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Would you let your child or grandchild take a route to school which involved walking straight across the A3 or the M42? Or would you be willing to walk at night along an unlit road with tired, maybe drunk, truck drivers speeding up behind you in a version of Russian Roulette with wheels? No, and nor me. But both these scenarios are commonplace in many parts of the developing world, and part of the reason for the astonishing toll of death and injury caused by road traffic collisions.

More than 1.2 million people are killed and up to 10 million seriously injured every year on the world’s roads – a life-changing event every six seconds. And as motorisation and urbanisation both rapidly increase in the new powerhouse economies of the BRICs, and in fast developing Asia, Africa and South America, the casualty rate is only set to rise. Yet one of the most obvious solutions, safer road design, is often not implemented. It is an area of policy and expertise in which the World Bank can be both an expert leader and motivator, but also sometimes is slow to provide the true leadership that is so desperately needed.

Ten years ago, when I agreed to chair a new independent Commission for Global Road Safety to promote a stronger international response to this appalling carnage, policymakers could be excused for not having safe road infrastructure on their radar. Today there is no such excuse. The work that our Commission did, in partnership with many other actors, to raise road safety higher on the policy agenda has seen to that. Through the Commission for Global Road Safety’s reports and ‘Make Roads Safe’ advocacy campaign, we played a key role in achieving several UN General Assembly resolutions; a million name petition to the UN Secretary General; a first ever Global Ministerial Conference (hosted by the Russian Government); and the proclamation of a United Nations Decade of Action for Road Safety. This year, we are close to securing a stand-alone target for road safety in the new Sustainable Development Goals, a true coming-of-age for road traffic injury prevention as an issue of international development and public health.

From the first, our Commission deliberately focused on improving the safety of road infrastructure design as one the core messages of the campaign. Billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money and aid from many donor countries were and still are being spent on building new roads or ‘upgrading’ existing roads in developing countries with an emphasis on economic development, easing trade bottlenecks, and delivering faster travel times for motorised vehicles. An unintended side effect of this dash for growth is the often fatal consequence for people driving on faster, metalled roads in unsafe vehicles with little driver
training, and even more danger for the communities through which these roads pass. An
agenda designed by country elites, aided by well-meaning development advisors, all used to
seeing the world from their limousines or Land Rovers, has often resulted in a shortage of
empathy for the experience of those left standing at the roadside. Vulnerable road users,
predominantly pedestrians, account for around half of global road fatalities. Children are
among the most at risk.

Inevitably, a new road attracts new businesses, new factories, and the people needed to work
in them. The factories will often be built with little planning regulation, and the workers will
often travel from distance in overcrowded minibus taxis or walk along high-speed roads with
no footpaths or crossings. The workers attract roadside vendors and need to build new shanty
housing close to their place of employment. So a fast road designed for virgin land becomes a
fast road surrounded by, and utterly unsuited for, teeming humanity. Therefore, the injuries
increase.

What can be done? The first step is to recognise and understand the issue. In 2008 we
convened a conference at the European Bank for Reconstruction & Development in London,
which brought together for the first time all the major multilateral development banks
(MDBs) to discuss safe road infrastructure. Our Commission had urged the MDBs to ensure
that at least 10% of their road infrastructure expenditure be earmarked for road safety, a
combination of design improvements, funding for enhanced enforcement, and other road
safety measures along the corridor. Our recommendation, itself taken from little-used World
Bank guidance, is a rough and ready measure that has the virtue of being easily
communicated. In part, it is shorthand for putting in place transparent and effective
accountability measures, metrics for expected public health outcomes from any given road
scheme. A major criticism of the World Bank is that there is no standard way to report or
measure the road safety impact of a project. Some schemes have excellent metrics and others,
next to none. The 2008 conference began a process comprised of regular meetings amongst
the MDBs to try to standardise the way they anticipate, measure and report road safety
performance.

