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The Honourable Ms. Ruth Bhengu, Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Transport Chairperson
Honourable Members of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Transport

AA Submission to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Transport

Our thanks and appreciation is extended to members for permitting the Automobile Association to present to the committee.

As we all know, road safety in South Africa, and Africa as a whole, is something that does not particularly have any significant support from either civic society or political platforms. Neither does it enjoy any real standing on the list of priorities when it comes to public health and safety.

Despite the warnings substantiated by international experience and research, South Africa, because of its status as a developing nation, will inevitably be faced with a spiralling increase in road related injuries and fatalities for many years to come. The increase in vehicle ownership combined with a rapidly deteriorating road infrastructure and vehicle roadworthy standards will significantly contribute to the sustained high fatality and injury costs borne by the South African economy.

It is for this reason that we wish to place on record our concern that road safety in South Africa is not enjoying the focus it deserves.

It is an indictment on government when the number of people killed on our roads – mostly preventable, rivals the number of persons murdered in the same year and by all predictions, the road fatality rate is going to get worse.

Can the economy continue to absorb R140 billion per year together with the concomitant loss of valuable human capital? We would urge members to tally the cost to the economy over the past five years of what is in essence, preventable expenditure.

The launch of the UN Decade of Action in South Africa heralded a renewed focus on road safety in South Africa together with a defined timeline.

Our concern however is that almost a year later, no action has been forthcoming. There is a perception that the RTMC and the DoT are not cooperating and the AA is concerned that when the interim status report, due in 2014, is tabled at international level, South Africa will be found wanting.

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THE AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICA (ASSOCIATION INCORPORATED UNDER S21) REG NO 1932/004001/08

In South Africa, road safety responsibility is primarily driven by Government at three levels, i.e.: national, provincial and local.

Although the lead agency in this regard is the RTMC, the national department of transport through the ministry and the now largely defunct Arrive Alive program endeavours to provide road safety policy and guidelines very little has come to fruition, each province has a similar strategy based on the national guidelines and this is where many of the problems occur.

Although the overriding strategy is centrally based, fragmentation of the strategy has occurred through a number of interventions and factors, these being a lack of resource, political will and quite often a lack of understanding of the specific campaign and its intended outcomes.

South Africa is the leading developed country in sub-Saharan Africa and yet with the combination of first world technology and infrastructure we have yet to come to terms with killing 14 000 citizens and seriously injuring at least 55 000 people while more than 100 000 people sustain minor injuries annually. (These statistics are estimates as reliable crash data was last published in 1998).

Accurate crash data needs to be collated annually in order to evaluate the status of road safety in South Africa. Reporting should include injuries and damage only crashes too. How else will we be able to establish the true cost to the economy of road crashes and, more importantly, evaluate the effectiveness of road safety actions or interventions.

Yet, our single most vulnerable road user, the pedestrian, accounts for almost 40% of all fatalities every year. This trend has been established over the last fifteen years and yet, very little has been done to try and reverse it.

Mobility in South African society is growing extremely rapidly. The increase in new vehicle sales this year will see our car parc exceed 10 million vehicles by year end. There is no reason that South Africa will not follow the same route of other developing nations by experiencing an increase in crashes commensurate with mobility. Unfortunately there are no action plans in place – other than a high level strategy – to prevent this from happening, despite the launch of the Decade of Action.

However, to make the Department of Transport strategy, which is aligned to the Decade of Action, work and deliver, Treasury has indicated that funding would be made available provided the motivation be provided. R200 million would see the strategy develop into quantifiable and measurable outcomes which will see lives saved. All that is needed is an action plan.

At the heart of the problem lie the issues of education and enforcement.

Continued road safety education in our schools and workplace is not happening. There is very little synergy between government departments such as Transport, Education, Health and Justice to address the problem, or find solutions, tenuous they may be. Interventions emanating from all departments will have a positive outcome on the road safety situation in South Africa as the information shared will be reinforced through departmental competencies.

Publicity campaigns and the use of the media, especially community radio stations, must be more effectively utilised. In this regard the national broadcaster must be an active participant through the application of Public Benefit Announcements across all its channels as is done in many other

countries. This provides a cost effective communication channel for messaging to the citizenry on any number of issues deemed to be in the public interest – road safety being one.

