WHY LOCAL GOVERNMENT MUST BE ON THE FRONTLINE OF GLOBAL ROAD SAFETY

By Councillor Alex Ward

By 2030 the number of people killed worldwide in road crashes should be halved. This #50by30 target was endorsed at the 3rd Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety held in Stockholm on 19-20 February. Every year 1.35 million lives are lost in road crashes which shockingly are now the number one killer of young people worldwide aged between 5 and 29 years old. Understandably fighting the corona virus is today’s urgent priority, but in the decade ahead we must act decisively to curb the deadly epidemic of predictable and preventable road trauma. A new ten-year effort to transform the safety of our roads is needed to avoid the tragic loss of life and serious injuries that burden families and communities across the world. In many countries the highest number of traffic fatalities occur on local and rural roads. That is why local government must be on the frontline of the global effort to meet the #50by30 target and eventually achieve a world free from road traffic deaths.

Following the Stockholm Conference there has never been a stronger global mandate for road injury prevention. Of course, road safety is a shared responsibility of us all, but success depends on strong leadership both national and local. This was recognised when road safety was included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A target to halve road deaths is part of Goal 3 for Good Health and Well Being, but also in Goal 11 for Sustainable Cities and Communities. And this was reinforced with the inclusion of strong road safety recommendations in the New Urban Agenda adopted at the 3rd UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (HABITAT III) in 2016. But to achieve these goals, and the #50by30 target, there must be a stronger level of commitment to action by local governments across the world.

Localising the road safety related SDGs will be critical to their successful implementation. Councillors and Mayors serving in cities, towns, and villages should, therefore, take the lead in developing ten-year local...
road safety plans that will meet the Stockholm Conference’s #50by30 target. Developed and implemented through local community partnerships, these plans can propose speed limits based on harm reduction principles, improvements in infrastructure to make roads safe especially for vulnerable road users, support enforcement of road traffic rules, promote procurement of safer vehicles, and encourage safer transport modes including public transport, cycling, and walking.

It is also essential that local road safety plans should be integrated with broader goals for sustainable mobility and public health. This was a key theme of the Stockholm conference which strongly recognised the interdependence of the SDGs. Making our streets safe fits well with targets for cleaner air, reduced greenhouse gases, and healthier living. For too long our transport system has prioritised space and speed for vehicles at the expense of safety and the environment. But to overcome this will require strong local leadership; firstly, to avoid dependency on cars; secondly, to shift towards cleaner transport modes; and thirdly, to improve our mobility system by promoting clean and safe transport technologies.

We need more human centred road transport policies that prioritises people rather than vehicles. And for effective road injury prevention we need to adopt the ‘safe system’ approach also known as ‘Vision Zero’. Its starting point is an ethically inspired perspective that there are no acceptable level of road deaths and serious injuries and that road users respecting the rules of their road networks have a right to be safe. The four guiding general principles of the Safe System approach are:

- people make mistakes that can lead to road traffic crashes;
- the human body has a known limited physical ability to tolerate crash forces before harm occurs;
- individuals have a responsibility to act with care and within traffic laws, but a shared responsibility exists with those who design, build, manage and use roads and vehicles to prevent crashes resulting in serious injury or death and to provide post-crash care; and
- in order to multiply their effects, all parts of the system must be strengthened in combination, so that road users are still protected if one part fails.

Rejecting the tendency to ‘blame the victim’ and the impossibility of eliminating all human error on our roads, the Safe System approach is now being widely accepted as the most effective strategic framework for both national and local road safety plans. Including ambitious casualty reduction targets is also a common feature of the Safe System approach. Targets promote urgency, ownership, and accountability with a benchmark to measure progress. It is also important to recognise that achieving the #50by30 target does not represent a final outcome. Rather it is an interim target that once reached, will be reset and renewed towards the goal of zero deaths and serious injuries.

To achieve substantial casualty reductions will require simultaneous action across five areas of road safety management, safer roads, safer vehicles, safer road users and emergency response. But an overarching requirement of the Safe Systems Approach is improved speed management. The strong relationship between speed and severity of crash injuries is well established. Higher speeds increase the likelihood and severity of crashes. And yet, a 5% decrease in average speeds can result in a 30% reduction in the number of fatal road crashes. Lower speeds give road users more time for hazard perception, to reduce the risk of a crash, and the severity of impact forces if one occurs. It is very significant, therefore, that the Stockholm Declaration supports wider use of 30km/h speed limits in areas where vulnerable users and vehicles frequently share streets and road space.

