

Lord Robertson
Labour peer

Global road traffic deaths continue to rise. It's time to put people before cars and back an action plan to half traffic fatalities worldwide by 2030

Global health is the topic foremost in everyone's mind at the moment, as governments around the world crunch the numbers on the potential spread and impact of COVID-19. It is a serious and worrying epidemic. Yet, while we wait for the full scale of the virus to become apparent, here are some numbers from another global epidemic, one that has been with us for years and will tragically still be killing and maiming long after this latest emergency has been resolved.

One hundred million: the number of young people under the age of 18 seriously injured on the world's roads since 2010.

Two hundred and fifty thousand: the global number of children and teenagers who will be killed by adults driving vehicles this year.

Twenty-three: the number of seconds that tick by between each death on the world's roads.

Last month, ministers and officials from 140 countries including the United Kingdom came together in Sweden to approve the Stockholm Declaration, an action plan for halving traffic deaths worldwide by 2030. Many of the measures in this action plan will be familiar for having helped to drive down traffic casualties here in the UK from historic highs of more than 8,000 a year in the late 1960s to below 1,800 in 2018. Seat belts, safer vehicle and road design, improved braking systems and, above all, speed management.

For the low- and middle-income countries – where 90% of casualties occur and road traffic deaths and injuries continue inexorably to rise – there are still low-hanging fruit to be plucked. Too few people wearing motorcycle helmets. Too many high-speed roads with no sidewalks or protection for pedestrians. Too many auto makers willing to produce and sell shoddy and unsafe (new) vehicles.

And across the world – in part spurred by the need to act on climate change and the health

effects of traffic pollution – there is a movement towards designing and managing cities to put people before cars. Walking and cycling, made possible by low speed environments, is being prioritised. It is a policy – reducing speed where pedestrians and traffic mix to no more than 20 miles or 30 km an hour – that unites London and Edinburgh with New York, São Paulo and Addis Ababa. It is proven to be highly effective in preventing death and serious injury and is the flagship policy of the Stockholm Declaration.

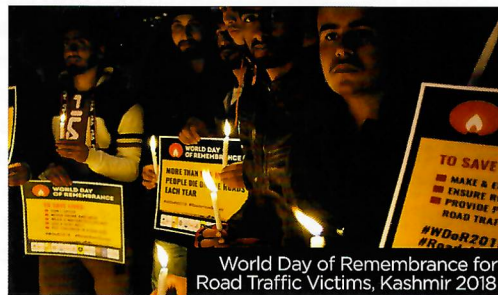
It is also a signal of a new approach to tackling road trauma. Rather than blaming crashes on individual error, progressive countries and cities are recognising that traffic deaths and injuries are the result of a system failure, which it is the responsibility of system managers – road engineers, vehicle designers, urban planners and political leaders – to fix. This 'safe system' approach argues that no death or serious injury on the road is acceptable and that the aim of policy should not primarily

be to prevent collisions, because mistakes are inevitable, but to prevent those collisions from causing harm.

Follow the logic, and priorities become clear. Cars are now designed to make collisions at 40mph survivable for occupants, so design roads or reduce speeds to make head-on or side-on crashes above 40mph impossible. A pedestrian's likelihood of dying increases exponentially above 20mph, so limit traffic speed to below 20mph where people are walking. It's not rocket science.

So we have the 'vaccines' for this epidemic. But, despite the huge toll on the young and poor, we have not yet secured sufficient global political commitment and action to help deliver them.

Thanks in part to campaigning by the FIA Foundation, a UK charity I chair, road death reduction has been made a health target of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). DfID provides some welcome funding for global road traffic injury prevention, but not nearly enough. Yet, if we want to free up intensive care beds today for coronavirus victims tomorrow, there is one policy guaranteed to help worldwide: Slow Down! 🚗



World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims, Kashmir 2018

Lord Robertson's debate on the UK's progress towards UN-SDG 3: halving global road deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents by 2030 is scheduled for Thursday 19 March