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## ROAD SAFETY POLICY IN FRANCE: THE GAP BETWEEN TECHNICAL EXPERTISE AND POLITICS

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### ABSTRACT

National Road safety policy in France is focused on controlling and punishing driver behaviour. And yet, technical knowledge exists that shows the importance of the road layout in achieving gains in safety and limiting the risk of accidents –notably in urban areas where there is a trend towards questioning the place of the automobile. This technical knowledge generally does not find its way into public policy. The result is an under-implementation of road safety objectives. This paper focuses on understanding this under-implementation using the theoretical tools of public policy analysis.

First, road safety in France is not yet a truly important political and social issue. For instance, “Green” ecologist political parties have been mobilised around questions of sustainable development and mobility but they have not taken up the question of road safety. Road safety policy is not a priority value for decision makers, for local authorities or for engineers that work in local authority services.

Secondly, our main hypothesis is that road safety can become a real issue thanks to the local level...National-level policy is the level of discourse for changing road users' attitudes...To change the way of conceiving this policy, it may be important to take a local point of view and local traffic accident data (territorialised expertise)...but road safety is still a non-decentralised policy in a decentralised politico-administrative system.

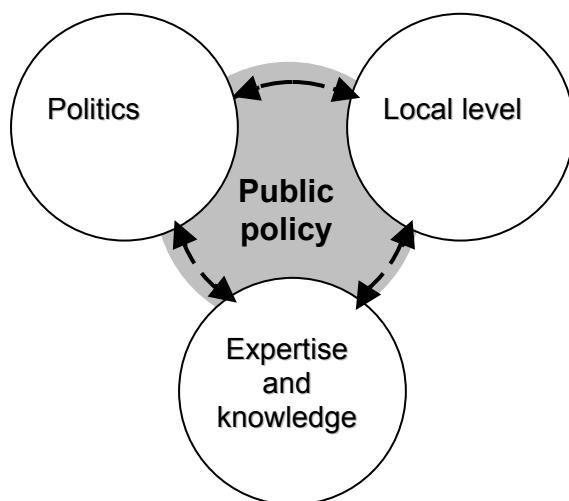
Thirdly, as a consequence of both the first and second points, road safety science is not a recognised science.

## FRAME OF REFERENCE

This paper focuses on the analysis of road safety policy in France. Public policy analysis is mainly organised around three spheres:

- analysing how politicians consider roads as a public problem to be solved.
- taking the local levels into account and studying the impact of levels of government on the structuring links between expertise/policies and politics.
- understanding the main characteristics of the technical knowledge that shapes policy.

**Figure 1. Hypothesis on the fields mobilised to analyse road safety policy.  
The ideal rational, well-balanced model.**



## I THE ROAD SAFETY PROBLEM: NON-POLITICAL AND NON-IDEOLOGICAL?

Since 2002, in France, President Jacques Chirac has presented road safety policy as his “priority” for his five-year term. Since his announcement, this public problem has been on the agenda and the French government has developed a national public policy to reduce traffic accidents.

What is this policy? The main characteristics of this policy include:

- strong communication on a “change of attitude” among road users.
- strong communication on new rules and laws and their strict application (drugs, alcohol, speed, etc.).
- mobilisation of the police force to be visible on the road.

Since July 2002, there has been strong media pressure. Every month the government (mainly the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Equipment) presents road safety data. They use these indicators as an argument and to show that they have been obtaining good results since they presented road safety as their priority. They attribute this general downward trend to their policy.

**Fig 2 Number and percentage of change, 2002 vs. 2001 and 2003 vs. 2002, for injury accidents, killed and injured persons. Monthly comparison since July 2002 (President's speech on road safety)**