Traffic law enforcement is in a state of flux in the country. Essentially traffic law enforcement comprises of four distinct entities – provincial traffic inspectorates, metropolitan police, municipal traffic police and the South African Police (SAP) to a lesser degree.

Road engineers who have limited understanding of traffic law enforcement are managing many provincial traffic inspectorates. Metropolitan police see themselves as crime fighters rather than traffic law enforcers and as a result, compliance with traffic legislation in the cities is fast declining. Campaigns against drunk drivers for instance, have little chance of success without active enforcement.

Aligned to this is the continued delay in the implementation of AARTO. What has becoming clear is that AARTO in its current guise has too many inherent flaws which make the system unacceptable to not only those who are expected to implement it, but to various transport industries as well.

What is of concern to the AA is the expectation that AARTO created in reducing the carnage on our roads. Perhaps as an interim arrangement, the point demerit system for drivers be introduced adjacent to the fine schedule without the associated administration process. Our understanding is that this could be achieved with minimal legislative input.

Traffic safety specialists are in agreement that in order to curb the high number of injuries and deaths on South African roads, there should be a focus on four things – seatbelt usage, drivers and pedestrian alcohol and substance abuse and unroadworthy vehicles combined with effective visible policing of moving traffic violations. At face value this seems simple enough to achieve.

International studies have shown a definite correlation between injury severity and seatbelt usage. The higher the seatbelt wearing rate, the lower the severity of injury. Combined with airbags, the seatbelt becomes a very necessary safety component of a motor vehicle and does save lives.

Legislation introduced in 1995 made it compulsory for both front and rear occupants of passenger vehicles to wear the seatbelt provided, yet, less than 10% of rear seat occupants comply. The wearing rate for front seat occupants is less than 50%.

Experience has shown that a dramatic increase in the wearing rate of seatbelts is achievable in a very short space of time (weeks rather than months) through a combination of an information campaign and strict law enforcement. The positive effects can be measured months after the campaign and sporadic seatbelt law enforcement serves to extend the higher wearing rate – thus saving countless lives.

Another issue is the safety of unrestrained children in passenger vehicles. Currently SA law only makes provision for child restraints if they are fitted in the vehicle. Perhaps we should be looking at the provision of motor manufacturers / dealers to automatically supply a new child restraint when a vehicle is purchased whether required or not. In this manner affordable child restraints would enter the market and more children would be saved from injury or death.

Studies have established that of the 40% of pedestrians killed on SA roads, about 70% tested positive for alcohol or drugs or both, and, had they been driving, more than half would have exceeded the 0.05 legal limit. (MRC Injury Morbidity Surveillance Study 2004)

Most pedestrian fatalities occur during periods of low light and generally are seen by motorists at the last minute when avoiding them is almost impossible. For this reason alone more emphasis needs to be placed on retro-reflective material to be used in everyday clothing. Many well known brands of cross trainers and running shoes have reflective strips incorporated into the shoe design making the wearer visible from a reasonable distance.

The National Department of Transport (NDoT) through its Offence Monitoring report of 2004 has established that after dark, 1:15 drivers are driving drunk. Current (2010) RTMC offence monitoring data appears to be flawed and unreliable.

Traffic law enforcement agencies have in the main not reacted to the extreme risks drunk drivers pose to other road users.

Despite knowing what the legal alcohol limit is, most drivers continue to drive drunk knowing that the risk of detection is minimal. These perceptions need to be changed urgently and this can only be achieved through intensive law enforcement. A review of the legal alcohol limit for drivers should be conducted with a view to a standard 0.02g/100ml for all drivers.

The real challenge however, is educating pedestrians about the risks of walking drunk and changing their behaviour.

Drugged drivers in South Africa can generally escape detection as there is only one person in the country who is qualified as a Drug Recognition Expert. In 1998, it was mooted that the Drug Recognition Program (DRP) based on the Los Angeles Police Department model be introduced in South Africa. Despite the obvious advantages to law enforcement officers and the subsequent curtailment of the drug problem on our roads, this project has yet to be introduced in SA.

In surveys undertaken by the CSIR during 2004, it was found that 1:4 truck drivers, who voluntarily took part in the study, regularly used alcohol and / or drugs, or both, while driving vehicles up to 56 000 kilograms.

