

Measurement is not enough for global road safety: implementation is key



On Dec 7, WHO releases the latest 2018 Global Status Report on Road Safety.¹ The report serves as an important tool for monitoring the risks, outcomes, and progress related to road safety and transport across WHO members states. Fourth in the Global Status Report on Road Safety series, it aims to provide a systematic and consistent approach to measuring the burden of road injuries in terms of crashes, disability, and mortality. According to the report, more than 1·3 million people die on the world's roads each year, with millions more injured and disabled, and these numbers appear mostly unchanged since the first report in 2009.²

These reports are important and have changed the discourse on global road safety in many ways since their initial publication. First, they have brought technical and political attention to a condition that previously had not been on the global stage; injuries in general, and road injuries in particular, were neglected by the global health community. Second, they have highlighted the inconsistencies between data reported by member states and the expected numbers of deaths predicted by good modelled data, thus providing a stimulus for countries to review their own data systems. Although these inconsistencies raised much political concern, WHO is to be commended for defending their methods. Third, the public availability of such road injury data has allowed institutions and individuals to use and analyse it for their national or programmatic use and dissemination.³ Fourth, the fact that these reports have been published over time allows the global community to track the progress of road safety efforts over the past decade.⁴

The current report shows that numbers of deaths from road injuries have not been majorly reduced since the first report, and that increasing numbers of people, especially young people, have continued to die across low-income and middle-income countries since the year 2000.^{1,2} Although there are specific locations where road injuries have been reduced and successful case studies are quoted, the widespread change needed has not happened. Furthermore, although measurement is necessary for change, it is clearly not sufficient, and that is of concern, especially as the Decade of Action

for Global Road Safety 2011–2020 comes to an end.⁵ It is important to ask tough questions and to understand what was declared, what was actually implemented, and how—despite a decade of effort—the numbers have not changed.

Key to reducing numbers of deaths is implementation of effective interventions on the ground. That goal, in turn, requires not just providing a menu of actions, but also a consideration of five key issues: political commitment, an enabling environment, implementation support, public engagement, and confronting threats.

First, it is credit-worthy that the number of UN General Assembly and World Health Assembly resolutions on road safety and injury prevention have increased since 2003. However, these declarations appear not to have been followed up with support for national actions or major financial allocations for programmes at the country level. Thus, a sense of achievement at declarations alone is short sighted: governments must be held responsible for their commitment to convert declarations into actions and delegation of both authority and finances for road safety.

Second, road safety programmes cannot be implemented in a vacuum and without a supportive environment across a nation or state. Attempting to create one more vertical programme for ministries of health might not be the optimal direction for success. Developing the human, technical, and financial capacity for successful programmes is crucial in an area of health that has been traditionally neglected. WHO and partners need to support a multisectoral approach to road safety and ensure that it is a high priority, not only for the health sector, but also for transport, environment, justice, education, and the economy.

Third, and most concerning, is the apparent assumption that providing lists of interventions will somehow lead to their adoption on the ground.⁶ Implementation of effective interventions at scale is the only way to decrease death and disability across the globe. Such implementation requires an orientation to context—how specific features of each country can affect the rollout and sustainability of road safety programmes—and defining packages alone is not

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enough. Operational guidance, contextual analysis, implementation research, and systems science are all needed. WHO must provide support for this implementation, and understand that normative guidance alone does not guarantee real-world change.

Fourth, one of the crucial gaps for global road safety, compared with even other health issues, is a relatively weak non-governmental sector and poor civil society engagement, especially in low-income and middle-income countries. The presence of a global alliance for non-governmental organisations or a victims organisation in a country, though encouraging, is not enough, nor are these organisations sufficiently scaled, to ensure a public movement for safety in the countries that need it most. The public outrage briefly seen among youth in Bangladesh in 2018⁷ captures the fundamental motivation for road safety that should be seen in all countries of the world: that these injuries and deaths are preventable. It is time for WHO and partners to make road safety a high priority, framed as a fight for reducing vulnerability, supporting social justice, and ensuring that the poorest do not bear a disproportionately high burden of death and disability. It is time to give voice to this outrage, expressed by those who have lost loved ones on the world's roads, and encourage societies to hold their policy makers accountable.

Finally, it is also important for WHO and partners to acknowledge the threats to global road safety, especially from industry. For example, the alcohol industry openly engages in and promotes actions that, at best, have little or no evidence for success.⁸ Their actions to engage as a partner in road safety should be viewed with concern—their probable motivation being to prevent actors from affecting their market. It is unfortunate that UN agencies have accepted funds from the alcohol industry, purportedly to be used for road safety, knowing that such engagement raises concerns over conflicts of interest and transparency.⁹ Although WHO has, thus far, not accepted funds from this industry,

unfortunately, it does not appear to have a strict policy of non-engagement as with the tobacco industry. It might be time to develop a UN-wide policy for this type of industry engagement to set an example for the rest of the world.

Global road safety is crucial in the path towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Although the monitoring approach of WHO through the Global Status Report on Road Safety is commendable, the time and effort need to be balanced with proactive support for implementation of known and effective interventions on the ground. Measurement alone is not enough, and recognising the lack of progress is the first step towards the development of a strong and sustainable set of actions for changing the current status quo on global road safety.

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For the Global Alliance of NGOs for Road Safety see <http://roadsafetyngos.org>