
Applying a Small Wins Approach to Safe System Road Safety Management: Policy Implications in Three African Countries

Tor-Olav Nævestad^{a*}, Enoch F. Sam^b, Haneen Farah^c, Daniel Mwamba^d, Jaqueline Masaki^e, Aliaksei Laureshyn^f, Matilda Magnusson^f, Andras Varhelyi^f, Rune Elvik^a, Jenny Blom^a, Thomas Miyoba^d, Vibeke Milch^a, Anteneh Mekonnen^c, Filbert Francis^f, Lars E. Egner^a

*lead presenter: ton@toi.no

a Institute of Transport Economics, Oslo Norway

b University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

c Delft University of Technology, Delft, Netherlands

d Zambia Road Safety Trust, Lusaka Zambia

e University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

f Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Keywords: Safe System maturity, implementation, road safety, European, African

Background

The Safe System approach represents a paradigm shift in road safety management by recognising human fallibility and the need to design transport systems that prevent serious injury and death even when errors occur. However, implementing Safe System principles requires institutional capacity, cross-sector collaboration, sustained political commitment, and long-term investment; conditions that may be challenging in resource-constrained settings.

The “small wins” approach offers a potentially pragmatic pathway for advancing Safe System reforms incrementally. By focusing on achievable, context-sensitive interventions that cumulatively shift policy and practice, small wins may help build institutional learning, political support, and stakeholder alignment. Examining how such incremental strategies operate in African contexts can provide valuable insights into policy development and implementation in low-resource environments.

The focus of the current study is on Safe System road safety management in three African countries (Tanzania, Ghana, Zambia), with three European countries (Norway, Netherlands and Sweden). The European countries have a great track record of excellence in traffic safety and practicing Safe Systems principles.

Aims

The overall aim of this study is to examine how Safe System road safety management can be advanced in resource-constrained settings through a “small wins” approach. The small wins approach refers to the identification of feasible, context-sensitive improvements in road safety data and learning systems that can be implemented within existing constraints and that cumulatively strengthen Safe System readiness over time.

The study has three aims:

- 1) Review systems for road safety data collection, learning and continuous improvement (accident database quality, in-depth data collection and national KPIs) in the three European and the three African countries.
- 2) Discuss how the three African countries can learn from the systems of learning and continuous improvement in the three European countries.
- 3) Apply a small wins approach to identify realistic measures.

Method

The study is based on document analysis and semi-structured interviews, mainly focus group interviews, with 73 people working with road safety in the six countries. We also use data from follow up discussions in focus groups in the three African countries (n=40 participants). The purpose of the second round of interviews in the African countries was to present and discuss the results of the first focus groups, and to get feedback on improving the national road safety management systems in each country, taking constraining factors into account.

Results

The three European countries that we study have relatively well-functioning learning systems related to road safety, with ongoing continuous improvement and learning processes; with alignment between formal and informal aspects of road safety management.

The African countries do not have this continuous improvement process to the same extent. We provide recommendations as to how the African countries can improve their road safety management systems, in accordance with the processes in the European countries. Implementing these steps may, however, be challenging in the African countries, given constraints related to lacking funding and national economical constraints, insufficient institutional stability and strength, insufficient commitment etc. These are factors indicating lower levels of Safe System readiness in the three studied African countries, than in the three European countries.

The factors constraining Safe System road safety management in the three African countries require new innovative solutions to improve road safety data. In national workshops in each African country, we discussed how the quality of road safety data could be increased, based on a list with questions we prepared. Participants suggested several ways of improving the road safety data, given the observed constraints: 1) Community watch to increase reporting of accidents, 2) Train journalist to report accident data, 3) Use artificial intelligence to search the internet for accident data, 4) NGO-based measures, 5) Harmonisation of data.

Conclusion

The small wins approach means advancing Safe System implementation through realistic, stepwise improvements that gradually build institutional strength and learning capacity. Its unique contribution lies in demonstrating how incremental, context-sensitive reforms in data and governance systems can create cumulative systemic change, even in settings with limited resources and institutional constraints.