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THE INTERNATIONAL AID SECTOR AND FLEET SAFETY

WHEN TRAINING ALONE IS NOT A FLEET SAFETY MEASURE!

By: Tony Walsh, Fleet Safety Consultant and Trainer

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It is an established fact that globally more people are killed in low and middle-income countries than in high-income countries from road crashes (WHO 2004)[1] . This should be of particular concern to the Humanitarian Aid Sector which operates large vehicle fleets in low and middle-income countries.

In 2006, the author conducted a road safety study on twenty international aid organizations working in Africa. Of the ten organizations who returned a questionnaire a fatality rate for their vehicle fleets of three hundred and twenty six vehicles was recorded as follows.

"It is not about giving up on training, it is about senior managers questioning the approach of the training provider."

During the five-year period between 2002 and 2006, twenty-five vehicle crashes were indicated by the organizations. These crashes accounted for the deaths of thirty people, which included seven drivers, seven passengers, four pedestrians, five cyclists, three motorcyclists, four children, and fifteen serious injuries. The study was limited and the main restraint was access to recorded information and loss of institutional memory due to high staff turnover. We believe that these restraints resulted in underreporting.
The Make Roads Safe Report (2006)[2] argues that road deaths often act as a trigger to poverty, and hampers the needs of the present generation due to the large amount of fatalities and injuries to family breadwinners. It can also compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs due to the large fatality rate of children and disabilities incurred by children due to road crashes. In 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development[3] defined sustainable development as, *development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.* As described above and shown in our limited research road traffic injuries are impacting on the needs of the present generation and compromising future generations to meet their own needs. We can then conclude that road traffic fatalities and injuries impacts negatively on sustainable development.

Roberts (2005)[4] cites the former chief economist at the World Bank Joseph Stiglitz who argues that globalisation has been brought about by the enormous reduction in transportation and communication costs. However, he goes on to question whether the cost of transportation has really fallen or if it is just been externalised. The human cost of transport is staggering and global business does not pick up the cost. Africans pay the costs and this is reflected in the reduction of family finances after a road crash.

The amount of information available on how the international aid sector's vehicle fleets contributes to the fatality and injury rate due to road crashes in low and middle-income countries is limited however, anecdotal accounts and the limited research discussed here does indicate that international aid organizations have much work to do in regard to fleet safety.

"Research shows that skill and knowledge will not reduce the risk taken by drivers, particularly young drivers. Motivation and higherorder factors will."

For several decades there has been an ongoing global debate on the effectiveness of driver training as a fleet safety measure in reducing vehicle crash rates. Naturally, one would think that any operator of any machine would require training to enhance safety and improve efficiency.

Many driver training providers respond to our reliance on purely natural instinct by offering advanced and defensive training programmes, some of them claiming that their programs have been successful for thousands of drivers. For many people this makes perfect sense. However, a closer look at the research surrounding driver training proves our natural instinct on driver training worthless.

Christie (2001)[5] conducted a literature review into the effectiveness of driver training. His evaluation studies have found that experienced drivers who attend advanced or defensive driving courses have not shown sound evidence that the courses help to reduce their vehicle crash rates. He also goes on to say that *some driver training providers claim that their programmes produce accident reductions, particularly in fleet settings. Many of these claims are often based on small samples, testimonials or data derived by non-scientific means.*

To be fair to driver training providers this review also highlights that once the training is concluded, a driver trainer has little control over the behaviour of trainees or of other risk factors that may contribute to a crash. Research has consistently shown that skill and/or knowledge will not reduce the risk taken by drivers, particularly young drivers. It has much more to do with motivation and higher-order factors.

If you are a manager in the Development Aid Sector thinking of purchasing driver training as a fleet safety measure to reduce road crashes you would be best advised to note the issues and criticisms of what the researchers are saying.

Evans (1991)[6] an authority on traffic safety argues that the absence of proven safety benefits from driver training/ education does not conclusively prove that it cannot increase safety, but rather that none of the training/education methods so far applied have been demonstrated to be successful. The importance of road safety, particularly in low and middle-income countries where it is now at crisis level justifies continuing research aimed at discovering more effective training techniques.

The buying in of driver training is simply not enough to improve fleet safety within organizations and as we have already seen it simply does not work.

What is the way forward?

First of all, if you are thinking of purchasing driver training or any other fleet safety formula, it is of paramount importance to become familiar with the research so that one knows what one is purchasing and the likelihood of its success. Christie's (2001) review recommends a combination of approaches that can help reduce vehicle crashes within the organization's fleet. This is a multifaceted approach to fleet safety using best practice approaches for dealing with:

- The selection of personnel.
- The selection of vehicles.
- Integrated training/education.
- Incentives for crash free driving (not reward).
- An occupational health and safety policy within the organization.
- Management of where, when and how vehicles are used may help reduce crash risk.

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This approach is potentially more effective than relying on conventional driver training as a fleet safety measure. It is not about giving up on training, it is about senior managers questioning the approach of the training provider and making sure that the role of the training provider, trainees and senior management is clearly defined regarding work related road safety. If a proactive road safety culture is not part of an organization then the drivers become the focus of vehicle crashes. A better approach and focus would be to identify the organization's short falls in a multifaceted approach to fleet safety.

Any organization operating vehicle fleets in low and middle-income countries are working in an environment where drivers have little or no driver education, traffic law enforcement is poorly executed and ineffective, and road safety engineering is in a very poor state. Operating vehicle fleets in this environment often results in high fatality and injury rates. To avoid this and the negative impact it has on poverty, health and development senior managers within the international aid sector have to take control of the safety of the vehicles fleets that they are ultimately responsible for.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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[1] World Health Organization. (2004). World Report on road traffic injury prevention.
[2] Make Roads Safe Report (2006) http://www.makeroadssafe.org
[3] Brundtland G. H. (1987). The World Commission on Environment and Development Brundtland Commission.
[4] Roberts I. (2005) Death on the road to international development. British Medical Journal ;330: 972 http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/330/7497/972
[5] Christie, R., RCSC Services Pty Ltd (2001) The effectiveness of driver training as a road safety measure: An international review of the literature.
[6] Evans, L. (1991) Traffic safety and the driver, Van Nonstrand Reinhold, New York.

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