SHORTAGE OF FUNDS TO MAINTAIN AND MODERNISE THE ROAD NETWORK


ACUTE SHORTAGE OF FUNDS FOR ROADS

The road sector also suffers from a large and growing backlog of deferred maintenance. Furthermore, although many countries in Africa have over-invested in their road networks – one of the contributory causes for the maintenance backlog – other countries in Asia and Eastern Europe have suffered from years of under-investment.

The large backlog of deferred maintenance is a particularly important concern. In the 85 countries that received World Bank assistance for their roads during the 1980s, maintenance allocations had been so low that nearly 15 percent of the capital invested in main roads – roughly $43 billion – had been eroded (Harral and Faiz, 1988). Although the situation has improved somewhat since then, these countries continue to live off their assets. In some cases, particularly in Africa, this was partly due to over investment in roads. However, the main reason was the acute shortage of funds for maintenance – allocations were frequently less than a third of the amount required to keep the road network in a stable long term condition. To restore only those roads that are judged to be economically viable, and to prevent further deterioration, will now require annual expenditures of at least $5 billion per year over the next ten years. The costs of poor road maintenance are furthermore not borne by the road agency. They are borne primarily by the road users. When a road deteriorates from good to poor condition, each dollar “saved” on road maintenance increases vehicle operating costs by between $2 and $3 (Thriscutt and Mason, 1991). Far from saving money – which is how governments often see cuts in the maintenance budget – cutting back on road maintenance increases the costs of road transport and raises the net costs to the economy as a whole.

Not only do these countries have large backlogs of deferred maintenance, many countries in Asia and Easter Europe have also suffered from years of chronic under-investment. This has resulted in low network densities (measured in terms of road length per square km) and extensive lengths of sub-standard road. For example, large countries like China, Russia and Ukraine have network densities that are not only lower than the USA – they are only a third of the level in India. However, the real key is the sub-standard quality of their road networks. Many roads are still single lane, they have accident rates which are up to 10 times higher, measured in terms of fatalities per 100,000 vehicles, than in industrialised countries (Jacobs, Aeron-Thomas and Astrop, 2000), their road pavements cannot support heavy axles (the potential EU accession countries are working hard to strengthen their core road networks to meet EU axle-weight standards), and the length of motorway and expressway is limited and likely to stay that way for some time to come. The motorway density in Central European Countries (CEC) is 2.5 km per 1,000 sq km, compared to 15.6 km per 1,000 sq km in the EU. More tellingly, the EU is adding more than 1,000 km of new motorways per year, while the CEC is adding less than 100 km per year (Eurostat, 2002). So, in addition to the $5 billion annual bill for road rehabilitation, another $5 billion per year is probably needed to modernise and expand these countries’ road networks and to improve road safety.

REFERENCES
