

How the SOURCE project began

Major changes in the road sector

Over the past ten years, a wind of institutional reform has been blowing over the road sectors of a number of African countries. It has been supported and encouraged by donors, particularly through the Road Maintenance Initiative (RMI), a SSATP component (Sub-Saharan Africa Transport Policy Program). New mechanisms have been introduced, such as the debudgeting of road maintenance resources or direct participation of road users in management bodies. And with redefined rules: enhanced market logic, more decentralization, and new types of operators.

In fact, this institutional Meccano has been built up throughout the developing countries or those in the throes of change, with cross effects. Africa has drawn inspiration from Latin America, then West Africa from East Africa, and in turn, Central and Eastern Europe..., with the effects of successive generations that sometimes interrelate. Some countries have undergone vagaries, blockages, setbacks. Many countries have undeniably made progress.

What tools to measure and analyse progress?

At the same time, signs of methodological errors are detected here and there. For example, the long-term void often left by the closing down of public plant pools

when market prospects and conditions were not sufficient to create supply. Other aspects, proven by the facts, also deserve to be re-examined.

“Proven by the facts”! A requirement logically put forward by all the partners involved in these processes, whether stakeholders in the road sector or donors. They all have a pressing need for efficient monitoring instruments to assess progress, achievements and the eventual relevance of recommended reforms. **Which means capitalizing while exercising sound judgement.**

Within the countries, the new management bodies in which road users are associated generate increased demand for easy-to-use, objective performance monitoring methods for the road sector. If a road hauliers' representative is to accept, extend or increase a “road maintenance tariff”, and convince his mandators of its relevance, he will in turn need regular, concrete measurements of the results.

The general question of “How to correctly monitor and assess progress in road maintenance” is thus relevant both within each country and at an overall level.

Upstream answers, downstream answers

Upstream, there must obviously be monitoring of institutional progress, for which new tools are

being set up. These tools measure the political will reflected by a reform, but not the operational efficiency.

There is also conventional monitoring of the implementation of intervention programs or the functioning of the new road agencies themselves: technical audits and management audits. This involves checking that the machine is working properly “as is”, but does not extend to its ultimate efficiency.

Downstream, in terms of field results, the engineer has a full range of excellent, proven tools and methods to assess road condition. In increasing order of quality and accuracy of results (but at the same time, in increasing order of complexity and cost): visual, multi-criteria surveys on damage, roughness or equivalent measurements and deflection measurements. None of these tools, even the lightest, (windscreen surveys) is suitable for overall, recurrent, large-scale monitoring, for which they have not been designed. Their field of excellence begins at the preprogramming stage of work. Besides requirements for heavy logistics and specialized skills, the cost of these campaigns over a main road network would usually be politically unjustifiable, weighed against the meagre budget devoted to road maintenance. When the monitoring cost is more than a quarter of the cost of maintenance work, it is impossible to “keep up”. We must change tools.

In terms of road policy monitoring and assessment, except for a few countries, we come up against a void in terms of reliable tools.

The status of road statistics

Here again, the facts speak for themselves, better than any arguments. It is a fact, that commonly-used road statistics in the form of national aggregates are mostly qualitative (despite appearances which are deceptive) and in fact unworkable. It is a fact, that far too few countries have permanent road data banks, locally managed and regularly updated, based on objective technical data.

Example: out of 45 African countries interviewed in 1998, 41 replied that their data bases did not meet these criteria, 20 road administrations could only provide statistics that were "commonly accepted but with no precise statistical basis".

And it is a fact that overall traffic-related data are rarely available except under specific programs.

That is why in practice, large-scale systematic monitoring can only exceptionally be directly based on a pre-existing road data bank.

On a supranational scale (for country-to-country comparisons), the homogeneous nature of present statistical series hides two major defects: the lack of unified criteria (from the measurement of deflection to "what the expert says"), and reference networks that are extremely inconsistent and unstable (in the series examined, we see stop-and-go effects reaching [-66%] over 8 years. The extent of these defects is such that they can cause complete misinterpretation of the basic question "progress / no progress?").

SOURCE - to provide factual proof

What is the real state of the road network?

How do new and rehabilitation work programs stand the test of time?

What is the actual level of service provided for users?

How is this level of service changing?

Does the response from the road sector match up to potentialities and requirements? Etc.

The answers to these crucial questions for road and road transport policy, provided by existing statistics and data, are few and far between.

But monitoring of the actual level of service of the road network, taken as an overall indicator of the physical performance of a network, is precisely the aim of the "SOURCE" project launched in 1998 by the RMI, which enabled the SOURCE method to be fine-tuned and validated.

The aim of the SOURCE project was to create and test a low-cost, simple, practical tool, to monitor the status of the road network in a country by an objective, easy, standardized method: **an overall benchmark instrument.**

The idea: supply on a country-by-country basis, an accurate standard picture of the main network, produce aggregate front-line information of well-controlled statistical quality (not determined by the availability or quality of already-existing bases).

The key-product (but not the only one): a single macro-indicator per country, which will be the most relevant tool for users.

