Passengers play a key part in road safety in Kenya

An educational intervention that encourages passengers to complain about reckless driving could improve road safety in Kenya, say researchers. Zoe Alsop reports from Nairobi.

Aboard a Kenyan long-haul minibus (matatus), some hold their breath, others try to sleep, and many pray for the merciful intercession of the Almighty but, like characters resigned to a tragic script, they rarely speak up. In this universe of steel and glass, 15 feet by five, the driver is king.

“He tore his way down the road, hooting at those unlucky enough to be in his way, swerving just at the last second to overtake other motorists, all the while carrying out endless phone conversations”, one passenger wrote in a local newspaper. “I mouthed a silent prayer for journey mercies.”

But a new study in Kenya, where more than 3000 people die each year in road accidents, suggests that, when passengers are encouraged to speak up, they avert disaster. “We wanted to bump people into a different way of behaving”, said William Jack, one of the report’s authors and an economist at Georgetown University. “These stickers are supposed to make you feel that when you are scared you can say something.”

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For 8 months, Jack and coauthor James Habyarimana monitored insurance claims for over 2000 long-haul matatus. Half were offered stickers. The results were better than expected. “We were flabbergasted because we were hoping to see something like a 10% reduction”, said Jack. “It was taking this very simple idea that required no external enforcement, no rules, no police involvement, no licensing, nothing like that, and seeing if we could make it work.”

The outcome is promising for low-income countries which, according to a 2002 WHO study, accounted for 90% of 1.2 million road deaths worldwide. In places like Kenya, where traffic enforcement is often little more than a pretence for pay-offs and buses are privately owned, a driver’s only imperative is speed.

There is the multitude of other buses racing along the same line. There is the fatigue of a 15-h day that mixes poorly with narrow cliff-hanging roads clogged with livestock and thousands of decrepit goods trucks. There are the traffic police at roadblocks whose hands must be greased whether the law has been broken or not. And there are the gangsters demanding protection money. At the end of the line sit suspicious bus owners totting up each shilling, deciding whether a driver will work another day. “The essence of the business is profit. If you employ someone who doesn’t bring in returns, what business is this for you?” said Sammuel Gatukui, a manager with Mololine bus company.

When Mololine was asked to participate in Jack and Habyarimana’s study, it refused, saying the gruesome images on the stickers would unsettle passengers.

Economists and experts in traffic safety suggest the calculus leading to reckless driving is flawed. Even in cold cash, the value assigned a human life is simply too low. In its 2002 survey, the WHO estimated that millions of road deaths and injuries cost US$518 billion globally in damage, health, and other consequences. “For an economist, it’s incredibly inefficient”, Jack said.

Governments with their hearts set on sleek development goals decades into the future would often rather not address the slapdash, rowdy network that conveys their citizens in the present. Setty Pendakur, a road safety expert at Pacific Policy and Planning Associates in Canada, says: “There are a lot of simple solutions that we can do, but in African cities, in Indian cities, in Russia, and in Brazil, politicians tend to go for big projects because big money has big attraction for all people involved. We need to change the fundamental outlook of planning so you put people as the number one priority.”

Kenyan insurance agents see a cheap way to save millions of shillings a year and have offered to help recruit buses for the next stage of the study. “Stickers are good because they will educate our people”, said insurance agent Isaac Ngugi. “Kenyans are used to being imposed with rules. If you place stickers, they know their rights.”

Zoe Alsop