

ROAD TRANSPORT IN MOROCCO: WHAT IS THE BEST ROUTE OUT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS?

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Introduction

Like many other countries across the world, Morocco was affected by an unprecedented economic and social crisis in 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

During this crisis, road transport companies across all sectors played a critical role in moving goods, supporting the operation of supply chains, repatriating citizens and transporting people to their workplace, all while increasing the risk to their employees' health and well-being.

However, the effects of the crisis were quickly felt and impacted several sectors, including transport and logistics, which experienced significant challenges.

Road passenger transport has been particularly hard hit by the virus, especially when one considers the lockdown measures, restrictions on movement, protective measures, the fact that transport seems to be a major factor in transmission of the virus and the speed with which the virus spreads. In fact, the measures taken by the Moroccan authorities, particularly the health authorities, to contain the spread of the virus since the first cases of Covid-19 appeared in March 2020 have had dramatic repercussions on the profitability of public and private passenger transport companies, especially as a result of the complete shutdown of public passenger and tourist transport.

Nevertheless, freight transport companies were affected to a lesser extent, in part due to the collective efforts of the authorities and professionals in the sector to ensure the continuity of freight operations. However, the crisis has not affected all freight transport companies to the same degree. Suppliers in certain sectors under particular strain (food, refrigeration, essential products, courier, etc.) were highly productive, while others came to a virtual standstill. This situation was the result of the transport sector's high dependence on its client industries (shippers and contractors), which experienced a slowdown or partial or total suspension of operations, and the increase in demand for essential products, which gave rise to situations that were sometimes difficult to manage (flow imbalances, non-guaranteed loading rates, empty returns, adjustment of transport plans, etc.).

Admittedly, the Covid-19 crisis has had a huge, unprecedented impact on mobility operations and transport systems, but it has also exposed the weaknesses and structural failings in the Moroccan sector.

Although it is somewhat premature to draw definitive conclusions and lessons for the transport sector, one thing is certain: this health crisis marks a "before" and an "after" for the sector. It will give rise to a new context in which the transport sector will be forced to consider new ways of adapting and evolving

to meet future challenges and be better prepared to strengthen its resilience and face a future marked by uncertainty.

Decarbonization of Transport: Towards Greater Awareness?

Although the Covid-19 crisis has had a severe impact on economic and social aspects of Morocco's transport sector, it has also brought positive effects, thanks in large part to the unprecedented lockdown and restrictions on movement and travel. These benefits include a reduction in environmental externalities, especially a cut in CO₂ emissions, better air quality and improved road safety indicators due to the drop in the number of road fatalities and injuries.

Raising awareness regarding these positive aspects may well have a lasting effect on future mobility behaviour and could encourage the country's political decision-makers to set up a national strategy for sustainable mobility, to consider more low-carbon solutions and to support a transition towards safer, more efficient, more accessible, more inclusive and more resilient transport systems.

Management of the pandemic and its economic and social consequences must not overlook measures to combat climate change in transport. On the contrary, post-Covid-19 public policies and economic recovery plans must allow for further progress towards green, sustainable solutions for the transport sector.

Physical Distancing: A Catalyst for Digitization in Transport

The handling of the Covid-19 pandemic has served to reinforce arguments in favour of digitizing services and the trend towards "zero paper" in several sectors, especially transport and related services.

The context created by the spread of the virus, lockdown measures, social distancing and restrictions on movement has further highlighted the need for digitization. The lack of a digital solution was widely revealed by the suspension and termination of services and the exceptional extension of validity periods for certain documents issued to users.

Paperless administrative procedures and the use of electronic documentation are therefore becoming essential to ensure the continuity of services. They also provide a real opportunity to speed up digital transformation and ultimately boost economic growth and development.

Through cross-sectoral interactions between Morocco's various strategies, the transport sector is playing a central role in this dynamic and has been forced to follow this trend, above all to support its development. Digitization is therefore no longer an option for transport stakeholders and professionals, but rather an absolute necessity to adapt to the development and constant changes in the market.

In this context, the Ministry has launched several projects, in particular the digitization of transport procedures and documents, including those issued to freight transport professionals, promotion of virtual freight exchanges, deployment of teleservices and the widespread application of online appointments

for public services such as driving licences, registration documents, periodic technical inspections and the individual approval of vehicles.

The Ministry is also focusing on completing and upgrading its legal and regulatory tools governing the sector with a view to monitoring the developments and changes that it has undergone during the pandemic and even to anticipate such changes in the future.

With respect to human capital, new occupations will inevitably emerge in this context, which is overflowing with new technologies. To that end, the government will focus on preparing and deploying adequate training plans aimed at capacity-building in areas related to digitization and information systems (TMS, WMS, etc.).

Improving Transport Services in Rural Areas: The Path to Social Equity?

The current crisis has also highlighted the inequalities in the provision of transport solutions and revealed the need for governments to implement mobility rights for all citizens, regardless of whether they live in urban, peri-urban or rural areas. In this regard, it should be noted that the challenges facing transport policymakers when it comes to establishing and guaranteeing the foundations of a fair, equitable and sustainable transport system are complex and highly diverse.

According to the projections of the Moroccan general population and housing census (RGPH) established by the High Commission for Planning (HCP), nearly 32.2% of the Moroccan population will live in rural areas by 2030. Therefore, improving means of access and mobility will be key to achieving objectives for growth and the reduction of social and territorial disparities. To achieve this, however, it is crucial to adopt and implement public policies concerning transport in rural areas, including road infrastructure, modes of transport and transport services.

Nevertheless, despite the substantial investments made by the Moroccan public authorities since the mid-1990s in the development and rehabilitation of road infrastructure in rural areas through several programmes, most notably the National Rural Roads Programme (PNRR-1 and PNRR-2), the Territorial Upgrading Programme (PMAT) and the Programme for the Reduction of Territorial and Social Disparities (PRDTS), these interventions have not fully delivered on the population's growing expectations in terms of accessibility, nor have they improved the social conditions of rural areas or adequately responded to the need to boost economic activities.

Thus, if these investments are to provide the rural population with significant economic and social benefits, a more comprehensive approach should be adopted by the public authorities and the various stakeholders to improve transport planning and implement additional measures to address both infrastructure development and the provision of quality transport services that meet the specific mobility needs of rural areas and are compatible with the rural population's purchasing power.

Conclusion

Plans and solutions to overcome the crisis and mitigate its impact must be addressed by all economic sectors, including transport. The silo mentality of sectoral public policies must become a thing of the past. Now is the time for all stakeholders to pool their knowledge and come up with ideas to provide concrete, innovative and sustainable responses to the immediate challenges posed by this crisis, and also to long-term challenges that could arise unexpectedly. Of course, in the world of the “new normal”, the transport sector must make great efforts to adapt and sometimes even transform itself if it is going to play its full part in recovery.