

This week, the worldwide road safety community has pulled together for the Third United Nations Global Road Safety Week and the #SaveKidsLives campaign, which highlights the shocking dangers faced by children on the world's roads – every day over 500 children are killed while many thousands more are injured. The time for action is now.

Unfortunately, this year's Global Road Safety Week is also marked by controversy as a result of a little-known UN process: the antiquated, secretive appointment of UN Special Envoys.

Surprisingly, there are no requirements for public consultation, comment, or, indeed, any disclosure whatsoever, on why and how UN Special Envoy appointments are made. It's simply the Secretary General's private choice. Even UN agencies are not consulted. Usually we assume the Secretary General makes the best decision possible based on the information available; most of the time these appointments are uncontroversial.

But this Global Road Safety Week, here is the result of that opaque, non-consultative process: the surprise appointment last week of Jean Todt, President of Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) – the organization that governs Formula 1 and automobile clubs worldwide – as UN Special Envoy for Road Safety.

According to the FIA's website, its mission is “representing the rights of motoring organizations and motor car users throughout the world via campaigns and activities that defend their interests.” Yet more than 50% of all traffic deaths are among pedestrians, cyclists, and users of public transport – populations with no powerful group like FIA lobbying for them, and whose interests are clearly at odds with those of FIA's constituents.

And, while Formula 1 is surely exciting and enjoyed by millions, it thrives commercially by promoting the allure of speed and danger to a predominately young, male audience that also happens to be the demographic most frequently involved in road crashes.

We have no doubts about Mr. Todt's sincere personal commitment to road safety, but it is clear that there are multiple conflicts of interest in the head of FIA being the UN Special Envoy for Road Safety. That is why so many NGOs, academics, governments, and international institutions involved in road safety are disheartened by last week's sudden announcement. It is akin to appointing the head of a tobacco company as UN Special Envoy for Cancer.

But there is a simple solution to the problem: mandate a transparent process and public consultation period for all UN Special Envoy appointments. The controversy surrounding Mr. Todt's appointment is a direct result of the lack of such a process.

It is surprising that, in the 21st century, behind-closed-doors processes like this still exist at the UN. Indeed, some member states have already begun to call for the reform of how Special Envoys are appointed. This Global Road Safety Week, we encourage and support these calls for reform.

Building consensus among disparate and often contentious groups of stakeholders is never easy. But that is exactly the kind of hard work that the UN needs to be doing – and doing in the light of day – if it strives to represent all global citizens, including child pedestrians in the developing world who are suffering from an epidemic of road traffic injury (more than 4% of children in some of urban areas in Africa are injured *every year*, for instance) and don't have well-funded advocates at their disposal.