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Public transport in the MENA region: Time for action

1st UITP MENA Congress and Showcase, Dubai, 25-27 November 2007



For national and local politicians from the MENA region, the Congress served as a reminder of the importance of devising and implementing integrated mobility policies prior to investment in public transport infrastructure

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which extends from Morocco to Iran, represents a market which is home to over 300 million inhabitants. The region is also recording sustained and rapid economic growth (+5.1% per year on average) and is heavily urbanised (60% of its population). With one or two exceptions, the bulk of the region's cities have not developed or organised heavy public transport systems and have suffered from a lack of urban mobility policy at a time when transport demand is constantly increasing. Having grasped the problems and their negative impact on the economy and society, national governments and local authorities in nearly all the region's countries are currently completing final studies prior to investment or, even better, have now embarked on far-reaching structural reforms and on the building of major projects. Most of them will open between 2008 and 2012.

It is in this context that UITP held its 1st MENA Congress and Showcase hosted by the Roads and Transport Authority (RTA) in Dubai, UAE, on 25-27 November 2007. Around 350 participants from 50 countries attended the congress sessions and visited the showcase where 43 industrial groups

presented the latest public transport technologies.

"The right to mobility should be considered as a human right", said Prof. Amer Moustafa, Associate Dean of the School of Architecture and Design, of the American University of Sharjah. To this end,

some major steps to be taken into account were highlighted at the Congress.

Integration, always the keyword...but this should start at the design stage of new systems

The Congress emphasised the development taking place in most MENA coun-

tries as far as the implementation of public transport systems is concerned. It encourages large and medium-sized agglomerations to invest in high-capacity systems in order to accompany and anticipate the growth in mobility demand. However, it draws the attention of national and local policy-makers in the MENA region to the importance of defining and implementing an integrated mobility policy prior to investment in public transport infrastructure. The latter is only a component of such a policy and will have a limited impact if it is not part of an integrated approach.

Presentations raised awareness of the importance of integration of public transport at all levels: strategic, tactical and operational.

At strategic level, one key element is the coordination between land use planning and transport policy, which Prof. Moustafa calls "the holy matrimony", where cities should be seen in three dimensions instead of a group of neighbourhoods. It ensures long-term viability and efficiency of the mobility system. This approach is being followed by Amman. In the capital city of Jordan, an interesting approach integrating transport and land use is being developed. Moreover, a new law has been introduced encouraging the integration of public transport services. In many cases, the development of cities is determined by land owners; this must be accompanied by a dialogue with the authorities in order to ensure that sustainable transport solutions are integrated at the early stage of urban development.

At tactical level, the integration must involve transport networks, modes, services, tariffs, ticketing, information, timetables, etc to make public transport easy to access and use. Tunis created a central committee in 2001 to take care of the network integration and the creation of trip planners between various modes. Thanks to the now accomplished integration, public transport gained a 35% market share and the government set the goal to reach 50% by 2011. Now the aim is to develop the system especially within larger areas where 1.5 billion trips are provided by public transport every day.

At operational level, integration provides a guarantee for the transport company that human, financial and technical resources will be optimally used.

Information and communication technologies: indispensable tools, but still only tools

The current context is favourable to the introduction and use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in public transport. ICT could improve efficiency, safety, quality and reliability of the service. They reduce maintenance costs and offer possibilities for increasing revenues. They also improve the attractiveness of public transport. In Oslo, the comprehensive information service Trafikanten is now completing its offer with information on how to get to and from public transport points on foot. In the Netherlands, the unique information phone number 9292 (with reference to its creation year) offering information before and during trips noted a 1% modal shift, which is a considerable success in terms of reducing congestion and raising revenues for the operators. With such information systems, modal choice will more and more be in favour of public transport.

There are numerous fields of application for ICT in public transport including e-ticketing, information, operation, security etc. However, the Congress reminds us that ICT are and remain tools and will

"What will you do when you come back from the Congress?"

never replace a clear policy and efficient management.

The challenge of public transport and sustainable development in oil-based economies

It is indisputable that oil resources are limited and fuel prices will continue to grow. Simultaneously, the contribution of the transport sector as a whole to greenhouse gas emissions and to the risk of climate change is rapidly increasing. In this situation, the Congress reminds us that public transport is the most energy-efficient motorised mode per passenger transported and contributes to the reduction of carbon use. Moreover, public transport needs less road space to carry high numbers of passengers; it improves accessibility to goods and services and is safer than individual modes. Prof. Moustafa reminds us that "land is inherited but borrowed from future generations, so let's use it wisely". Therefore, public transport needs to be a "state-of-mind" and there is a need to find ways to involve all stakeholders and to advocate public transport.

The Congress calls on national and local policy-makers in the MENA region to give priority to public transport infrastructure and services and to encourage their use by the public. M. Singh pointed to the introduction of electronic road pricing in Singapore, where the government decides the growth rate of car ownership. There has only been a 3% growth in 10 years thanks to the public auction system and public transport has a 60% modal share.

Several MENA cities are expanding fast geographically and demographically. The Congress recommends the definition of transport master plans at the design stage of the urban development plans, and their subsequent implementation accordingly. The world cities that followed such an approach in the past are those that have the least mobility problems nowadays.

Human factors, last but not least

Human resources are a key element in the definition, implementation and operation of public transport systems. The MENA region is developing fast and is in need of qualified staff and managers. Training and capacity building are essential. The Congress recommends developing appropriate initiatives at national and international levels in this field and encourages exchanges of knowledge and experiences between members, notably under the UITP umbrella.

In conclusion, the Congress observes that it is technically and economically possible to define sustainable transport solutions for any city; but their implementation will depend on a strong political will of local policy-makers.

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