	Injury accidents		Killed		Injured persons	
	Number	Evolution (%)	Number	Evolution (%)	Number	Evolution (%)
July 2002	9 141	-9.5	661	-12.2	12 333	-9.6
August 2002	8 067	-10.2	634	-1.6	11 135	-10.4
September 2002	9 077	-9.5	601	-11.2	11 651	-12.0
October 2002	9 507	-13.9	666	-4.6	12 070	-13.7
November 2002	8 771	-11.0	572	-11.3	11 366	-10.2
December 2002	7 817	-14.9	526	-30.4	10 119	-15.8
Total year 2002	105 470	-9.7	7 242	-6.2	137 839	-10.5
January 2003	5 873	-29	395	-33.3	7 549	-30
February 2003	5 579	-27	364	-35.9	7 058	-29
March 2003	7 325	-18	454	-24.7	9 090	-21
April 2003	6 984	-19	405	-29.7	8 847	-20
May 2003	7 644	-16	530	-13.4	9 832	-17
June 2003	8 402	-11	542	-14.1	10 865	-12
July 2003	unknow n	unknown	535	-19.1	unknow n	unknown
August 2003	6 785	-15.9	525	-17.2	9 224	-17.2
Provisional total 2003	56 662	-19.4	3 750	-23.1	73 004	-21.2

Sources : National observatory for road safety ; Road safety quick indicator 2003, European Commission Directorate General for energy and transport, August 2003.

Compared with other policies, what is striking it is that there is no public debate on this policy. There is a spineless political consensus. This public problem is not taken into consideration in the political sphere.

First, no one stresses the fact that these data are not that easy to understand. If we take a more global look at these indicators, it is quite difficult to have such a definite opinion on this policy, which is less effective than we might think when just reading the events as they are presented. For instance, it is important to know that the data for the beginning of 2002 were very bad in order to understand the percentage change for 2003 vs. 2002, which seems very good...

That is just a small example to show that, politically, road safety is a neutral problem, "just" a technical one. Why is road safety not ideologically debatable or questionable?<sup>1</sup>

Yet, road safety problems can raise very important issues:

- Economic issues: there is much more lobbying for mobility than for safety (car industry and automobile clubs' ambiguous positioning). Certain economic issues prevail over safety.
- Environmental issues: safety could be included in a huge debate on sustainable mobility because fewer cars and less speed are good both for the environment and for road safety.

<sup>1</sup> This is not a typically French observation. In her paper "Road safety rhetoric versus road safety politics", Karin Koltzow shows that in Norway, whereas top level decision makers rank road-related measures above effective ones (before measures related to police enforcement and before information, education and change of attitude), there are strong reasons for continuing to promote less effective measures: it is easy to put forward a demand for a change of attitude among road users, it's a cheap policy, an easy-going and non-obliging statement. For her, road safety is a "suppressed field of political action" because of other, stronger values like "freedom of the car" or the need of mobility for economic development. KOLTZOW K., (1993), "Road safety rhetoric versus road safety politics", *Accident analysis and prevention*, vol. 25, no. 6, pp 647-657.

- Citizenship issues: to regulate our societies, what do we prefer? New laws, new rules and stronger controls or collective regulation?

But these issues do not show up on the political scene. "Green" ecologist political parties have been mobilised around questions of sustainable development and mobility but they have not taken up the question of road safety. Parties on the left have criticised the government's obsession with security but road safety is still being forgotten.

Our main hypothesis is that road safety can become a real issue thanks to the local level...National-level policy is the level of discourse for changing road users' attitudes...To change the way of conceiving this policy, it may be important to have a local point of view and local traffic accident data...but road safety is not yet a decentralised policy.

## II ROAD SAFETY POLICY: A NON-TERRITORIAL POLICY?

France has long been the epitome of a strong, centralised state with extensive governance capacity. But, the decentralisation reforms<sup>2</sup> that were implemented during the 1980s changed this pattern to some extent. The central state is today less *dirigiste* and allows for more autonomy at the local level (the town council for town planning and the *département* for roads). Also, local authorities have become increasingly important centres of innovation in public policy. Nevertheless, local representatives of the state remain a key player in the French administrative system. Actually, a large majority of local authorities continue to look to the local representatives of the state for help, even though they have been legally competent since the decentralisation reforms. For instance, the 90 *départements* have been responsible for road management and the *communes* have been responsible for land-use planning. They can manage these policies on their own, but in fact, they opt for a form of co-administration with the local representatives of the state<sup>3</sup>.

In sum, it is now generally admitted – including by the central state – that the local level is the most appropriate scale at which to co-ordinate public policies. The devolution<sup>4</sup> of state power can be seen as a process of constant adaptation of territorial administrative organisation in order to be more effective: from a stable order of powers and of rules to a system in which the rule is the constant adaptation of the state according to territorial specificity, problems and needs.

