

## ROAD SAFETY IN SOUTH AFRICA – ARE WE GETTING IT RIGHT?

September-2015

By – J. Olivier

More than 25 years of experience and currently the Director at The High Option Ltd.

RTMS. RTMC. AA. DOT. FESARTA. NTP. SARAP. RTLECET. SANRAL.

Do these acronyms mean anything to anybody? I have to ask the question, because despite the noble efforts of all these organizations, the carnage on our roads, the poorly maintained trucks, the problematic state of repairs of our roads infrastructure and the best intentions of the public, our roads remain among the most dangerous in the world. And before I get lambasted for not knowing what I am talking about, let me set the record straight.



I am writing as a road user, a member of the public, an observer and a critic. I am not writing as a transportation professional or businessman. I am also writing so that I can become educated. I am also writing as a parent of children who use our roads on a daily basis. Most of all, I am writing as someone who wants to contribute towards improving the situation, and this requires a better understanding of what the current situation is.

The companies and organizations represented by the acronyms we started with have admirable goals and objectives when you visit their respective websites. They all talk the same language. They all express concern over the same thing. Our road infrastructure is deteriorating. The drivers of our trucks that transport our goods are not properly trained. The transport operators are not maintaining heavy vehicles properly. These things we hear time and again when a serious road accident, particularly involving heavy vehicles, make headline news. Most serious accidents do not make the headlines, despite loss of life and the destruction of family structures. It has to be a multiple collision involving large loss of life, or extended road closures that impact on the national economy before it makes the headlines. Have we become callous in our perceptions of the problem? Are we ignoring what is blatantly obvious in front of us?



Are these organizations talking to each other, or are they suffering from a trans-corporate version of the Silo Effect? Are they all mightily striving to improve the conditions on our roads and encourage safer drivers and vehicles, but simply forget to mention it to each other? Do they have inter-disciplinary programs that encourages a holistic view of the problem, and are they working together to resolve the issues we face? If so, then why does the public remain unaware of it?



All of these questions require answers, and the public has a right to know what all of these organizations are doing. After all, the public carries the bill for the existence of most of these organizations, bar one or two. We reluctantly pay toll fees and eTolls, we pay our taxes, we adhere to the rule of the road (well, most of us do), and we all are irritated by the number of trucks on our roads. We all blame them for the condition of the roads due to overloading, we nod knowingly when we hear reports of corrupt traffic officials taking bribes, and we all gasp in horror when serious accidents occur.

But few of us know how bad the situation really is. we remain uninformed, and only when someone takes up the flag and marches into the unknown do we gain some understanding of the various organizations that impact on how safe our roads are. we assume that the government will take care of it, and yet we blame

them first for being corrupt. Traffic and Police officials are now often the first suspects when accusations of corruption are made. We have lost our respect for the authority vested in the uniforms of those entrusted with maintaining law and order.

Why are we in this situation? Where have we lost touch with what is happening, and do we really understand where this is heading?

Everyone has a duty to work towards safer conditions on our roads. The public is the greatest road user of all sectors, and yet we have the least say. The structures available to them to influence road safety is far less powerful than they should be. Power rests with government and some industry-led organizations. There appears to be an imbalance of both interest and investment.



Government is not going to solve this problem on its own, and it does not matter how much we wish to point fingers at them. Raised taxes, increased toll fees and upwards trends in fuel levies or any other means of government-driven programs is not going to resolve the issue. It is clear to me that closer cooperation between the public and the private sector is where the key lies, and this is where all of these organizations fall short, in my view. I am not saying that they are not trying. I am saying that what they are trying does not appear to be working as well as they envisaged it would. Perhaps there needs to be a revision of goals and methodologies.

A more effective combined effort between business and organizations that represent the public interest is perhaps something that requires closer attention. Higher levels of investment, and an innovative approach to road safety with initiatives from within should be considered.

Where do we go from here? How do we address the issue in a synchronized, coordinated manner? How do we identify key areas and address them sensibly and without corporate identities and pride standing in the way? In the end, we all seek the same outcome. How we get there is what we need to seriously sit down and talk about.

Let's Indaba. Let's make plans. Most of all, let's make a difference.