Seize the Moment

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It is the forgotten epidemic. Thousands die on our roads every year, many more are injured and disabled. Road crashes kill on a scale equivalent to that of malaria and tuberculosis, but this problem receives only a fraction of the attention from government and donors. The fight against malaria and TB justifiably commands considerable funding and media interest, but at the same time global road safety is seriously under-resourced in all these respects.



Road crashes kill on a par with malaria and TB.

Yet road traffic injuries routinely take a heavy toll. Even if we leave aside for a moment the casualty figures and the emotional trauma suffered by the family and friends of victims, the economic burden in itself is staggering. It is estimated that road crashes cost us roughly 2% of GDP every year. This is almost equal to the total foreign aid received by Bangladesh in a given fiscal year!

Bangladesh has one of the worst Crash Rates in the world more than 100 deaths per 10,000 registered vehicles (World Bank/UNESCAP). We are right up there with countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia whose infrastructure has been ravaged by war. Compare this to India's 25.3, Malaysia's 5.5 and America's 2.1 and it becomes clear that something is seriously amiss on the roads of Bangladesh. To put the above statistics into clearer perspective, it should be remembered that it is based on conservative "official" data provided by agencies such as the police and Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA). The official figure for road deaths is three to four thousand a year. Independent studies by international agencies such as the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) have suggested the actual death toll in Bangladesh could be three times as high. The number of people seriously injured in road crashes is estimated at more than 1,00,000 each year. It is an appalling price to pay.

In the face of this rising menace, we seem paralysed by a misguided sense of fatalism. We think road crashes are accidental an unexpected and unavoidable event. It is something that just happens now and again, a price that we must pay for the privilege of transportation. It is this numbing indifference that prevents us from tackling a problem that is an epidemic in every sense.

Strategists around the world stopped thinking of road safety as a mere transportation issue long ago and recognised it as a public health and sustainable development problem. This view was reinforced when the World Health Organization devoted World Health Day 2004 to Road Safety. In a pioneering study, WHO and the World Bank spelt out the extent of the problem. According to statistics, 1.2 million people are killed in automobile crashes annually across the globe, 3000 lives lost per day. As many as 50 million are injured and suffer disability every year. A whopping 90% of these casualties happen in developing countries. A large proportion of those killed and injured are pedestrians. The WHO predicts that without effective safety measures, the death toll will double in twenty years. Low and middle-income countries will bear the brunt of the carnage.

> Road safety advocacy groups such as Make Roads Safe are calling on governments across the world to support a 'Decade of Action for Road Safety' along the lines of the UN campaign to roll back malaria.

According to the recently published World Report on child injury prevention (WHO/UNICEF) , road traffic inju-