Around the world there is a growing trend toward reducing speed limits. Many cities, for example, are adopting Vision Zero policies that tackle speed through a combination of tougher speed limits with traffic calming measures and automated enforcement. For example, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan has led the introduction of a 20mph limit within the city’s congestion charge zone. Transport for London (TFL) also plans to introduce safer speed limits across 150km of its road network, focusing high-risk sections of road, town centres where people walk and cycle, and encourage local speed reduction programmes led by the London boroughs. To encourage this, TFL has issued a Lower Speeds Toolkit, which gives practical advice on their effective implementation and will help engineers and designers make London’s streets healthier and safe for everyone.
Tackling the problem of speeding is not uncontroversial and introducing tougher limits can provoke a negative response. But frequently so called ‘populist’ opposition to speed limits comes from a vocal minority. To counter this, local authority leaders need to engage in depth with their communities and give a voice to the many that are concerned about the safety of their streets, especially for their children who are our most vulnerable road users. Since 2009 the FIA Foundation estimates that over two million children and young people have been killed in road crashes and another 100 million have been injured. Opponents of improved speed management should be confronted with these appalling losses and the challenge of how to make roads safe for children. Because if road networks are designed, built, and managed with child safety as a priority then safe speed limits will be simply essential.

There are important social equity issues at stake here too. Around the world the poorest communities are most exposed to the risk of road injury but often least empowered to ensure that local leaders will act on their behalf. That is why local road safety plans need to be developed with the strongest possible community engagement, systematically consulting with affected groups such as parents, teachers, police, health workers, victims organisations, and the private sector, especially fleet managers. All can play a role in the debate around speed and participate in local partnerships that can champion community-based road injury prevention. It is also essential to anchor the debate in the best available data and evidence. Local injury surveillance, tracking where and when fatal crashes occur, can help build the case, and win the argument, in favour of strong action on speed.

Whilst local government serves as a first line of defence in the battle against road injury, we must also ensure that central government demonstrates leadership too. If that doesn’t happen then there is a risk that localising road safety may allow national authorities to evade their own responsibilities. Unfortunately, in my view, that has been the recent experience in the United Kingdom where I serve as a Councillor in Ashford In Kent. During the first decade of the 21st century the UK’s annual road fatality rate halved. This success was the result of better car design, improved road engineering, and better road user behaviour, especially with reduced levels of speeding. Sadly since 2011 the UK’s road safety performance has stagnated. Steep public expenditure cuts in both roads and policing have had a negative impact. At the same time the Department for Transport reversed its previous policy of adopting a national casualty reduction target. Critics at the time warned that this would send a signal that road safety was no longer a priority. It is no surprise, therefore, that austerity and lack of national policy ambition has left many Borough Councils with an impossible task of maintaining local roads and strong multi-stakeholder safety partnerships. This was confirmed in a 2018 UK Road Safety Capacity Review commissioned by the DfT which reported that: “Most local authorities are struggling to carry out and prioritise effective road safety activity in a time of budget cuts and growing demand in other areas, such as social care, without the impetus provided in the past from national measurable objectives”. This reduction in the road safety capacity of local government has, I believe, significantly contributed to the UK’s disappointing slowdown in road injury reduction.

The lesson for local government leaders everywhere is that they need to be champions of ambitious and properly resourced road safety plans at national as well as local level. I would, therefore, strongly encourage my fellow local government Councillors around the world to challenge their national governments to respond to the Stockholm Declaration’s call for action. Meanwhile we can use the Stockholm Declaration as a guideline for the adoption by our own authorities of #50by30 road safety plans.

There is already a strong global network of road safety bodies that can assist local government step up their road safety efforts. At the UN level the World Health Organisation (WHO) has lead responsibility for road safety and hosts the UN Road Safety Collaboration. Also, the UN Economic Commission for Europe is responsible for a number of important global road traffic convention and hosts the World Forum for Road Traffic Safety. In addition there are some effective global partners working on road injury such as the Bloomberg Initiative for Global Road Safety which since 2007 has brought together a group of leading road safety organisations working together in 14 countries and 45 cities, the FIA Foundation which is heading a powerful campaign for safe streets for children and, of course, the Toward Zero Foundation which successfully promoted the new #50by30 target at the Stockholm conference.
With such a strong mandate for road injury prevention, now is the time for local government to take on a leadership role in global road safety. It was, therefore, disappointing that local government was not more strongly represented at the Stockholm Conference. I would like to see international bodies like United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) all play a stronger role in promoting road safety and the #50by30 target.

Although the Covid 19 outbreak is overshadowing us all in 2020 we cannot forget the challenge of implementing the SDGs. When they were adopted in 2015, Heads of Government agreed that the Agenda 2030 Goals were “integrated, indivisible, global in nature and universally applicable”. Inevitably that means that road safety must be a priority for local government. Far too many people are dying on our local and rural roads for us not to try at least to halve deaths and serious injuries by 2030. That is the #50by30 challenge issued in Stockholm and it is one that I hope Councillors and Mayors around the world will willingly accept.

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