the ECMT**

Another possibility would be to open worldwide the membership of the current European Conference of Ministers of Transport transforming it from the ECMT to an 'ICMT'. The international ministerial conference could then begin to carry out the 'lead agency' role described above, working in partnership with the UN and its specialised agencies. The ECMT, like the UNECE, is currently reappraising its role in Europe as enlargement of the European Union increasingly transfers transport policy competence to the European Commission. There is clearly an opportunity, therefore, to reallocate some traditional ECMT activities to a more global context in partnership with the UN. These are just three options. Others may have different proposals and it could be possible to blend elements of these suggestions together. The ECMT and the UNECE, for example, already have a history of close co-operation and could combine their efforts at a global level quite successfully. For the FIA Foundation the location of a 'lead agency' is a secondary issue. The main issue is to recognise that road safety deserves this degree of concentrated attention, and that the UN is best placed to provide the required leadership.

Conclusion

The FIA Foundation believes that the UN through its existing regulatory activities undertaken by the UNECE, already has the authority to play a leading role in global road safety. It should, therefore, grasp the initiative to create an international 'lead agency' on road safety. This would provide a co-ordinated response to the challenge of global road safety, by making better use of existing multilateral structures and budgets to promote best practices and the application of a 'systems' approach to traffic safety management at both country and world levels.

A 'lead agency' is needed now to ensure that road safety no longer remains invisible but becomes an important part of the international community's efforts to promote sustainable development. Above all it is needed now to anticipate a significantly preventable rise in death and serious injuries on the world's roads in the decades ahead.
