

Development of Transport in the Western Mediterranean Region

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Transport in the Mediterranean region constitutes an opportunity for integrated social and economic development in the area. It is a unifying agent with regard to the key concept of cooperation and of combining potential, and can often help to establish qualitative bonds more quickly where economic and other types of relationships and attitudes are concerned. The concept of transport can also pave the way for a new and comprehensive approach to town and country planning, and the development of the infrastructure within which it operates, and consequently proposes a new dimension for links and the exchange of people and merchandise, as well as of other less tangible goods. At present, the Mediterranean still constitutes a rather prominent border in terms of economic development. However, work and the passing of time should see these discrepancies fade away. Vigorous voluntarist policies are already being operated, with a view to developing the entire region of North Africa; a process, which moreover, involves close cooperation with the European authorities. Beyond that, the present and the future of the area should be bright with beneficial promise, for the simple reason that this area boasts many assets, including a privileged geographical location that is close to the centres of consumption and decision-making, and is thus able to attract international investments, regarding products that require a broader dissemination.

This is an area with great potential for development in the future, and which, thanks to its highly advantageous position within the world economy, may soon be on a level to be able to compete with the traditional markets of the Far East.

Furthermore, it must be considered that there is an average distance of thirty kilometres between the two shores of the Straits of Gibraltar and that once the future project has been carried out to establish a permanent link over this stretch of the sea, it will take a mere twenty minutes to travel from one shore to the other. These facts mean that it is possible to predict an increase of the journey included in the classification «urban», or at least of those made within the same conurbation. In the long or the very long term, this makes it possible to predict an incredible potential for unprecedented levels of exchange between the shores, which could contribute to local town and country planning on both sides. It will then be possible for people to live at home and maintain ties with their native land on one shore, while crossing to the other for work or do their shopping as an ordinary or daily routine. The future presence of a fast transport system could thus benefit and unify people without requiring a high degree of uprooting.

Examined within its international economic context, transport development in the western Mediterranean region comes within the scope of the construction of an area where there is a genuine partnership between the European Union and the Maghreb. The foundations for this were laid by the Barcelona Conference, held in 1995, and converted to reality through a series of associa-

tion agreements signed between the European Union and its Mediterranean partners (Tunisia in 1995, Morocco in 1996, and Algeria in 2001).

In both the north and south of the region, transport networks are already being organised and efforts are being made to develop by mutual agreement the main corridors.

For its part in the process, Europe, benefiting from a network of modern Mediterranean ports that are equipped with adequate infrastructures, is developing the north/east and south/west corridors, with the various corresponding ramifications and means of transport, opening out onto the Mediterranean. A good example of this could be the case of Spain, who has made a considerable effort in this respect, constructing around five thousand kilometres of motorways and expressways in around ten years, in addition to a high-speed railway line that serves the south of the country and is scheduled to be extended to the north, towards the French border.

Meanwhile, as part a global strategy, the countries of the Arab Maghreb Union are working on two major communication routes that are particularly worth underlining:

- The Maghreb Unity Motorway, which connects the five capitals of the region's countries, from Nouakchott in Mauritania to Tripoli in Libya, covering a distance of 6,850 kilometres. Fully asphalted, with the exception of a 470 kilometres stretch between Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, where work is still in progress, this road system currently consists of 947 kilometres of operational sections of motorway, a further

2,500 kilometres scheduled for the medium and long term, and 504 kilometres of existing roads with two lanes in each direction.

- The trans-Maghreb railway, which already connects Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, and extends over a distance of 8,383 kilometres, of which 5,587 kilometres use the European gauge. Major works are taking place with a view to renovating tracks, improving their capacity and modernising communication and signalling facilities.

Morocco has carried out significant work in this respect. In terms of ports, it has initiated construction work corresponding to a comprehensive project, «Tangier-Mediterranean», consisting of a deep-water port where containers and cereals, general cargo and passengers will be transhipped, and incorporating tourist-oriented, commercial, logistic and industrial duty-free zones, in addition to motorway and railway connection infrastructures. The new port is scheduled to begin operating in 2007 and will attract additional offshore traffic heading to or coming from the Mediterranean basin, and operated by shipping lines that connect the American continent with the countries of the Middle and Far East.

With regard to the motorway network, Morocco has planned to build 1,500 kilometres of motorways along all the country's key communication routes by 2010. 552 kilometres of these motorways are already in service, while work is in progress on a further 206 kilometres, and 800 kilometres are scheduled in the short and medium term. It has also begun work on a Mediterranean bypass, which is to link Tangier to Morocco's border with Algeria. This road will stretch over 550 kilometres, consisting of 250 kilometres of existing roads to be redeveloped and 300 kilometres of new roads. It is also possible to connect to Morocco's southern border by means of a road built to international standards, spanning 2,400 kilometres between Tangier and El Gouera. This

road constitutes the main section of the Tangier-Lagos road system, which will draw traffic down from the west African country via the Mediterranean. It will cover a distance of 7,600 kilometres, and over seventy percent of it is already in place.

Additionally, three countries – Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal – have decided to join forces to develop the Tangier-Nouakchott-Dakar road, which will extend over a distance of 3,500 kilometres. The relevant authorities in the three countries have already spent more than two years working on the construction of the missing 470 kilometres stretch between Nouadhibou and Nouakchott, as well as a bridge over the Senegal river and the development of other sections that have already been built.

It was in this spirit that the first meeting of Ministers of Transport of western Mediterranean countries was organised in Paris in January 1995, bringing together Spain, Italy, France, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and the European Commission. The Ministers of Transport were of the opinion that adapted and effective transport systems and infrastructures would be advantageous with regard to achieving the lasting economic and social integration of all the western Mediterranean countries, which in its own right is a major challenge for the coming years. The ministers planned to engage in a regular, joint meeting process, in order to identify the priority corridors in terms of extending trans-European networks to and between the countries of the southern shores, and to assist with the development of those networks. The maturity of certain projects was examined, along with the possibilities of financing and carrying them out.

This work was taken up at the Euro-Mediterranean level as a result of the creation of the EuroMed Transport Forum in 1999, under the auspices of the European Commission. This initiative was geared to developing the sector with the prospect of establishing the Euro-Mediterranean free-trade area. In

this context, the European Commission began several actions, including two major studies that are currently being carried out regarding European Commission financing, and which update and complete several studies already undertaken in these areas. The first study, which is called DESTIN, is aimed at implementing priority projects in the western Mediterranean area. The goal of the second, entitled MEDA-TEN-T, is to define and develop Mediterranean corridors on the basis of the extension of their European counterparts.

An approach to structuring a Euro-Maghrebi network is therefore slowly being established. A simple reflection on town and country planning at the level of the European Union is revealing the importance of developing the transport networks in south-western Europe, encompassing France, the Iberian Peninsula and Italy. This group of countries should not be marginalised where overall investments in transport are concerned. The European Union may risk neglecting its Mediterranean commitments and concentrate its efforts solely on the opening-up of eastern Europe, hence the need for the aforementioned approach with regard to a Euro-Maghrebi network.

Historically drawn to the north and east, Europe must counteract this tendency, in order to prevent the economic and social discrepancies between the two shores of the Mediterranean from becoming greater, and in order for Europe to also genuinely direct itself toward the south. The development of part of Europe would be inconceivable without also considering the co-development of its North African neighbours; a synchronisation that is necessary because the systems are, *de facto*, a common system. Beyond conjunctural trials and tribulations, there is a genuine vision of anchoring the Maghreb to the exhilarating process of development that is undertaken by Europe, provided that regional political resolve and interest can be mustered in relation to the development of transport infrastructures.