

European Perspectives

This new regular section looks at emerging issues with a definite pan-European focus and high significance for transport and/or infrastructure research. Three general inter-related themes will be examined in the new section – policy, practice and research. The connections between these themes will also be the focus of the section. Sometimes the section will primarily address one of these themes and at other times it will address two or all three of the themes. The policy theme will include recent developments in European transport policy and also recent developments in environmental, regional development and economic policy where there are specific implications for transport. The practice theme will include issues such as European benchmarking and pilot projects as well as recent developments in different transport industries across Europe (shipping, aviation and rail for example) and prospects for the future. The research theme will include topics such as recent developments in European research priorities and funding opportunities for transport and/or infrastructure research.

The European Transport White Paper

Dominic Stead

OTB Research Institute for Housing, Urban and Mobility Studies

Delft University of Technology

Delft

The Netherlands

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In September 2001 the new European Transport White Paper was published: “European transport policy for 2020: time to decide”¹. Like its predecessor, the first transport white paper of 1992 (Commission of the European Communities, 1992), the document identifies a 10-year strategy for European transport policy. According to the Commission, the new document marks “*a qualitative change of direction in transport policy*” (European Commission, 2001). Whereas the previous transport white paper emphasised the opening up of the transport market, the new white paper claims to place more emphasis on transport users’ needs. However, critics argue that despite the emphasis on transport users’ needs, the document was produced without input or review from stakeholders.

The white paper is divided into four main parts:

1. shifting the balance between modes of transport
2. eliminating bottlenecks
3. putting users at the heart of transport policy
4. managing the globalisation of transport

¹ Commission of the European Communities (2001). *European transport policy for 2020: time to decide* [COM(2001)370]. Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg [http://europa.eu.int/comm/off/white/index_en.htm].

In Part 1, the European Commission explains that there is a growing imbalance between transport modes in Europe. It states that the success of road and air transport is resulting in ever worsening congestion while the full potential of rail and shipping is not being fulfilled. The Commission argues that unless competition between modes is better regulated there will be even greater imbalances in the future. It suggests that two priority objectives need to be met before 2010: regulated competition between modes, and a linking of modes for successful intermodality.

In Part 2, the European Commission explains that bottlenecks on many of the main international transport routes are posing a major problem for Europe. If these are not addressed, it argues that the internal market and territorial cohesion of the EU will not be fully realised. Therefore, the Commission sets out proposals for a two-stage revision of the guidelines underpinning the trans-European network (TEN). The first of these, due in October 2001, will concentrate on eliminating bottlenecks, completing designated priority routes and improving access to outlying regions. The Commission will present a more extensive review of the TEN in 2004, which will focus on encouraging 'sea motorways', developing airport capacity, linking outlying regions with the centre and integrating the networks of accession countries with those of EU countries.

In Part 3, the European Commission argues that transport users should be able to enjoy a system that meets their needs and expectations. It advocates that users' needs should be at the heart of transport policy. In the transport white paper, users' needs equate to considerations about safety, external costs (social and environmental) and intermodality (including interchange between modes and the integration of timetables, ticketing and baggage handling).

In Part 4, the European Commission states that much transport is increasingly regulated at the international level and argues that with the enlargement of the EU on the horizon and the TEN soon to extend across the continent, the European Union needs to rethink its international role within organisations such as the International Civil Aviation Organisation and the International Maritime Organisation.

The White Paper contains no formal legislative proposals but indicates areas where the Commission intends to initiate action over the next few years. The document sets out more than sixty transport policy measures to be taken at the Community level over the next ten years (Box 1). It also contains an action programme (as an appendix to the main document), which specifies a timetable for the introduction of various policy measures, and proposes a monitoring system, which will be used to make an overall assessment (including economic, social and environmental impacts) of the implementation of the measures advocated in the White Paper. The document commits the European Commission to continue to quantify its policy objectives and announces the intention to produce a communication in 2002 on the matter.

