

Changing Tracks

Improving international rail passenger transport through corridor coordination

Highlights of the Rli online event, 18 September 2020

On the 18th of September 2020, the online event ‘Changing Tracks’ on improving international rail passenger transport took place, organised by the Dutch Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (Rli).

Following the advisory report and letter to the European Commission, concerning a corridor approach for international rail, the Council set out to share their insights and recommendations and discuss this within a European context. The meeting was attended online by 285 participants representing experts in the field of international rail, stakeholders, Ngo’s and government organisations of supranational, national and regional levels.

The online event has been recorded, and can be viewed online. Watch the recorded livestream by clicking the link to the Rli website [here](#). The report and letter to the European Commission can be found on the same page

Improving #internationalrail

The online event kicked off with an introduction by **Jeroen Kok**, member of the Rli Council and chair of the advisory committee. Jeroen Kok stated that the event is about how to act to meet the goals of the Rli-report and making international rail more attractive. Rail provides a sustainable way of connecting important European urban regions. But the share of rail in international passenger transport is still very limited. What can we do to make rail an attractive alternative?

Jeroen Kok explained that the report of the Rli is addressed to the Dutch government but includes a letter with recommendations to the European Commissioner for Transport, Adina Valean. This letter was co-signed by advisory councils from Luxembourg, Belgium and Germany, the network for European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils and endorsed by even more. The recommendation at the centre of the letter - and the online event - is the corridor approach.



Analysing the mobility system in 4 layers

The Rli recommendations are based on extensive analysis. Jeroen Kok illustrated in a video why the Rli-commission chose the viewpoint of the passenger/consumer as the starting point for the analysis, and explained some of the persistent barriers that exist in the mobility system. To get a better understanding of these barriers, the Rli used a 4-layer model to analyse the mobility system further. Looking from top to bottom it consists of:

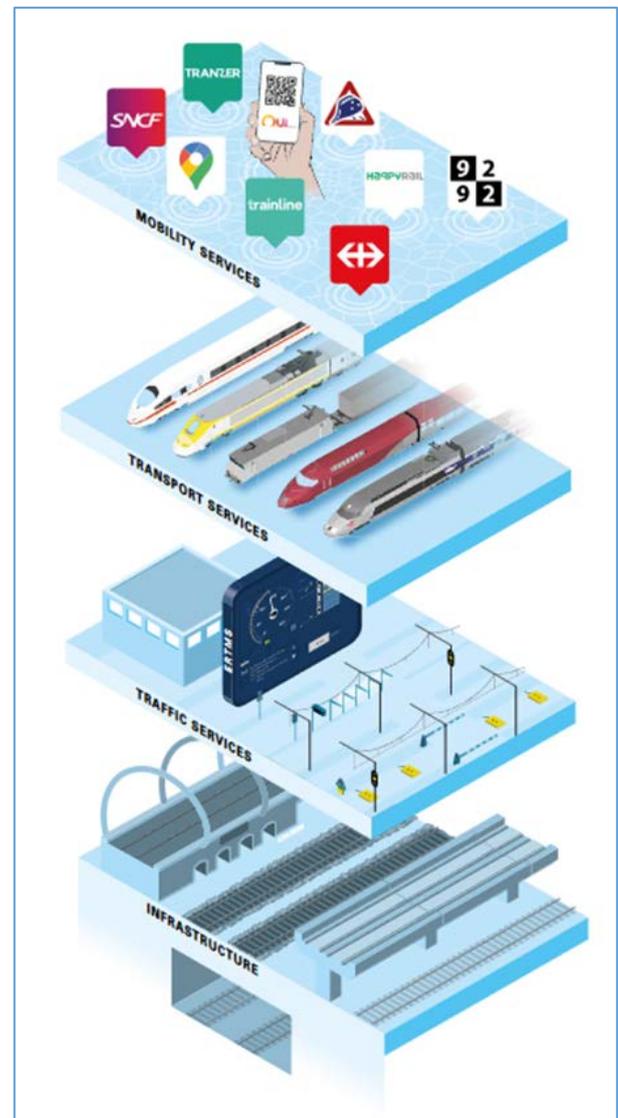
1. Mobility services – travel information, ticketing, passenger rights. As a passenger, this is the level at which you start. One of the problems is that there are no sufficient platforms that offer services for the whole of the journey in different countries, as is the case for air travel. Therefore the Rli recommends to make the data necessary for planning and booking available for all service providers.

2. Transport services – the trains. The issue on this layer is that the operators who operate international trains, are also responsible for national services. Due to the higher volumes of domestic travel, the priority lies on the national level at domestic services.

3. Traffic services – fundamental is how we manage the capacity of the rail system. This layer is crucial but also promising because new technology and innovations allow us to make better use of the existing infrastructure. Improving coordination between the different countries on this level can really make a difference for international rail.

4. Infrastructure – any improvement in infrastructure needs to take the other layers into account. Improvements in the physical infrastructure will only be truly successful if the approach is integrated with traffic, transport and mobility services.

The top layer of the system is (relatively) quick to adapt, compared to the bottom layers. This is where improvements on the short term can be made.



Rli recommendation: the corridor approach

Wijnand Veeneman explained the Rli recommendation for the corridor approach. This is based on the observation that the open access policy of the European Union regarding international rail is not developing enough passenger services. To improve the number and quality of the services, governments should decide what kind of services we need between which European cities to help develop these long distance rail services. As a first step towards more European integration on this topic, multiple member states can cooperate along a corridor, and act as launching customers. Improving the connectivity using existing infrastructure is low-hanging fruit.

“Corridors are a way to work towards a sound basis on which international services can develop”

Political statement on the development of international rail passenger transport

The Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management and State Secretary Van Veldhoven played an important role in the political statement on international rail that was published on the 2nd of June 2020.