New technology which can be used to screen drugged drivers and determine the class of drug is available – much like the current portable breathalyser. The cost per screening is relatively cost effective and should become standard enforcement equipment.

Unfortunately no data is available to establish the extent of drugged driving however anecdotal evidence suggests that in some quarters it may be worse than drunk driving.

This year has seen too many high profile crashes involving the public transport sector where the number of fatalities per crash has exceeded five. Public outrage has had a limited effect but the evidence has proven that these interventions have been largely ineffectual.

The AA submits that at least two interventions within the public transport sector be introduced as a matter of urgency. Firstly, that Certificate of Fitness testing be reviewed to be mileage based rather than time based, i.e. every 30 000km travelled. Secondly, that the PrDP issue and renewal process incorporates a physical driver skills assessment. Currently the PrDP renewal is almost totally an administrative process.

With the banning of leaded fuel in January 2006, it was legislated that all motorised vehicles should comply with tailpipe emissions standards. An opportunity to introduce a safety examination at the same time could be made compulsory as a precursor or part of periodic vehicle testing. This would raise the standard of vehicle safety very quickly.

Driver licensing and the standard of learner driver training needs to be reviewed as a matter of urgency. As our vehicle parc grows, so too does the driver pool. Over a million learner licences are issued every month.

The AA supports the view that the implementation of a provisional drivers licence (with restrictions) after passing the practical K53 driver test, for 18 months prior to the issue of an unrestricted drivers licence, would do much to reduce the number of new drivers being involved in crashes.

Visible policing of moving offences has shown to have a marked effect on compliance with traffic legislation – which in turn supports a reduction in the incidence of road related injury and / or death.

Because of the fragmentation of South African traffic law enforcement agencies, a dilution of effort was inevitable. For example, Metropolitan police are loath to perform traffic control duties while the SAP would rather be actively investigating crime rather than traffic crashes.

In order to effectively engage the various agencies, co-operation agreements need to be in place which would focus on the desired outcomes of any road safety project which involves traffic law enforcement.

There is a need to change the perception of the motorist that all traffic officers are bribe able. Coupled to this, there has to be a greater degree of professionalism displayed by law enforcers themselves.

While we recognize that funding for road safety will remain fairly low on Governments' list of priorities, especially in view of the serious socio-economic problems facing the country such as HIV/ Aids and poverty alleviation, the funding which is allocated is not being spent judiciously.

From an oversight perspective, the AA would like to place on record its disappointment on the manner in which public funding is being spent – specifically when it comes to road maintenance.

The Treasury allocation of almost R30 billion for road funding last year, and combined with the MTEF allocation of R21 billion for the next three years, should see a dramatic improvement of the country's neglected roads. However, due to the lack of oversight, incompetent contractors are being appointed which results in the same job having to be repeated up to four times before acceptably completed. Each time the contractor is being paid. This obviously results in only a quarter of the maintenance work being done and perpetuates poor road conditions and the maintenance backlog. The poor road environment contributes to about 10% of all road crashes or around 1400 fatalities every year.

Were the correct process to be followed in terms of appointing competent contractors, we believe that not only would the general state of our roads be improved, but also that major capital projects like the Gauteng Freeway Improvement Plan be funded from the existing fuel levy.

Commerce, together with labour, needs to become a critical driver of traffic safety in South Africa. Funding and implementation of road safety policy and initiatives must become part of every private sector employer's corporate responsibility.

Regional road safety forums should be held at least twice a year, not only to identify road safety issues, but also to evaluate the success of current projects. This forum would be the best mechanism to interact with the various government departments on an ongoing basis. Workshops to educate and brief stakeholders would ideally be launched from this platform.

25 000 road fatalities during the past two years alone – clearly road safety in South Africa has long passed crisis point.

Government has been blamed in many quarters for failing to deliver on its promises of a substantial reduction in road related injuries and deaths through the various Road to Safety Strategy frameworks. While it must be said that the fault, in most instances, can be found at the door of the road user – we as citizens of the country need to be more responsible in our attitude towards our own safety. It is in this context that private sector involvement needs to be motivated as speedily as possible.

The developing world experience must be borne in mind - campaigns or projects must be simple, sustainable and easily understood with clearly defined outcomes, which should encourage stakeholder and community participation.

Thank you.

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22 November 2011