

Speech by Dr Stephen Ladyman MP
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FIA Foundation Dinner for the United Nations Road Safety Collaboration

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The scale of the worldwide road safety problem is hard to overestimate.

It has been predicted that by 2020, road accidents could overtake HIV and tuberculosis to rank third in the causes of premature death and disability around the world.

Every year well over 1 million people die in road crashes worldwide. Up to 50 million are injured or disabled. And, here in the UK about 3,200 people still die each and every year. Yet most of these fatalities and injuries are preventable.

So I welcome the important work that is now being done by the FIA Foundation, the World Health Organisation, the World Bank and the Global Road Safety Partnership.

Sharing good practice with other governments and organisations is vital if we are to reduce deaths and casualties around the world.

In the UK, safety underpins all our policies.

At the Department for Transport, we are trying to create safe, comfortable travelling environments that add to people's sense of well being.

But we also have a duty to prevent injuries and deaths through a process of education.

That applies for all modes of transport, but particularly for road travel.

A recent survey revealed that Britons spend an average of seven and a half hours a week in their cars.

That's equivalent to spending over two and a half years behind the wheel in an average lifetime.

It's a statistic that puts into perspective the importance of ensuring people travel safely and responsibly while on the road.

As new ideas and technology have emerged, so our road safety strategy has evolved. This is why we are able to boast some of the safest roads in the world.

But new initiatives are not always well received. You only have to think back to the days when people complained about the introduction of seatbelts and motorbike helmets.

They were presented as severe infringements of personal liberty – but today, nobody in their right mind gets into a car without putting on a seatbelt.

And some of you will remember the introduction of the breathalyser - that was tantamount to the arrival of Big Brother!

But the vast majority of motorists now agree that anyone who's caught driving while drunk should be prosecuted.

Now our task is to change attitudes to speeding in the same way.

And one of the ways we're addressing the problem is through the use of safety cameras.

Safety cameras have only one purpose – and it isn't anything to do with raising money – it's about saving lives and reducing casualties at known accident hotspots.

I'd be very happy if we never raised a penny from cameras – because it would mean everyone was travelling at the appropriate speed – and saving lives as a consequence!

But the point I want to make is this: When you start to introduce policies that are proven to improve road safety, it's unlikely that every driver's going to support you.

You learn quickly that you need to be strong, determined, and patient - if you want to see your policies gain broad acceptance from road users.

That is why I understand why some governments have balked at the prospect of introducing potentially unpopular legislation.

But the more that road safety policies are seen to work, the easier it will be to start cutting road deaths across the world.

However, legislating to reduce road accidents is only half the battle.

To improve road safety, you also need to win over the hearts and minds of ordinary people and change their attitudes.

So it's essential to educate people.

As you know, the THINK! publicity campaign plays a crucial role in getting road safety messages across to the British people.

The campaign's TV ads are among the most memorable of recent years - they are simple but stark and they have been instrumental in making our roads safer.

And they encapsulate the message so concisely and powerfully they have since been adapted for use in France and Ghana.

Education plays a key role in achieving road safety objectives – and so does engineering safety into roads.

And it doesn't come cheap. For example, local authorities in England spend around £90million annually on road safety engineering schemes.

Unfortunately most developing countries simply don't have equivalent sums of money for road safety. There are just too many other pressing needs.

But that doesn't mean they can't improve road safety.

For example, in countries where mobile phone networks are just becoming established - there's an opportunity to legislate on hands free use while driving - rather than enforce legislation retrospectively.

This is just one small way that we can share good practice and show support to road legislators in developing countries.

But as their road networks evolve - particularly those with rapidly growing economies - there is worrying evidence that accidents will soar.

In fact, the World Health Organisation predicts that with growing industrialisation, road deaths and casualties could go up by 65%.

But as our record shows, you don't have to accept rising death tolls as an inevitable consequence of economic success.

And it's now vital we pass on our accumulated knowledge to benefit others.

And I'm glad to say that the UK is already an active player in this respect. Many countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the USA have built on our principles of a Road Safety Audit.

The UK is also helping developing countries to improve their road safety record by working through organisations like PIARC - the World Road Association.

And we're also collaborating with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to highlight road safety best practice.

Sharing solutions across the world is vital. And only by working in partnership – both domestically and internationally - can we make roads safer for everyone.

The work of the FIA Foundation, and others, in raising awareness of the problem and galvanising action, is to be applauded. Who knows the number of lives that may be saved by the efforts of everyone here today.

So my congratulations to the FIA Foundation on the very deserving Prince Michael Road Safety Award it is going to receive tonight and remember this - on average just while we sit here tonight enjoying ourselves another person will have died on the roads of the UK and about 20 will have died around the world.

Thank you.