Albeit slow, there has been some progress. While the MDBs have not yet standardised their
road safety metrics, the issue has been a salient one. For example in 2012, at the Rio+20 UN
Sustainable Development Summit, the seven leading MDBs made a 10 year US$175 billion
commitment to delivering safe and sustainable transportation. In promoting the ‘Safe System’
approach to road safety management, the World Bank is a genuine policy leader. It hosts the
Global Road Safety Facility (GRSF), a multi-donor partnership funded by the governments of
Australia and the UK, Bloomberg Philanthropies, the FIA Foundation, and the Bank itself.
The GRSF has supported more than 30 countries with road safety capacity reviews and
strategic advice, and generated more than US $500 million in road safety lending as part of
larger World Bank projects. At its best, as in Argentina, it has supported the delivery of a
holistic ‘Safe System’ road safety strategy encompassing institutional development, data
management, safe road infrastructure design, police enforcement reform, and road user awareness-raising. But more can and must be done to ensure that investment in roads and land transport does not incur health and economic costs that can have been avoided.

The economic benefit of investing in safer infrastructure is compelling. The International Road Assessment Programme (iRAP) is a UK charity which has developed non-profit highway safety assessment protocols and star ratings which are now being used or piloted in more than 70 countries worldwide. The charity estimates that raising the 10% highest risk roads in 82 low and low/middle income countries to at least a ‘3-star’ (out of 5) iRAP performance level would cost around US $70 billion but would prevent 20 million deaths and serious injuries and more than US $700 billion in economic costs over twenty years. Implementing safety improvements and countermeasures as part of initial road building or routine maintenance, rather than the traditional approach of reacting to ‘black spots’ after fatal crashes have occurred, is a more cost-effective and comprehensive approach.

As a key element of the ‘Safe System,’ a minimum safety performance requirement for roads is a proven way of reducing casualties. Leading road safety pioneers, including the Netherlands, New Zealand and states in Australia, are now using star rating assessments as a performance measurement tool. The new corporation responsible for English motorways and roads, Highways England, is also considering using star ratings as a formal measurement tool. In the context of fast-motorising countries like Brazil, China and India, safety assessment can help guide billions of dollars of new road investment in a safer direction. Demonstration projects in India, co-funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies and the World Bank, are showing that minimum star ratings provide a clear framework for developing both policy and engineering solutions network-wide and measuring outcomes. In China, RAP is now embedded within the Ministry of Transport as a research programme guiding a number of significant demonstration projects. The country’s State Council, the main executive decision-making body, has approved RAP protocols for the country’s new road design manual.

The Fund for Global Health, led by Ernest Loevinhson, formerly Director of Global Health Advocacy & Policy for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has identified improving road infrastructure safety as an area which can provide “maximum possible health benefit to vulnerable people in developing countries.” Loevinhson has taken a lead in establishing a new ‘3 Star Coalition,’ which is leading advocacy efforts on Capitol Hill aimed at persuading the World Bank to adopt a road project outcome measurement equivalent to a minimum 3-star iRAP rating. Other members of the coalition in the US include the National Peace Corps Association, the American Automobile Association, the American Highway Users Alliance, the American Society of Civil Engineers, the FIA Foundation, and the Roadway Safety Foundation. A bi-partisan letter is currently circulating, co-sponsored by Republican and Democratic senators, and House members, calling on the World Bank to upgrade its accountability measures to ensure safer roads in its infrastructure portfolio.
For the FIA Foundation, a core donor to iRAP, the 3 Star Coalition is the latest stage of a ten-year effort, beginning with the launch of the Commission for Global Road Safety, to make safety a core focus of development bank road infrastructure lending. In the absence of effective data collection on deaths and serious injuries in many countries, there is still no transparent, publicly-available, safety performance measurement applied to all road projects, something which is essential for true accountability and for communicating to bank clients, policymakers, and the public, that roads can be and are being made safer. The current World Bank consultation and review of its Safeguards policy provides an opportunity to put this right. Clear road safety policies and expectations, combined with determined and vocal leadership from the highest levels of the Bank, can help transform the way client governments approach road construction and urban mobility projects.

In November this year, transport, health, infrastructure and development ministers from more than 100 countries will meet in Brazil for the second Global High Level Conference on Road Safety. This Brasilia Ministerial will review progress in the Decade of Action for Road Safety. This will be the first opportunity for putting together the partnerships to discuss the global indicators needed to implement the road safety SDG target. It can also be an opportunity for the World Bank, and its sister banks, to bring high level participation and demonstrate that tackling road traffic injuries is a real priority for the MDBs in the post-2015 era.

*Lord Robertson of Port Ellen is a Member of the UK Parliament and the Chairman of the Commission for Global Road Safety and a trustee of the FIA Foundation, a charity which supports international road traffic injury prevention.*