Taking the Ministry of *Equipement* as a case study<sup>5</sup>, we have shown that the central state has had difficulties in adapting its way of working. The devolution principle affirms that the central state's role is to plan policies by fixing the main lines and not to intervene in operational processes. In reality, the central state does not respect this distinction. At the present time, in many fields, central decision makers are not able to define the policy they are supposed to plan and thus, they are unable to propose a strategy with hierarchical objectives. Because of the vagueness of their aims, they sometimes continue to manage local services in an operational, day-to-day manner, or they are often totally absent and let local services work on their own.

What has happened to road safety policy is the first case scenario: the central state has tried to impose its policy (changing attitudes through information and communication, measures related to police enforcement and sanctions) on the local level.

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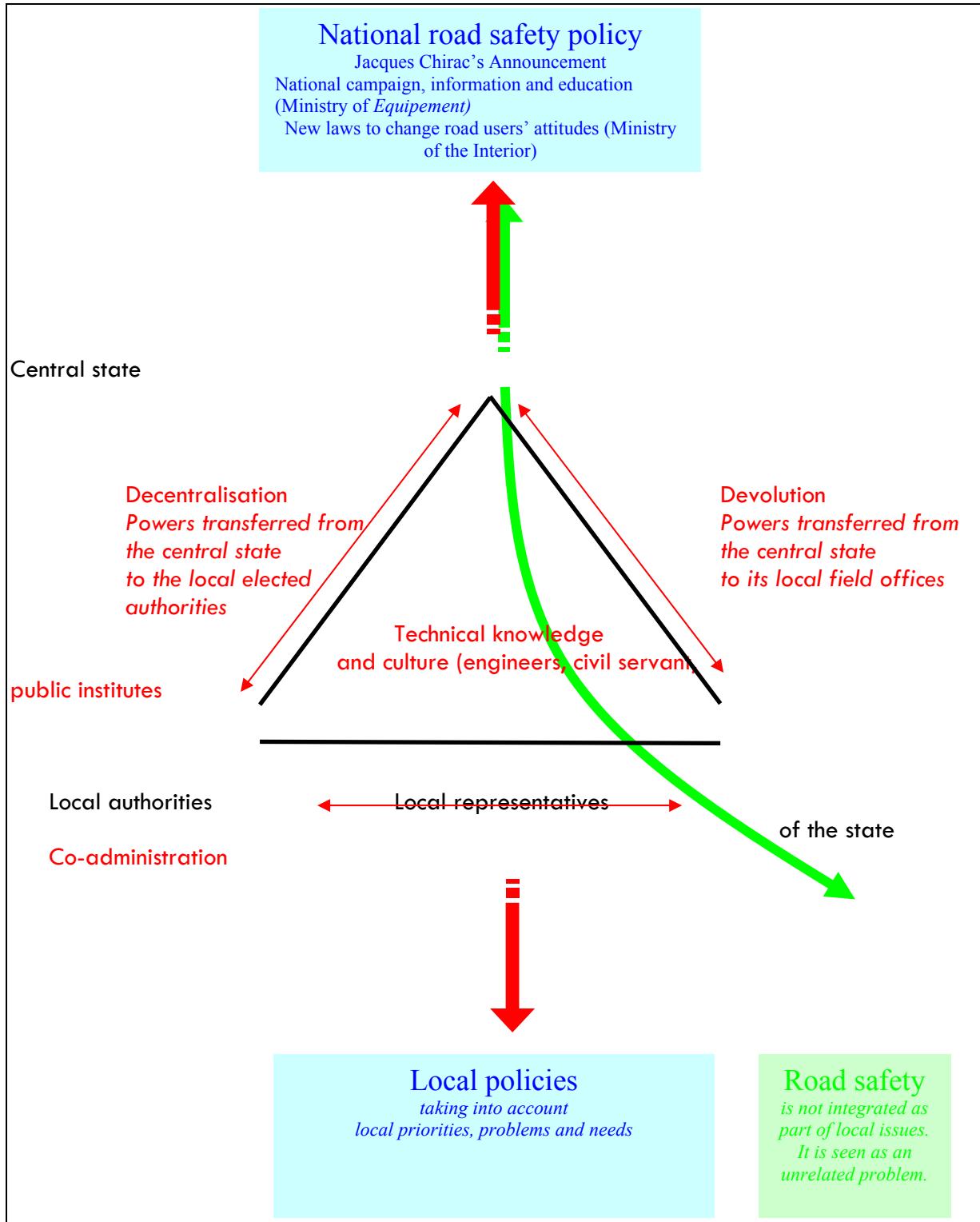
<sup>2</sup> Decentralisation is: powers transferred from the central state to the elected local authorities.

