

Mid-term review of the European Commission's 2001 Transport White Paper

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In June 2006, five years after the publication of the last European Transport White Paper, the European Commission issued its mid-term review of the Transport White Paper entitled 'Keep Europe moving – Sustainable mobility for our continent' (CEC, 2006a). The mid-term review not only assesses progress towards the White Paper's original objectives but also identifies a number of additional actions that might help reach the White Paper's objectives and, more significantly, signals a number of shifts in priorities for European transport policy. The use of the term 'sustainable mobility' in the title of the mid-term review of the Transport White Paper serves to highlight a key dilemma of European transport policy, namely how to reconcile the free movement of people and goods, one of the basic pillars of the European Union, whilst at the same time protecting the environment and improving the health and safety of citizens. 'Sustainable' and 'mobility' reflect the two frequently competing aims of European transport policy. The dilemma is further exemplified in the text, which states for example that 'efforts to achieve the goals of meeting growing mobility needs and strict environmental standards are beginning to show signs of friction' (p8). Also interesting is the fact that the term 'sustainable mobility' has made a return. It featured several times in the 1992 European Transport White Paper, not least in the wordy sub-title of the document ('The future development of the common transport policy – a global approach to the construction of the community framework for sustainable mobility' – CEC, 1992), but then did not feature at all in the following Transport White Paper of 2001 (CEC, 2001).

The mid-term review maintains that the objectives of the Transport White Paper of 2001, and even the objectives of its predecessor, the 1992 Transport White Paper, remain valid. Nevertheless, the mid-term review indicates something of a change in direction and focus in European transport policy. This is quite explicitly recognised in the mid-term review, which

for example refers to the 'need to re-adjust policy measures' and the need for 'a broader, more flexible, transport policy toolbox' (p6). The mid-term review asserts that the measures put forward in the 2001 European Transport White Paper 'will not be sufficient on their own to continue achieving the fundamental objectives of EU policy, in particular to contain the negative environmental and other effects of transport growth whilst facilitating mobility as the quintessential purpose of transport policy' (p6). Clearly, the prevailing view in the Commission is that transport policy should facilitate mobility rather than manage it: the emphasis on mobility appears to take precedence over sustainability. Demand management does not feature in the mid-term review. The mid-term review contends that the focus of transport policy needs to be revised because of a combination of emerging issues and developments like for example the substantial enlargement of the European Union in 2002, recent changes in the transport industry, evolving technologies and new innovations, and energy supply and security issues.

As all good European policy documents do these days, the mid-term review contains the obligatory nods to the Lisbon Agenda, stating for example that the objectives of European transport policy are 'fully in line with the revised Lisbon agenda for jobs and growth' (p21). Despite mentioning the recently revised European sustainable development strategy¹ (published a few days before the mid-term review of the Transport White Paper) and the Kyoto Protocol (indicating that the transport sector is threatening progress towards the targets agreed under the Protocol), there is noticeably no reference to the Gothenburg Agenda in the mid-term review. This provides another indication about the current relative priorities of jobs, growth and sustainable development in European transport policy. Thus, whilst the mid-term review contains the term 'sustainable' in its title, environmental issues are obviously not the top priority.

Reviewing some recent transport trends, the mid-term review highlights the current situation that European transport policy has to address:

- Across Europe as a whole since the mid-1990s, the growth in goods transport has been faster than economic growth whilst the growth in passenger transport has been slightly slower than economic growth.
- Projections up to 2020 indicate further growth in transport, particularly in freight transport: freight and passenger transport is predicted to increase by 52% and 35% respectively between 2000 and 2020, whilst economic growth is predicted to increase by 50%.
- Air and waterborne transport have both grown rapidly over the last decade and low-cost airlines now account for 25% of all scheduled intra-EU air traffic.
- Transport congestion is increasing across all parts Europe (the external costs of road traffic congestion currently amount to 0.5% of Europe's GDP and forecasts indicate that will grow to 1% of Europe's GDP by 2010 if nothing is done), particularly on roads and in major ports and airports (severe congestion is forecast in 60 European airports by 2020).
- The current environmental costs of transport are estimated at 1.1% of Europe's GDP, according to the mid-term review².

¹ Council of the European Union, 2006.

² Other studies suggest that the environmental costs of transport may be substantially higher (see for example Schreyer et al., 2004).

- There have been significant increases in greenhouse gas emissions from domestic transport since 1990 across the EU (23% growth) alongside larger increases in emissions from air transport (currently increasing at a rate of 4% per annum, which equates to an increase of almost 50% over a period of 10 years).
- There has been a decrease in transport-related fatalities over recent years in Europe but there is still a very high number of fatalities and injuries (in 2005 alone there were 41,600 transport-related deaths and 1,700,000 injuries), particularly on roads.

In summary, one can say that current trends do not show many signs of being any more sustainable than 5 years ago. In fact, current trends show more signs of being less sustainable than 5 years previously and the indications are that there will be a continuation of many of these unsustainable trends into the near future at the very least.

