

The Development of the Integrated Transport System in the Arab Mashreq

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Beirut

The main objective of ESCWA is to promote economic and social development through regional and sub-regional cooperation and integration, thus serving as the main socioeconomic development arm of the United Nations in Western Asia. ESCWA has 14 members: Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Five of these members belong to the Mediterranean region. It formulates and promotes development assistance activities and projects commensurate with the needs and priorities of the region and acts as an executing agency for relevant operational projects.

Also, ESCWA seeks to strengthen regional cooperation and integration in the region, thereby facilitating the trans-boundary flow of goods, services, and capital in order to meet the economic and social challenges posed by globalization and benefit from its opportunities.

On the other hand, the facilitation of transport and trade has recently acquired additional significance in the light of such contemporary developments as globalization, the increasing number of calls for the formation of regional economic blocs, the establishment of free trade zones and the consequent work involved in reducing obstacles to the flow of international goods. Accordingly, ESCWA has been undertaking a number of activities in this connection, focussing on the adoption of agreements and recommendations that ESCWA promotes and coordinates, aiming at transport and trade facilitation in the region.

In recognition of the importance of the subject, ESCWA, at its 19th session, held in 1997, adopt-

ed its resolution 213 (XIX) on the establishment of a committee on transport within the Commission. The Economic and Social Council endorsed the resolution by its resolution 1997/11 of 18 July 1997 (Annex 1).

Since its creation in 1997, the ESCWA Committee on Transport (i.e. the Committee) has provided the legal framework for intergovernmental cooperation and concerted action aimed at the development of an integrated transport system and the facilitation of transport and trade in the region. Since then the Committee has conducted nine sessions and is currently organizing the 10th (Beirut, 31 March-2 April 2009).

The first session of the Committee (Beirut, 9-10 February 1999) declared a statement on the adoption and development of the Integrated Transport System in the Arab Mashreq (ITSAM). The statement was issued during the ESCWA's 20th session held in Beirut on 27-28 May 1999 (Annex 2).

The concept of ITSAM is based on the fact that the transport sector, including land, sea and air modes, has a strategically significant role to play in fostering and sustaining the socioeconomic development of the ESCWA countries and in promoting their integration, notably by enhancing flows of trade and tourists among them and between countries in the region and the rest of the world.

The ITSAM approach is concerned with the development of an integrated infrastructure; the facilitation of procedures, operations and logistics; the formulation of regional multilateral agreements; and the promotion of appropriate recommendations, including legal and administrative reforms. Some of these major achievements are summarized in the following paragraphs.

The most important components of ITSAM are: (a) the Agreement on International Roads in the Arab Mashreq; (b) the Agreement on International Railways

in the Arab Mashreq; (c) the Memorandum of Understanding on Maritime Transport Cooperation in the Arab Mashreq; (d) National Transport and Trade Facilitation Committees; (e) road safety; (f) multimodal transport; (g) institutional frameworks and legislation; (h) the ITSAM Methodological Framework; and (i) the related geographic information system (GIS).

As an integral part of the development of the ITSAM regional network, the Commission resolved to work on the harmonization of regional road network specifications by preparing the Agreement on International Roads in the Arab Mashreq (i.e. the Roads Agreement). The preparation and negotiation of the Roads Agreement took more than three years of extensive discussions and negotiations in several expert group meetings and consecutive sessions of the Committee on Transport. The preparation and discussion included a thorough analysis and review of existing international, regional and national road standards and specifications, as well as legal implications.

The Roads Agreement forms the basis of an international network of roads with unified specifications built in conformity with internationally acceptable standards. This would facilitate the flow of goods and passengers among and across the countries of the region. The second session of the Committee on Transport (Beirut, 6-7 February 2001) finalized the draft Roads Agreement. The ESCWA member countries at the 21st session of ESCWA on 10 May 2001 unanimously adopted the Roads Agreement. Mr Kofi Anan, the United Nations Secretary General at that time, in his opening speech of the 21st session of ESCWA, noted that this is the first United Nations convention to be negotiated within the framework of ESCWA since its establishment (in 1974), and hence constitutes a significant landmark in the history of the Commission.

The fifth session of the Committee on Transport (Beirut, 2-4 March 2004) adopted an action plan for the implementation of the Roads Agreement, and the sixth session of the Committee (Beirut, 22-24 March 2005) selected two major priority routes in the Roads Agreement, M40 (Iraq, Jordan, Palestine and Mediterranean Southern Coast) and M45 (Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen), in order to focus on their improvements to speed up the implementation of the agreement. As of today 11 members (including the five Mediterranean members) have joined the agreement that entered in force on 19 October 2003. And implementation of the agreement has begun in many of those countries.

