

Road safety and Sistema MAPFRE

Miguel Muñoz

Instituto MAPFRE de Seguridad Vial

In MAPFRE's business culture it is thought that a business has reached its highest level of maturity when, in addition to concerning itself with its shareholders, clients, employees, suppliers and the circumstances of its own sector, it feels the need to work towards the good of society as a whole, making an attempt to reinvest a part of its operating surplus in not-for-profit activities.

In MAPFRE's history this level of maturity brought about the setting up of various foundations bearing the MAPFRE name. In parallel to this, a number of activities aimed at improving road safety levels have been carried out. These activities have not always had a complementary commercial purpose, and in some way, within the context of the motor unit, were aimed at supporting the work of the foundations.

This background created the right climate, as a natural adjunct to the desire to contribute to the social good, for a body to be created within Fundación MAPFRE - whose *raison d'être* is precisely the prevention of all types of risks - to take on the specific full-time work, with the support of considerable resources, of prevention of road risks. It was thus that the MAPFRE Road Safety Institute was created within the Foundation in June 1996.

But why a body dedicated exclusively to road safety? The answer is provided by the terrifying magnitude which road accidents, and their terrible consequences, have acquired in all developed societies. A few figures, without doubt anecdotal but illustrative nonetheless, may help us to appreciate the importance of the problem.

If we add up all the people who have died in road accidents in Spain in the last 25 years, a city the size of Albacete would be wiped off the map. Or Brussels, if the figures used

were to be extended to the European Union.

Those injured in the same period would convert Barcelona (or London if we put the data on the scale of the European Union) into a gigantic hospital.

Road accidents are the biggest cause of death, whatever its origin, for the age range between 18 and 24. It is the most widespread cause of death not due to natural causes in the population as a whole.

Any thought given to this tragic reality should provoke outrage, given the fact that the consequences of road accidents (and the information which has already been given is valid here) are - in terms of damage and social suffering - much more serious than other phenomena which have a much greater capacity to move the collective sensitivity, such as drugs, AIDS or terrorism. The fact that news of road accidents is constantly heard and that it is very much a part of everyday life, undoubtedly changes perceptions of these accidents so that they become thought of as an inevitable price which has to be paid in the name of progress. Only very spectacular accidents, or those whose victims are especially famous cause the slightest change in social conscience. Unfortunately however, this social awareness is very short-lived, in fact the news is soon eclipsed by other, fresher news, or the outcry caused by the accident itself is replaced by other considerations concerning the life or personality of the victims.

In the light of this unchanging indifference, prevention activities carried out by the private world take on their full importance as a way of contributing to a necessary increase in public awareness of road safety, which is not always given its true importance by the authorities. In any case, even though these author-

ities without doubt bear the main responsibility for increasing public awareness, the matter is too important for us, from a position of social responsibility, not to try to fight for road safety.

When referring to increasing social awareness, we also find ourselves considering the main work of the MAPFRE Road Safety Institute. This, through information and educational activities, concentrates on the human factor, and is a real proclamation of faith in mankind, whose overwhelming importance in the world of road safety is indubitable. This does not however mean that the institutes can not or should not also work on other aspects related to roads and vehicles, although the influence of the private initiative is much more difficult in these factors. Examples of the preventative activities by the Institute concerning these two factors include activities related to certain road elements, and solutions which may be put at the disposal of the competent authorities, and road worthiness checks on vehicles by the diagnosis units of the institute.

The MAPFRE Road Safety Institute is a young organisation, although MAPFRE's institutional concern for road safety is longstanding. Given the scarce initiatives of this type in the private sector, the Institute aspires to become the spearhead through which the sensibilities of a society which has become numb with conformity are woken up; and this is not because of a desire to take the starring role, but because someone has to take the bull by the horns from within society and encourage collaboration towards finding a solution to something which is of concern to everybody. Above all it is of concern to the authorities, this is true; but it is also of concern to the social agents and, in the end, to each and every citizen. This is how the MAPFRE Road Safety Institute has understood the situation, and we have begun the struggle and we will continue to fight. ■