Box 1. Some of the main measures proposed by the white paper

Theme	Examples
Passengers' rights	Changes to air passenger rights including compensation for air travel delays and denied boarding due to overbooking. Extension of passenger protection measures to other modes such as rail and water transport.
Road safety	Proposals concerning the signposting of accident blackspots, combating excessively long driving times, harmonising road transport penalties at the European level and increasing the use of new technologies in transport.
Congestion	A new programme (the Marco Polo Programme) to support intermodal initiatives and alternatives to road transport in the early stages until they become commercially viable.
Sustainable mobility	Measures to develop fair infrastructure charging which takes into account external costs and encourages the use of the least polluting modes of transport.
Harmonised taxation	Proposals for harmonising taxes on diesel for commercial use to reduce distortions of competition in the liberalised road transport market.
Transport services	Proposals for harmonising working conditions, especially in road transport, to promote safety and improve transport service quality. Actions to encourage good practice in the provision of high quality urban transport services.
Infrastructure	Completion of 'missing links', particularly the trans-European high-speed passenger rail network and infrastructure with genuine potential for transferring goods from road to rail.
Radionavigation	Proposals for a European radionavigation system with potential applications for transport (location and measurement of vehicle speed) as well as telecommunications, medicine (telemedicine), law enforcement (electronic tagging) and agriculture (geographical information systems).

By implementing these measures the European Commission believes that it will be possible to break the link between transport growth and economic growth without the need to restrict the mobility of people and goods (the idea of 'decoupling'²). To this end, the measures contained within the White Paper are presented as a step towards the delivery of a more sustainable transport system. The European Commission recognises that transport policy alone is not sufficient to tackle current transport problems and advocates an integrated approach with other areas of policy-making, such as economic policy, land-use planning policy, social and education policy and competition policy³.

Where the document is weak is in being explicit about its overall objectives and in specifying the relationship between European transport policy and transport policy at the national and sub-national level. The document contains a wide range of objectives (such as promoting passenger rights, improving road safety, preventing congestion, harmonising taxation, managing globalisation and so on) but does not indicate whether or how these objectives are inter-related or whether there are indeed compatible with each other. In general, the document reads like a collection of separate contributions from different sections within the European

² Decoupling transport growth from the growth in Gross Domestic Product is one of the headline objectives of the European Commission's recent communication on sustainable development (Commission of the European Communities, 2001 p12) but more of a secondary objective of the transport white paper.

³ Decoupling transport growth and economic growth is also the subject of a two-year research project about to be funded by the European Commission under the third call of the Fifth Framework Growth Programme [<http://www.cordis.lu/growth/calls/200101.htm>].

Commission which have been written in the absence of a common vision for European transport policy. Indeed, the lack of a clear policy direction for the white paper is acknowledged (albeit implicitly) in the statement that the European Commission is still working on the quantification of its policy objectives (and this will be the subject of a future communication from the Commission scheduled for 2002). Compared to the previous white paper, it is really the emphasis that has changed rather than the content.

In terms of the implications for European transport and infrastructure research, the European Commission outlines the need for “*less concrete and more intelligence in the transport system*” and indicates that future research will be targeted on the objectives set out in the white paper. According to the white paper, the European Research Area and one of its main instruments, the new research framework programme for 2002-2006, will provide the opportunity to put the objectives of the white paper into action, to facilitate co-ordination and increase efficiency in the system of transport research.

Press statements from various interested organisations and lobby groups are mixed in their response. Many organisations find areas for both agreement and disagreement in the document. On one hand, the document accepts that modal shift will be necessary together with other policies, it outlines the need to harmonise fuel taxes for the haulage sector, it reaffirms previous commitments to take action on transport pricing and it recognises the need to break the link between economic growth and transport growth, even if it is not given the same level importance as in the European Commission’s recent communication on sustainable development. On the other hand, it seems to be more concerned by congestion rather than sustainability, it addresses modal shift rather than demand management and focuses on the rights of transport users rather than the rights of citizens who suffer the effects of transport. One thing is agreed: more reactions to the document will certainly appear over the next few months.

References

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