



A stitch IN TIME

In Ghana, road accidents kill more young people than war or disease, but one organisation is trying to make a difference. **Tristan McConnell** takes a closer look.

A warden stops traffic in a busy street in Accra to allow a schoolboy to cross safely to the other side. Four people or more are killed on Ghana's roads every day. Most of them are children.

More than four people are killed on Ghana's roads every day of the year. Antoinette Amoah knows the pain behind the statistic. Her eldest son Abraham was hit by a car last year while returning from school: eight-year old Abraham died, the driver did not even stop.

"Losing your child is the worst thing in the whole world," says Antoinette. "You cannot even imagine. Every day I cry, but I have to wipe my tears and carry on because my other children need me." Since the accident Antoinette has moved her kids to another school, one that they can reach without crossing any roads.

"Drivers are undisciplined – they take akpateshie [local gin] and drive however they want," she laments. "The roads are bad and no one looks out for those who are walking. I fear for my children."

Hoping to put an end to these daily tragedies is Amend, a New York-based non-profit organisation. Amend hopes to halt child deaths and injuries caused by road accidents through its school education programme being piloted in Accra.

Staggeringly, road accidents kill more than 1.2-million people every year and leave up to 50-million more injured or disabled. In Africa it is the leading cause of death and disability among five to 21-year-olds. The World Health Organisation (WHO) calls road traffic crashes "the biggest killer worldwide of people aged 10-24 years". The World Bank estimates the cost of accidents at \$518-billion annually. And those worst affected are children and the poor. This almost mundane everyday event causes more destruction than malaria, HIV/Aids or conflict. Yes, that's right – more young people die in road accidents than from disease or war.

The first recorded motor vehicle death in the world was in 1896 when a pedestrian was run over by a jalopy >

Pictures: Tugela Ridley



An Accra schoolboy is fitted with a reflective armband that will make him visible on the dangerous streets. In the background is an Amend poster, "be seen, be safe".



Ghanaian children are keen to learn the rules of the road. And quite right, too. Unless a child learns how to protect himself on Accra's lethal roads, he may become just another statistic.

< in Victorian-era London. Since then, car use, crashes and deaths have increased side by side with the highest fatalities in rapidly urbanising developing countries.

"Injury and death from road accidents is a huge and growing problem in developing countries where it comes as a consequence of a good thing, economic growth," says Jeffrey Witte, executive director of Amend.

But simply, more economic activity means more vehicles -- which means more accidents. "People tend to be fatalistic about road accidents – it's witchcraft or it's bad luck – but it is actually a highly complex system of inputs and outcomes," argues Mr Witte. He and his team hope to change some of those outcomes.

It is seven in the morning and the traffic is building in the seaside neighbourhood of Korlegonno on the western edge of Accra's urban sprawl. Squeezed between the busy road and a filthy beach is Hijaz Primary School where 350 young children come to classes every day. But first they have to dodge the traffic to cross the treacherous road.

It is a deadly daily ritual played out by kids in cities across the continent.

Then members of Amend arrive. Muhsin Barko and Kingsley Amoako, Amend's Ghanaian staff, are about to hold an unusual school assembly at Hijaz Primary. Arriving at the school in a taxi carrying a wall chart, a folder of colourful posters and a plastic bag full of reflective armbands, they wear T-shirts with the slogan "Be Seen, Be Safe". They gather the children together and a smiling Amoako takes the stage.

Amoako's stage presence and infective enthusiasm quickly has all the children joining in. "Be seen, be what?" he calls out. "Be safe!" reply hundreds of young voices. His road safety lesson lasts 45 minutes, teaching how to check for traffic before crossing a road, not to run, and not to play in the street. At the end of the lesson Amoako and Barko hand out reflective armbands to all the children so they can be seen in the dark.

In its first 12 months, Amend took this campaign to over 12 000 pupils in Accra. It is simple, basic stuff and saves lives in a very direct way.

"I fear for my students, I fear for my own children too," says headmistress Fatima Bawa Abdulai as pupils run around with their new \$0.40 reflective armbands showing them off as if they were the latest playground fashion accessory.

"Even me – I fear walking around Accra," she adds. Crossing a road in Accra, as in many developing world cities, is a hair-raising experience. Here it involves leaping over an open sewer, weaving through the heavy traffic while keeping an eye out for dangerously erratic drivers and ankle-twisting potholes before making it to the other

side where, if there is a pavement, it is likely to be colonised by stalls, hawkers and parked cars.

Using public transport is scarcely less nerve-wracking as you hurtle down the road in a rickety bus or packed into a "tro-tro", a cheap minibus piloted by a driver who – according to a government study – on average works 16 hours a day without a break.

Last year, 1 700 people were killed in road crashes in Ghana, a country of 23 million people. Almost half – 42% – of those killed in Ghana are pedestrians, >

"Losing your child is the worst thing in the whole world. Every day I cry, but I have to wipe my tears and carry on because my other children need me."



“People tend to be fatalistic about road accidents – it’s witchcraft or it’s bad luck – but it is actually a highly complex system of inputs and outcomes.”

“Look at my pretty bracelet,” this little girl seems to say. But it’s a bracelet that may well save her life.

< ploughed into by speeding motorists. Almost a quarter are children. “Children are very vulnerable,” says Noble Appiah, executive director of the National Road Safety Commission. He is happy to see Amend’s work saying, “It is just not sustainable for [us] to run teaching programmes at our schools.”

A

ppiah blames the death toll on unplanned urban growth, an ever-increasing number of vehicles and lack of awareness on the part of all road users. “If you look at the way we design our roads we don’t make adequate provision for pedestrians. There is a lot of competition between pedestrians and vehicles on the road. The drivers are undisciplined and the hawkers in town take up everywhere the pedestrians are supposed to be.”

Poorly equipped and under-funded, the vehicle and licensing authorities make only cursory roadworthiness checks, meaning that many vehicles are often held together with little more than rust and rope, barely any of the parts belonging together. As Barko puts it, “Everything in the car is second hand – from the tyres to the petrol.”

Most drivers do have licences but Appiah concedes that, “Whether they are credible is another issue.” For a few dollars those without licences can bribe their way through police checkpoints.

Not only do road accidents hit developing countries worse than developed ones, but they hit the poorest citizens in those countries. It is “not the big guys”, as Appiah puts it, in their private cars who mostly die in road crashes – but the pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users.

The problem is expected to get worse. WHO predicts that by 2020, fatalities will increase by 80% in sub-Saharan Africa. By contrast, in high income countries such as the United States, that figure is forecast to reduce by 30%.

Driving in Africa is chaotic at best, the “highway code” taken as a suggestion rather than a set of rules. To make matters worse, shoddily made roads crumble at the edges after only a few months of use, turning new highways into sparsely tarmac-ed single-track roads. Pedestrian crossings are rare and, like speed restriction signs, ignored. Traffic lights and streetlights are either broken or lack electricity, drunk driving is rife and seat belts are missing or broken.

And, as elsewhere in the world, many male drivers seem to believe over-taking at break-neck speeds is a symbol of virility rather than a fast way to the morgue.

“Road safety should be higher up the agenda for development agencies and for government, it should be seen as comparable to HIV/Aids,” says Appiah, who points out that it is the youth – the most economically productive members of society – who are worst affected.

But death and injury, especially among children and youth in developing countries, is not entirely ignored. “You don’t have to wait for something to happen to you,” says Barko. “You see the figures, you know what is happening, you have to act.” TL

issue



Even the boys enjoy wearing these reflective armbands which make them stand out in the dark.