<sup>3</sup> REIGNER H. (2001), "Multi-level governance or co-administration? Transformation and continuity in French Local Government", *Policy and Politics*, special issue "Multi-level governance", April 2001, pp. 181-192.

<sup>4</sup> Devolution is: powers transferred from the central state to its local field offices.

<sup>5</sup> REIGNER H. (2002), *Les DDE et le politique. Quelle co-administration des territoires ?*, Paris, L'Harmattan.

**Figure 3. Road safety : a non-decentralised policy in a decentralised politico-administrative system**



### III ROAD SAFETY SCIENCE: AN UNRECOGNISED SCIENCE?

Technical knowledge exists that shows the importance of the road layout in achieving gains in safety and limiting the risk of accidents. But, as a consequence of both the first and second points, this technical knowledge generally does not find its way into public policy. Over the years, road safety scientists and engineers have produced many results showing what road safety measures could be effective... They have become somewhat discouraged... Moreover, road safety science has become an unattractive field.

Over the years, strong knowledge of roads has been accumulated.

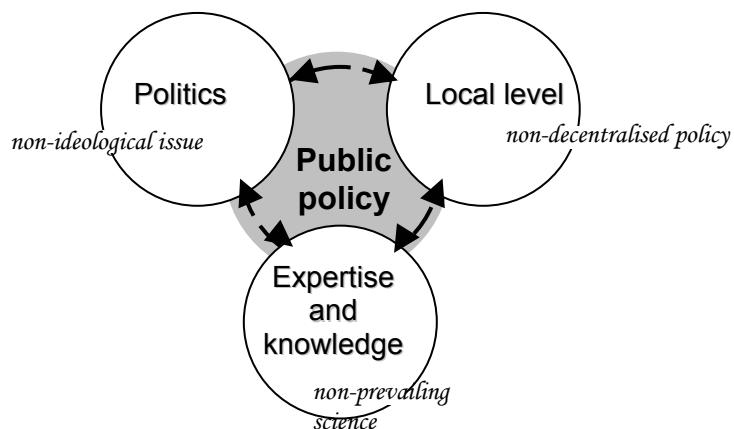
This knowledge and technical culture concerning roads has, in France, been strongly organised by and for the public sector. The Ministry of *Equipement* has historically been characterised by the highly homogeneous culture of road engineers (often members of a prestigious corps recruited from the "Grandes Ecoles"). Within this corporation, road safety does not appear to be a priority. What seems to be important for these engineers is to build roads in an interesting way for civil engineering works, for mobility and for fluidity. This means comfortable roads that allow speed and technical achievement. In this context, road safety is not considered as an attractive field in the hierarchy of science engineers.

Safety science is becoming concentrated in specialised institutes (such as Inrets) and it is quite difficult to decompartmentalise its subjects. For instance, in political science and public policies analysis, there is nothing about road safety policy. It is not an object of public policy analysis because it is not considered a political issue.

So is it a technical issue ? No. The technical issue surrounding roads and cars is mobility and the environment.

There is a feeling among planners and researchers that almost every question about traffic<sup>6</sup> can be answered with the use of currently available knowledge. But this science does not prevail for decision makers. Others are beginning to be interested in this science: the victims of road crashes. Usually, decision makers put forward a demand for a change in attitudes among road users. Recently, road users have begun to put forward a demand for responsibility among road decision-makers.

**Figure 4 Road safety – a vicious circle**



<sup>6</sup> VARMING M. (1990), "The knowledge is there, but not the political will", *Actes du congrès Vivre et Circuler en ville*, Paris, 29-31 January, Ed Cetur.

