

Summary:

Vision Zero – in theory and practice

Since 2001, Norwegian road safety work is based on Vision Zero, modelled on, but not completely identical to, the Swedish Vision Zero which was passed by the Swedish Parliament in 1997.

The Norwegian version of Vision Zero has been summed up in three points:

- 1) Ethics
- 2) Science
- 3) Responsibility

The first point refers to the starting point of the vision; that it is ethically unacceptable that humans die or are permanently injured in road traffic. The second point is that the foundation of road safety policy should be scientific, in the sense that the established physiological and cognitive limitations of humans should be the basis for the design of the road system. The third point says that responsibility for road safety should be shared among the road users and the authorities.

This report examines the interpretations of Vision Zero that co-exist among actors in the road-safety community in Norway. It provides a comparison between the “official” versions of the vision in Sweden and Norway, and proceeds to describe how the vision is understood among public actors and a selection of NGOs working with related questions.

The report is based on interviews with the then State Secretary in the Ministry of Transport and Communication, representatives from the Norwegian Public Roads Administration, the National Police Directorate, the traffic police (UP), the Norwegian Council for Road Safety, the environmental organisations Fremtiden i våre hender (The Future in our Hands) and “Norges naturvernforbund” (Friends of the Earth Norway/Norwegian Society for the Conservation of Nature); the national cyclists’ organisation; and The Norwegian Motorcycle Union, the largest Norwegian motorists’ organisation (NAF), the Confederation for Norwegian Enterprise (NHO), an organisation working for the interests of people injured in road traffic (Landsforeningen for trafikkskadde), and Opplysningsrådet for Veitrafikken. The latter is an umbrella organization for various actors in the transport sector, such as transport businesses, motorists’ organisations, road construction companies, petrol station chains, insurance companies etc. Questions concerning Vision Zero were also posed to members of the Standing Committee on Transport and Communications in the Norwegian Parliament, in the course of interviews with a somewhat broader scope. We find that within the Public Roads Administration, interpretations of the vision are fairly homogeneous, shifting the focus from frequency of accidents to severity of accidents. This interpretation

gives the organisation a specific starting point, and as such it can serve as a relatively uncontroversial basis for further road safety work. The task is now to focus on road stretches where serious accidents take place, so as to improve these as much as possible. The vision is also strongly associated with some of the road safety measures developed in Sweden in conjunction with the vision, particularly central guard rails.

Many of the informants also found that the vision had heightened the status of road safety work in general, and that it had also been better integrated in day to day work, especially in the context of construction of new roads, where road safety auditors have now been given the authority to approve new roads (or demand revisions), thus providing an incentive for the project administrators to include safety expertise in an earlier stage of the planning process. Several of the informants therefore experienced that road safety work was now more integrated and holistic, in that the safety measures were no longer added to the project in its latest stages.

In general, the representatives from the Road Administration were not very concerned with what has been seen as dilemmas in the vision, such as the allocation of responsibility in the road system. As far as they were concerned, the vision was a practical and specific reorganisation of efforts. However, some informants were aware that continued improvements in road safety might eventually call for measures beyond infrastructural improvements, and that this stage was likely to be more controversial.

Outside of the Road Administration, interpretations of the vision were considerably more diverse. Even the police and the National Council for Road Safety (Trygg Trafikk), who have contributed to giving the vision its Norwegian shape, had a somewhat broader understanding of what the vision entailed. The National Council for Road Safety, who has traditionally focused their attention on changing behaviour on the road – working especially with children – conceived of the vision as being largely irrelevant to their own work, but had seen the vision as operationalized in Sweden as a potential threat against their understanding of the causal determinants of accidents. Thus they understood this vision as ideological – and as a challenge to their own ideology. They did, however, find that the Norwegian version of the vision was toned down as compared to the Swedish original, and therefore more acceptable. The police tended to see the new paradigm not so much as a completely new approach to road safety as a furthering of existing strategies, although in a more targeted manner. They also emphasised that whatever the vision might say about shared responsibility, the responsibility of individual road users was still firmly defined by traffic law.

Most of the Members of Parliament interviewed were on the whole positive to the vision, but did not consider it to be “realistic”. They often expressed support of the ethical content, the idea that fatalities in traffic is in principle unacceptable. Most of them did not, however, associate the vision with the other elements in the official definition, such as a scientific basis, or shared responsibility. A very few of them mentioned measures such as median guard rail, but always in conjunction with other, more traditional methods such as surveillance.

Among the non-governmental organisations, the level of knowledge about the actual content and practice of vision Zero varied considerably. Many of the organisations were not primarily concerned with road safety, and thus had an interest in the issue only insofar as it was relevant to their main agendas. Like the politicians, they frequently focused on the ultimate goal of the vision (the “zero”), either because they wanted this to be seen as an actual target, or because they deemed it unrealistic. On the whole, there was a tendency that they took much more interest in the question of responsibility allocation than was the case among the actors from the public sector.

Almost all of the informants, within the Public Roads Administration as well as stakeholder organisations, agreed that the vision had not been well publicized. Most of them regretted this, as it might lead to a lack of acceptance for measures taken, or because it does not put the kind of pressure on the authorities that was needed. However, some also felt that given that it was the public actors who stood responsible for realizing the goals of the vision, there was no need for it to be well known outside of the professional environment, and some even feared that the focus on the responsibility of authorities might be an unfortunate influence on road users.

It is remarkable that very few of the informants brought up the scientific basis of the vision, although some mentioned the “toleration thresholds” introduced with the vision. Some of the NGOs expressed doubt as to the rational basis of road safety policy, without, however, linking this to the “scientificness” of the vision.

The organisations that seemed to be most negative towards the vision were those that promoted alternative modes of transport, such as the cyclists, motorcyclists, and the environmental organisations. They found that the vision contributed to entrenching the current transportation regime, rather than encouraging other – and more environmentally friendly – modes of transport. Making the road system safe can be very costly, and the decision to do so seems to at least partially preclude the re-allocation of resources to other parts of the transport system.

In conclusion, we can observe that Vision Zero seems to be working fairly well within the Public Roads Administration, and also that it is familiar to most of the organizations working with road safety, although they do not necessarily have detailed knowledge about the practical content of the vision. It seems to be a common understanding, however, that the responsibility for realising the vision lies with the authorities, and other organisations have not been integrated in the process to any considerable degree. Also, the vision is not very well known among the general public, meaning that the vision is more of an internal vision for the road authorities – like an organisational vision, rather than a societal vision. Critics of the vision argue that it is conservative in terms of what kinds of transport are being promoted.