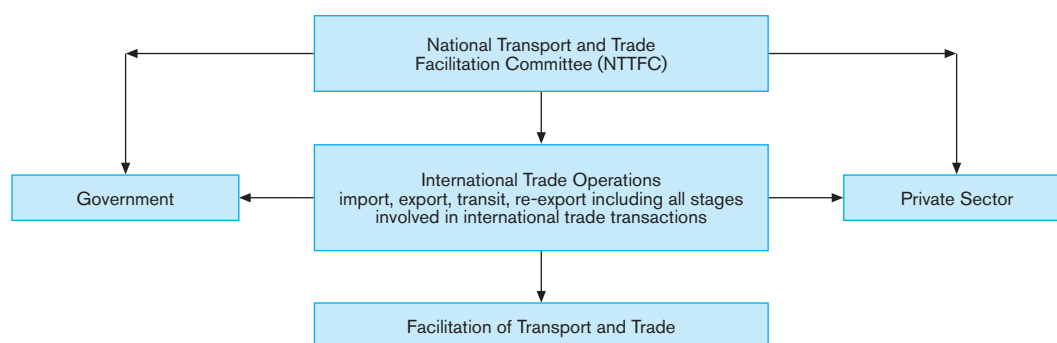
The ESCWA Roads Agreement covers more than 31,400 kilometres of international roads distributed over 13 major routes between north and south and 10 between east and west. These roads are numbered in such a way to allow the extension of the agreement to include the countries of the Arab Maghreb should they wish to do so. Care was taken to ensure that signs, signals and road markings are in conformity with the Vienna Convention of 1968 and as amended. A special sign has been designed for the roads included in the agreement; Figure (1) shows the sign that identifies the international roads in the agreement. The agreement includes 13 articles and three annexes. Pursuant to Article 7 of the agreement, which states, "Parties thereto may propose amendments," a few amendments to the agreement and the respective map have been requested by Saudi Arabia and Syria and recently approved by the Secretary General of the United Nations, acting in his capacity as depositary, on 16 December 2008. On the other hand, Sudan (recent member of ESCWA, 2008) has requested to join the agreement in February 2009.

FIGURE 1

Road Sign for the International Roads in the Arab Mashreq



The second major component of the ITSAM is the Agreement on International Railways in the Arab Mashreq (i.e. the Railways Agreement). The Railways Agreement had been prepared by ESCWA in reference with the consciousness of the salient characteristics of railways with respect to construction and running costs, speed, safety, regularity, personal comfort and environmental conservation, and affirming the importance and necessity of providing railway links between the countries of the region in accordance with a well-studied plan for the construction and development of an international railway network in order to meet future transport needs, protect the environment and facilitate the movement of goods and passengers and, as a result, increase the exchange of trade and tourism in the Arab



Mashreq, which will greatly promote Arab regional integration.

The third session of the Committee (Beirut, 5-7 March 2002) finalized the draft Railways Agreement that was consequently adopted at the 22nd ministerial session of the Commission on 14 April 2003. As of today, eight member countries (including the five Mediterranean members) have joined the Railways Agreement that entered into force on 23 May 2005. The seventh session of the Committee (Beirut, 17-19 April 2006) adopted the plan of action for the implementation of the agreement (Beirut, 27-29 March 2007). The Railways Agreement includes 12 articles and two annexes and covers more than 19,528 kilometres of international railways, distributed over six major routes between north and south and 10 between east and west. These routes are numbered in such a way to allow the extension of the agreement to include the countries of the Arab Maghreb should they wish to do so. In this respect, ESCWA contributed to the preparation of the planned railways network to connect the Arab countries in cooperation with the League of Arab States (LAS) based on the expansion of the Railways Agreement to cover the Arab Maghreb region, using the same specifications and numbering system. The planned Arab railways network has been recently adopted by the Arab countries during the Economic and Social Summit of the LAS (Kuwait, 19-20 January 2009).

Taking into consideration that maritime transport plays an important role in strengthening intraregional and foreign trade and promotes the economic and social integration of the ESCWA region, ESCWA adopted the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Maritime Transport Cooperation at the 23rd ministerial session of ESCWA (Damascus, 9-12 May 2005). The mem-

orandum entered into force on 4 September 2006 and has been joined so far by eight members (including three Mediterranean countries, namely Lebanon, Palestine and Syria).

