



Gearing up efforts to promote road safety in Africa

By Robert Tama Lisinge

Road traffic injuries are a global problem affecting all sectors of society. More than 1 million people worldwide die each year as a result of road traffic injuries. Around the world, injuries are among the leading cause of death for people aged 15 to 44, and road traffic injuries are responsible for 25 per cent of all death due to injury. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), road traffic injuries could rank third among causes of death and disability by 2020, ahead of malaria and HIV/AIDS.

Proportionally, African countries suffer most from road accidents. Annually, the continent records 28 deaths per 100,000 population, making it the highest in the world. Studies show that pedestrians and young road users are considered as highly vulnerable groups in Africa. Road accidents also exact an enormous toll on the meager economic resources of Africa, accounting for an estimated 2 per cent of GNP (10 Billion USD), mainly for the importation of medicines, hospital equipment, vehicle spare parts, and other needs.

Despite the challenges, road accidents are preventable. The risk factors responsible for traffic related injuries include inappropriate human behavior, excess speed, non-use of safety belts and child restraints, drinking and driving, non use of helmets by riders of two-wheeled motorized vehicles, as well as poor road infrastructure and defective vehicles. With the right political will, African countries could take actions to tackle these risk factors and significantly reduce the incidence of road accidents.

The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) has been very committed to road safety for more than two decades. In 1984, ECA, in collaboration with Nordic countries, organized the First African Road Safety congress in Nairobi, Kenya.

This was followed by the second and third congresses in 1989 and 1997 in Addis Ababa and Pretoria, respectively. These congresses were organized to assess the fundamental cause of road accidents on the African continent. The results were encouraging and included a better understanding of road safety problems by stakeholders and the design of strategies to reverse the appalling trend of accidents on the continent.

ECA was also the lead institution in the implementation of the two United Nations Transport and Communications Decades in Africa (UNTACDA I & II) between 1978 and 2000 during which road safety and security was recognized as one of the challenges of the transport sector in Africa. The outcome document of UNTACDA II, which is a strategic framework for transport development in Africa, identifies the creation of awareness and education in safety and security issues; training of appropriate stakeholders, and the development of appropriate policies as areas for special consideration.

The UN in general has also demonstrated its commitment to road safety. In its resolution 58/289 of 2004, Improving Global Road Safety, the UN General Assembly recognized the need for the United Nations system to assist in addressing the global road safety crisis. The resolution also invited the World Health Organization, working in close cooperation with the United Nations regional commissions, to act as coordinator on road safety issues within the United Nations system.

UN Resolution (A/60/5) of 2005 meanwhile, invites Member States to implement the recommendations of the World Report on Road Traffic Injury Prevention – a document produced by the World Bank and WHO in 2004. The resolution also invites Member States to establish lead road safety agencies and to develop national action

plans, including actions such as passing and enforcing legislation, conducting necessary awareness-raising campaigns and putting in place appropriate methods to monitor and evaluate interventions aimed at reducing road traffic injuries.

In addition, the resolution invites Member States to recognize the third Sunday in November of every year as the World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims as the appropriate acknowledgement for victims of road traffic crashes and their families. It further calls on United Nations regional commissions and the World Health Organisation to jointly organize the first United Nations Global Road Safety Week, in collaboration with concerned stakeholders from government, civil society and the private sector. This is intended to serve as a platform for global, regional, national and local activities to raise awareness about road safety issues.

As a direct response to UN Resolution (A/60/5), ECA and WHO, jointly organized the African Road Safety Conference in Accra, Ghana from 5-8 February 2007. The conference reviewed progress in improving road safety on the continent and also highlighted the vital link between action on road safety and achievement of wider development objectives. Among other things, the conference recommended African countries to establish lead road safety agencies with proper legal backing, which are also empowered and supported by adequate financial resources to ensure that they are well equipped and staffed with appropriately trained personnel. In order to experience rapid positive results African countries were urged to enforce existing road safety legislation, particularly those related to speed control, control of driving while under the influence of alcohol, pre-hospital and emergency trauma care, use of helmets, and enhancing visibil-

ity. African countries were further urged to commemorate the first UN Global Road Safety Week by organizing activities at the national level and participating at a Youth Forum to be organized in Geneva in April 2007.

The most important outcome of the Accra Conference was a Ministerial Declaration, in which the Ministers resolved to undertake the following:

1. Work together to stop the growing epidemic of deaths and injuries on our roads;
2. Promote road safety as a health, transportation, law enforcement, education, and development priority for our nations;
3. Set and achieve measurable national targets for road safety and traffic-injury prevention in all Member States to contribute to the achievement of Africa's overall targets to reduce accidents fatalities by half by 2015. In this regard, Member States should designate a lead agency, with legal backing and adequate and sustainable financial resources, to ensure the achievement of the targets;
4. Take necessary steps to source sustainable funding for development and management of transport infrastructure and services and work with multilateral and bilateral donors to develop road safety projects and programs to build national road safety management capacity;
5. Strengthen pre-hospital and emergency services in order to provide timely and appropriate care to road traffic-injured patients to minimize their effects and long-term disability;
6. Mainstream road safety into new and existing road infrastructure development programs. In this regard, convince governments to devote a percentage of their investment in infrastructure development to road safety programs;
7. Improve the collection, management and use of data on road deaths and injuries so as to formulate evidence-based policies. In this regard, efforts would be made to address the non-report-

ing of accidents, and to harmonize data that originate from different sources;

8. Ensure the enactment and enforcement of laws associated with driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs; inappropriate and excessive speeding; non-use of helmets; driver licensing; road-worthy vehicles; and the use of mobile phones;

9. Implement specific education programs among drivers with regard to safe driving, particularly with issues associated with speed. In this regard, promote road safety initiatives at the local, municipal and national levels, for children and other road users;

10. Urge African countries to pay special attention to rural transport. In this regard, ensure that adequate resources are provided for studies on rural dimensions of road safety and the implementation of their outcome; and

11. Encourage African countries to sign, ratify and adhere to international treaties and conventions such as the Vienna Conventions on road traffic and road signs and signals."

It is encouraging that the United Nations system is partnering with African countries in an effort to improve road safety on the continent. However, for this partnership to achieve the desired result, a multi sectoral approach that brings together all stakeholders including professionals from the transport, health, law enforcement, and education sectors, as well as the private sector and civil society must be adopted. Ongoing efforts must be scaled up bearing in mind that road accidents are preventable. *

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