

Distr.: General
14 July 2020

Original: English only

Economic Commission for Europe

Inland Transport Committee

Global Forum for Road Traffic Safety

Eighty-first session

Geneva, 21-25 September 2020

Item 5 (b) of the provisional agenda

Policies for Vulnerable Road Users:

Focus on road safety challenges in South-East Asia

The case of non-conforming road transport modes: An initiative to provide innovative policy to improve the safety of mobility in the Global South

Submitted by the Chair, IRTE, University of Birmingham (UK) and John Hopkins University

A presentation highlighting the importance and neglect of the informal transport modes used in South-East Asia was made by IRTE at the special session convened by the Global Forum during the Ministerial meeting in Stockholm. For the current session, this document has been prepared by the informal group of experts aiming to trigger future work on the complex issues of “non-conforming road transport modes” and the eventual role that WP.1 could have in shaping them into mobility tools and enabling safe socio-economic growth in the Global South. WP.1 is invited to discuss this topic.

The case of non-conforming road transport modes, an initiative to provide innovative policy to improve the safety of mobility in the Global South.

1. Billions of people across the world lack appropriate mobility options. A number of regions, even those with fast-growing economies, still have transport networks that are inadequate to fulfil their basic functions, for example, to provide access to markets, education and health facilities. People in these regions may rely on various transport modes, referred to as irregular, informal, paratransit, and non-standard transport, that do not conform to international standards. However, these non-conforming modes of transport may be the most widely used means of mobility in low- and middle-income countries. They often serve a vital transport role in both rural and urban areas, contributing to the health and economy of the areas they serve.

2. Non-conforming modes of transport include vehicles which lack the basic safety features prescribed by international regulations, and also include vehicles that comply with standards being used in non-conforming ways, such as motorcycles carrying more than two people. Non-conforming vehicles may include modified motorized and non-motorized vehicles of various configurations which are affordable to build as they use locally available materials and mechanical skills. They may be the only transport option, particularly for large (and growing) parts of the population that are financially disadvantaged. Despite their non-conformity, these vehicles often serve essential roles, particularly to the poorest parts of communities, such as on-demand access to health facilities, jobs for low-skilled workforce, and transport services in areas lacking formal transit¹.

3. The importance of non-conforming transport to the region they serve can be significant as these modes may enhance mobility by compensating for the absence of functional road transport networks and public transport options. In the Global South, these non-conforming transport modes are of an incredible diversity and differentiation in terms of configuration, seating capacities, operating speeds and geographic coverage.

4. While non-conforming transport modes can serve essential mobility roles, it cannot be ignored that such transport can be a significant risk both for users and for others on the road. A tampered, modified or overloaded vehicle may provide little or no basic safety provisions for its driver and occupants, and may be difficult to operate in a safe manner.

5. Notwithstanding the importance of non-conforming transport modes, to date they have fallen beyond the scope and framework of conventional legal instruments governing road traffic safety and the safe interaction of all road users in a traffic environment. As such, it has been challenging to address the safety of these modes of transport within the dedicated international road safety forums. A thoughtful discussion of these modes, their mobility roles, and strategies for improving the safety of disadvantaged populations without compromising access to vital health and economic needs could be of widespread benefit.

6. To this end, a policy discussion should be initiated to address the challenging multi-disciplinary problem of road safety of non-conforming transport modes with a particular focus on their use in the Global South. The product of this discussion should be a report in line with WP.1's objectives. To facilitate this discussion, the following preliminary structure may be useful:

- (a) Taxonomy of non-conforming transport modes;
- (b) Prevalence of non-conforming transport in terms of regions, countries and conditions;
- (c) Mobility needs (social and economic) served by non-conforming transport modes;
- (d) Safety problems associated with these modes;

¹ Robert Cerveroa and Aaron Golub, Informal transport: A global perspective, Transport Policy 14 (2007) 445–457, Elsevier

(e) Appropriate guidelines for the safety of non-conforming transport modes.

7. The discussion should consider using cross-cutting, innovative and integrated principles that examine road traffic safety holistically and focus on achieving desirable results and targets. One such principle is that of **harm reduction**. Harm reduction is a public health approach that seeks to reduce the risk of certain behaviors which may be difficult or counterproductive to eliminate². As road traffic safety is a health concern according to WHO, in the context of non-conforming transport, the harm reduction approach might examine feasible strategies or policies for minimizing the risks associated with sub-standard vehicles, substandard and non-conforming road traffic environment, or road users' behaviors, while preserving essential mobility. Harm reduction approaches would not seek to modify the content of standards described in legal instruments, but rather would seek to reduce the risk of alternatives that are common in areas that cannot yet afford to comply with best practices.

² Harm reduction: An approach to reducing risky health behaviours in adolescents. (2008). *Paediatrics & child health*, 13(1), 53–60. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/13.1.53>