In view of the considerable challenges faced by the economies of the states in the ESCWA region and in light of the low volume of intra-regional trade, the reduced level of exports to other states, and the adverse impact of inefficient procedures for international freight flows across borders, ESCWA has been rigorously tackling the subject. In 2000 ESCWA completed a comprehensive field study on the facilitation of international freight transport in the ESCWA region. The study carried out a detailed survey of the procedures for freight transport across borders in the region, analyzed the obstacles to such trade flows and put forward appropriate recommendations for the facilitation and harmonization of transport and trade procedures and operations in the states of the region.

Moreover, the third session of the Committee on Transport approved the recommendation pertaining to the establishment of National Transport and Trade Facilitation Committees (NTTFC) in the countries of the ESCWA region. The manual for the establishment of the national facilitation committees including the proposed implementation steps was finalized during the fourth session of the Committee on Transport (Beirut, 14-16 January 2003). Chart 29 summarizes the establishment of the NTTFC. So far, nine ESCWA members (including the five Mediterranean members) have already established national facilitation committees.

The UN development account project on "capacity building in trade facilitation and electronic business in the Mediterranean" had been implemented jointly

by the UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and ESCWA during 2002-2005. Participating countries in the ESCWA region included all five Mediterranean countries: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria. The project deliverables included national trade facilitation audits, national workshops in which the findings of the studies were reviewed and discussed with public and private sector stakeholders, and regional seminars to review and discuss results. The project has been instrumental in advancing the establishment of NTTFC in participating countries.

The UN development account project on “capacity building in developing interregional land and land-sea transport linkages” had been implemented jointly by all five UN regional economic commissions and coordinated by ESCWA for six years from 2002 through 2007. The project was completed with great success in several aspects including but not limited to the identification of interregional road, road-sea, rail and rail-sea transport linkages connecting Africa, Asia and Europe. GIS maps and software of the interregional linkages were produced by the project.

As a result of the recent rapid development of international transport, which is especially apparent in the widespread use of containers in the majority of transport modes, international multimodal transport of goods has become one of the most important activities that contribute to streamlining the flow of international trade. Therefore ESCWA drafted a Convention on Multi-Modal Transport among the Arab Countries (i.e. the Convention) in cooperation with the League of Arab States. The 21st session of the Arab Transport Ministers Council (Port Said, 29 October 2008) adopted the final unified draft of the Convention and thanked ESCWA for its valuable efforts and cooperation with LAS in preparing the Convention.

As far as the methodological framework for the development of ITSAM is concerned, three volumes have been issued since 2000. The first volume outlined the basic principles and elements of the ITSAM framework. The second volume described in detail the mathematical formulation of an International Freight Simultaneous Transport Equilibrium Model (IFSTEM). In 2003, the ITSAM Framework was implemented in the economic feasibility study for the facilitation of the exchange of goods across the lands and seas of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. The study was the first of its kind in the region to quantify the comparative

benefits of trade facilitation among the three countries under alternative development scenarios.

From 1999 until the present day ESCWA has been developing a geographic information system for ITSAM (GIS-ITSAM). The GIS-ITSAM includes but is not limited to GIS maps, databases and software applications for several of the components of ITSAM.

Conscious of the growing importance of road safety, ESCWA, at its 23rd session (Damascus, 9-12 May 2005) adopted resolution 256 (XXIII), which urged member countries to take part in the activities undertaken by ESCWA, including the preparation of studies and meetings on the implementation of good practices for road traffic safety. The resolution exhorted member countries to take part in the preparations for the global road safety week (which was held in April 2007) and to make an effective contribution to relevant United Nations General Assembly debates on road safety.

Pursuant to the request of the Committee on Transport, ESCWA undertook the preparation of a review of the status of road safety in selected countries of the ESCWA region. This publication, titled “Study on Assessment of Road Safety in The ESCWA Region” was submitted in two volumes; the first covered Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, and the second covered Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Furthermore, it is expected to issue a third volume that will cover Palestine and Sudan in 2009.

In conclusion, ESCWA is playing a key role in developing and promoting an integrated transportation system, ITSAM, connecting all the countries of the region. This system has been designed not only to facilitate intraregional trade and promote greater economic integration, but also to connect the ESCWA members with neighbouring countries and regions and further integrate Western Asia into the global economy. Therefore, ESCWA has a big challenge in maintaining this positive momentum not only to achieve the ambitious target by the end of 2009, but also throughout the future years and biennia to continue to assist the region in the development and implementation of relevant integrated and multimodal transport systems based and/or expanding on ITSAM.

For further information:

www.escwa.un.org/divisions/teams.asp?teams=Transport&division=EDGD