

“Traffic Signs, Save Lives”  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
Reed College  
Nebiyat Esubalew ‘21  
[Nebiyat Esubalew – Medium](#)

Ethiopia has one of the highest rates of Road Traffic Accidents (RTAs) in the world where thousands of road users are killed each year and an even higher number are severely injured. RTAs in Ethiopia are systemic. Many of them are caused by reckless driving behaviors including speeding and distracted driving, driving under the influence, failure to enforce traffic laws, and poor infrastructure design among others. They are also a byproduct of corruption where incompetent drivers join the streets without the necessary training or where money intended for the construction and maintenance of roads is used for private gain.

During the initial stages of developing my proposal, I had three or four completely unrelated projects in mind— all of which stemmed from everyday problems I encountered growing up in a developing country. However, compared to the other projects I was contemplating, working on road safety felt timely as the current road safety measures do not seem to be doing much for the exacerbating problem as they tend to focus on the aftermaths of RTAs instead of the solutions. The first goal for this project was to help children as well as other pedestrians safely cross the street as they walk or bicycle to and from school while the second was to encourage other authorities to follow suit to ensure a safer environment for their students. A third goal added later on was to equip adults and children living in destitution<sup>1</sup> with the necessary road safety knowledge so that they are better able to protect themselves and their family members from RTAs.

Once I arrived in Ethiopia, a number of in-person meetings were held with Addis Ababa City Traffic Management Agency’s (TMA) Deputy Director Engineer Birhanu Girma and Director of Road Safety Awareness Hagere Hailu to discuss my project in depth and how to go about implementing it. I learned from the agency that comparable school-zone traffic signs exist in a handful of areas around the capital (these are triangular and red —adapted from the U.K. and produced locally). However, they serve a different purpose as they are only meant for sending signals to drivers to decrease their speed limits and do not necessarily force them to prioritize pedestrians. Since this is a pilot project, we had to first find a way to introduce the new signs to the general public. Therefore, the first thing we did was feature the project in a national magazine named TIKVAH-Ethiopia that has more than 250,000 subscribers and on TMA’s own Facebook page with more than 14,000 followers. On my proposal, I had a list of eleven schools that I wanted to work with—two of which I had attended. However, after discussing it with TMA officials, I learned that they have already identified more than fifty accident-prone areas near schools in Addis Ababa and we decided to go with the top twenty for this project. Contrary to what I anticipated, most of these schools are actually private high schools since most of them are located in the densely populated metropolitan areas of the capital and tend to be located near highways.

To date, we have mounted fourteen of the signs around nine private and public schools across Addis Ababa and we plan on adding four more schools to the list using the remaining six signs. Since June through late August is the rainy season in Ethiopia, we were forced to postpone the mounting process until early September. In terms of how the schools received the project, the response was overwhelmingly positive and after visiting a number of these schools a few times, I was able to see why there was an immense need for these school-zone signs. Being featured on TIKVAH-Ethiopia also created the opportunity to work with other organisations that had similar goals. One such organisation is Women’s

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<sup>1</sup> Destitution here defined as a state of extreme poverty including facing the risk of homelessness and living in a household where one or more members live with disabilities

Mobility and Safety (WMS), a non-profit that works to promote the safety and livelihood of women and children across Ethiopia through a range of service works. One of their works includes raising road safety awareness by giving bimonthly trainings on road safety (coupled with cash incentives) which I am a part of. I currently serve as a board member and in charge of the technical aspects of their work including drafting monthly reports. Even though other fund-raising efforts did not contribute to this project, the TMA office was kind enough to allocate two of its staff engineers for helping mount the signs, indirectly reducing costs. The long-term goals of my project are threefold: 1. To do this project on a bigger scale including in regions outside of the capital by setting up a GoFundMe page and using this project as a springboard 2. To expand the scope of the project to include other road safety measures such as expanding the use of zebra crossings by establishing a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) 3. To continue raising road safety awareness and to build a long-term partnership with WMS.

Although I do not recall a point throughout the duration of the project when I didn't think the project wasn't going to work, there were definitely some setbacks along the process. Shipping the signs to Ethiopia was particularly challenging as the total weight of the signs was quite large (more than 116 pounds!) and shipping them to Ethiopia using a regular mailing service wasn't going to work as it turned out to be too expensive. Another challenge was infrastructure unreadiness in the selected areas which had us wondering if the signs were going to be as effective as we thought they would be. The TMA has agreed to pair the signs with zebra crossings in the near future. The current political climate in Ethiopia has also created a tense environment in the country where it has made it difficult to do things with ease as before. When it comes to communication challenges, there were quite a few of them. Getting hold of road safety officials was not an easy feat, partly because of the pandemic. There were a number of unanswered emails and cancelled meetings. Once I arrived in Ethiopia with the signs, there was an even bigger challenge. Airport security officials wanted to make sure the signs are indeed going to be used for non-profit work and that we aren't reselling or redistributing them which took a lot of explaining and several calls to the TMA's office.

I understand peace as the absence of conflict – both internal and external, and I believe a big part of it involves living in the absence of fear. The road to recovery for RTA victims is not always peaceful and I believe prevention is the best solution. Through this project, I learned that complex problems require multifaceted solutions and that our interests might not necessarily align with others' priorities which is why patience and perseverance should be at the forefront of every project. Moreover, I was able to see that our actions, no matter how small, are quite significant and touch the lives of more people than we usually expect. Working on this project has been a very meaningful and rewarding experience. The encouragement and support I received from everyone around me has inspired me to want to do more in the future. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic did not have a substantial impact on the project, it did make it difficult to get hold of road safety officials since most have started working from home. It did deter us from holding larger in-person meetings as well. With a little bit of improvisation, we were able to make it work. My advice for future Projects for Peace grantees would be to always be willing to improvise. Not every aspect of a project goes exactly as planned and so it is important to be open to new ways of doing things.

*“Traffic Signs, Save Lives is a testament to the fact that complex problems usually require multifaceted solutions and that a step toward the right direction, no matter how small, can bring about a significant change. By ensuring the safety of school children, by equipping the community with the necessary road safety knowledge, and by encouraging other institutions to follow suit, we were able to meet all our goals for this project and more.”*

*-Nebiyat Esubalew (Team Leader)*

*Permanent email address: [esubales@gmail.com](mailto:esubales@gmail.com)*





Top - a group photo with General Tadesse Birru Memorial Primary and Secondary School students



Left - presenting the school-zone traffic signs to TMA Deputy Director Engineer Birhanu Girma

Right - a sign mounted near Meskaye Hizunan Medhane Alem Monastery High School