The mid-term review signals a number of key changes in the underlying aims of European transport policy. The issue of decoupling economic growth and transport growth, for example, which was one of the main objectives of the 2001 Transport White Paper (see also Banister and Stead, 2002 and Stead, 2001) and is one of the key objectives for transport in the new European Sustainable Development Strategy (Council of the European Union, 2006), has been reformulated in the mid-term review of the Transport White Paper with the statement that ‘mobility must be disconnected from its negative side effects’ (p4). A key difference is that this new formulation seems to attach less importance to restraining transport growth and consequently to transport demand management measures. The mid-term review states that a ‘broad range of policy tools’ will be necessary to disconnect mobility from its negative side effects (although what these new policy tools include is not entirely clear). The proposed actions listed in the mid-term review (summarised in box 1) do not seem to add much more breadth to the existing set of European transport policy measures.

The aim of modal shift, also central to the 2001 Transport White Paper (like the aim of decoupling economic growth and transport growth), also appears to have been superseded. The mid-term review refers mainly to the concept of ‘co-modality’, which it defines as ‘the efficient use of different modes on their own and in combination’ (p4). A key difference in the terminology seems to be the extent to which action will be taken to encourage the use of alternative modes of transport. It would appear that European Commission is now more reluctant to introduce policies that attempt to shift modes.

Energy supply and security arguably features more heavily in the mid-term review than in the 2001 Transport White Paper. The mid-term review identifies that ‘further transport policies’ are needed to ‘reduce energy consumption by improving fuel efficiency on the vehicle side and gradually replacing oil by other fuels’ (p15) and refers to the proposed European Action Plan on Energy Efficiency³ (subsequently published in October 2006) which, according to the mid-term review, ‘aims at ensuring competitiveness, security of supply and environmental protection has to focus, inter alia, on further transport policies which reduce energy consumption by improving fuel efficiency on the vehicle side and gradually replacing oil by other fuels’ (p15). This Energy Efficiency Action Plan mainly concentrates on the role of technology in reducing energy consumption in the transport sector (CEC, 2006b). Both transport demand management and modal shift again do not feature to any great extent in this document.

³ CEC, 2006b.

Box 1. Summary of new actions proposed by the mid-term review of the Transport White Paper

A. Optimisation of existing transport modes

- An internal market review of road transport to ensure the proper functioning of the market, determine the role of SME's, and provide an analysis of the social elements involved (2006)
- Launch European ports policy (2007)
- Removal of technical barriers in rail transport to ensure interoperability between companies. Programme to promote rail freight corridors and prepare a review of the internal market in rail transport (2006), with a scoreboard for market performance of rail (2007)
- A review of air transport liberalisation measures, airport charges and capacity (2006)
- A mobilisation of all sources of infrastructure financing; multi-annual investment programme up to 2013 for Trans-European networks

B. Mobility for the citizen

- Publication of a Green Paper on Urban Transport (2007)
- Development of a strategy for critical infrastructure (2006), land and public transport security (2007), and review air and maritime security rules (2008)
- Passenger rights: proposal on minimum standards for coach transport, notably for people with limited mobility (2007)
- A first European road safety day (2007); promotion of road safety through vehicle design and technology, infrastructure and drive behaviour (on a continuing basis)
- Review legislation on working conditions in road sector (2007)

C. Better transport solutions through new technologies

- Development of a freight transport logistics strategy, as well as the launch of a broad debate on possible preparation of an EU action plan for 2007
- Energy and transport: strategic technology plan for energy in 2007 and green propulsion programme for 2009
- Technology: RTD and support to market penetration, including big technology projects such as Galileo and European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS) which should be implemented on certain corridors from 2009 onwards.
- Smart charging (basis for methodology by 2008)
- Major programme to bring intelligent road transport systems to market (2008)

Source: European Commission, 2006

Finally, there is a noticeable policy shift regarding urban transport issues. Urban transport was a key focus of the 2001 Transport White Paper and several pages of the document were devoted to the subject of 'rationalising urban transport'. The issue receives less attention in the mid-term review. The main ways in which the European Union can influence urban transport policy, according to the mid-term review, are things like the study and exchange of best practice and possible legislation on public transport services (to provide a legal framework for public transport operation). In an apparent retreat from further action on urban transport issues, the mid-term review states that 'cities themselves, rather than the EU, are in

the driving seat' (p14). Also noticeable by its absence in the mid-term review is any reference to sustainable urban transport plans for European cities, which were proposed in the 2004 European urban environment thematic strategy (see Stead, 2004). No mention of these in the mid-term review suggests that they have been quietly shelved. Despite this apparent retreat urban transport issues (or perhaps precisely because of it), the mid-term review promises a new green paper on urban transport in 2007 in order to 'identify potential European added value to action at local level' (p14). Whether this green paper concludes that there is much potential European added value or little remains to be seen. What is clear is however that it will be another year before any further European action on urban transport will be identified.

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