#### IV CONCLUSION. CALLING ROAD SAFETY POLICY INTO QUESTION:

##### ROAD VICTIMS AND THE LEGAL SCENE

Ulrich Beck has analysed post-modern society as a 'risk-society'. Our societies are characterised by 'organised irresponsibility' whereby risk producers are protected at the expense of risk victims. He has examined how our leading social institutions, in economics, law and politics, are engaged in not only producing those risks, but in making the resulting risks socially non-existent. He has done research on risks to health and the environment<sup>7</sup>.

Since the beginning of the 80s, in France as in several other Western nations, the emergence of the notion of "risk" in the reflections of the authorities is linked to the growing impossibility of keeping ordinary people out of the decision-making processes and the framing of public actions on this matter.

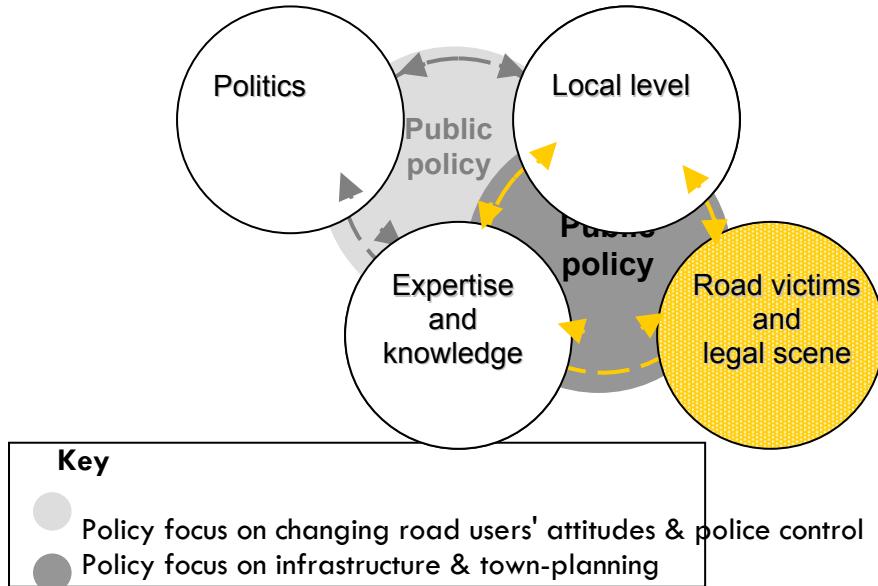
Actually, since the early 1980s, it has become more common that, following a collective accident, the injured persons and parents or relatives of those injured or dead mobilise collectively and make claims. There has been a strong trend from victims to initiate proceedings against decision-makers. The most spectacular concerned "AIDS-tainted blood": the Minister of Health was accused of manslaughter (through negligence). Another case has concerned the asbestos used in many public buildings (such as universities).

Some research has shown how these victims' mobilisation has come about and their impact on policy<sup>8</sup>.

Recently, road crash victims have accused the automobile industry. They may continue accusing the decision-makers responsible for roads, infrastructures and town-planning.

We venture as a hypothesis that the legal sphere may well be the place where road safety policy will be raised into a real issue and break this vicious circle<sup>9</sup>.

**Figure 5. Towards a bottom-up model for road safety policy?**



<sup>7</sup> "Risk may be defined as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself". The risk society is characterised essentially by a lack: the impossibility of an external attribution of hazards. In other words, risks depend on decisions, they are industrially produced and in this sense politically reflexive". BECK U. (1992), *Risk Society, Towards a New Modernity*. Trans. from the German by Mark Ritter, and with an Introduction by Scott Lash and Brian Wynne. London; Sage Publications.

<sup>8</sup> LEMIEUX C., BARTHE Y. (1998), "Les risques collectifs sous le regard des sciences du politique", *Politix*, n°44, pp 7-28.

<sup>9</sup> This point is in keeping with a collective research directed by M. Guilbot. GUILBOT M. (2003), *La mise en cause de la responsabilité des auteurs indirects : un levier pour une réelle prise en compte de la sécurité des déplacements par les décideurs publics* ?, projet de recherche Prédit, GO3.

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