Hinne Groot, working for the **Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management**, explained why this was step is so important.

The process started with a position paper, published in 2019. The State Secretary felt the need to make transport more climate friendly. International rail is a good means of doing so. However, markets do not perform as well internationally as we would like. The time to act is now because at the EU level everyone is thinking about the Green Deal and other sustainability priorities.

In the political statement, signatories describe their intention for international rail to be put on the EU agenda and for member states to cooperate more on international rail. Many member states recognise the difficulties of developing international rail services. But many also see that the time to act is now and there is momentum at the political level.

In the statement, signatories called for the creation of a platform. The platform is now being set up. First priorities for the platform are being defined (desired results and agenda-setting). Some of the possible first priorities are passenger information and booking, framework conditions needed for night trains and identifying barriers, and another is how to use the public service instrument across borders. The platform is a place where the momentum can be nurtured further. The platform can only work though, if the sector joins the agenda.

European Green Deal and the EU-Recovery Package

Daniel Mes, member of **Frans Timmermans' cabinet** was asked to explain the role the European Green Deal can play in making the transport sector more sustainable. He illustrated how rail is an essential, climate friendly modality. Also, post Corona we will have to think about how to travel safely. Rail provides opportunities for both. But why are we not seeing enough progress? We should put the passenger and its needs front and centre on the agenda to improve European rail.

“Rail is crucial for the Green Deal. It has the potential to unite people, to unite Europe and has much to offer. Europe now needs to put what the passenger wants and needs on the agenda”

International rail passenger transport wasn't mentioned explicitly in the Green Deal, but there will be a follow up in 2021. One of the barriers that we will try to tackle is ticketing. Post covid-19 the aviation sector will have to become leaner. Cooperation between aviation and rail sectors, to sell tickets on each other's platforms, is crucial.



Reflections on the corridor approach for improving international rail

The following speakers gave their reflections on the Rli recommendation for a corridor approach:

Monika Heimig	Executive Director of European Rail Infrastructure Managers (EIM)
Josef Doppelbauer	Executive Director of European Union Agency for Railways (ERA)
Libor Lochman	Executive Director of Community of European Railway and Infrastructure Companies (CER)
Elisabeth Werner	Director of Land Transport (DG MOVE) European Commission (EC)

The CER, EIM, ERA and DG Move all agree on the importance of improving the international rail transport in Europe. The importance has already been clear since a long time. However, with the coming of the Green Deal the opportunities for rail transport have never been better. If a carbon tax would be imposed, the competitiveness of rail travel will dramatically increase. In addition, the safety that rail travel provides gives it clear benefits, especially because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Taking these opportunities takes time. We have already seen a lot of regulatory changes in the past years. These might not have been apparent for the passengers yet, but a lot has changed in the railway sector.

“The opportunity for rail has never been greater than now, given the European Green Deal. We have the tools to create an attractive European railway system. Now we need to make it happen, corridor management can be a first step” - Josef Doppelbauer (ERA)

Despite the momentum, all four speakers acknowledge that obstacles for implementation still exist. The network has to be more dependable (less cancellations and more punctual) and efficient (no need to change drivers at the border due to language regulation) to compete with other forms of travel. Working on this is not easy because there is friction between countries and companies because we all come from a national perspective. We need to overcome these national, regional and corporate interests. This is a cultural change that takes time. There are opportunities that are easy to overcome and can lead to immediate effect - so called low hanging fruit. One of these opportunities is the harmonisation at the operational level. Different countries have different traffic management systems and infrastructure that hamper interoperability. This makes current travel lengthy and costly because trains have to switch between systems and have to be outfitted with the technology for different systems. Harmonisation of these aspects could lead to a seamless network of rail travel in Europe. Digitalisation also offers a lot of opportunities. It could make exchanging data between companies easier resulting in better ticketing options and information for passengers. As the Rli emphasises, ticketing is an important part of successful international rail travel. From a passenger perspective this is a make or break point. Digitalisation also makes it possible to easily connect the rail system with other modalities through MAAS applications. Infrastructure also still remains important. Europe needs a better high speed network and at certain key points in the network missing connections have to be resolved.

How can we overcome these obstacles and make it happen? Firstly, the EU plans to increase its funding for the aforementioned problems with a special emphasis on digitalisation and ticketing. The goal of the EU is to have a seamless and dependable cross border rail system consisting of several corridors throughout Europe in 2030. The corridor approach that the Rli advocates can be useful for this. The approach for each corridor is based on the same base principles, but in the implementation there are a lot of differences. A similarity for all successful corridors is that it has the right infrastructure and enough capacity on that infrastructure. For a crowded railway as in The Netherlands this could be a challenge.

“We have to make maximum use of the tracks that we already have in Europe. Now it is about smartly using it by maximising the traffic on it. There are no more excuses: don't ‘change track’, change gear!” - Elisabeth Werner (DG MOVE)

Panel discussion

The speakers who gave reflections on the corridor approach join **Jeroen Kok**, **Wijnand Veeneman** and **Daniel Mes** in a panel discussion.

The panel debate starts with the observation that the atmosphere breathes a lot of urgency and good intentions, but at the same time there is frustration. An online-submitted question (by Jan Koning) illustrates this: “The problems mentioned have been known for decades. What is really being done to eliminate them?” Indeed, Jeroen Kok recognizes the long timelines and awareness of problems in the debate. Yet, compared to the past 25 years the tone of the debate and the feeling of urgency is different now. How to capitalize on the current momentum and find the launching customer to unlock this potential is the key. One way of doing this argues Wijnand Veeneman is to break down the system in bits and pieces, the corridors, and try to get things done at the level of individual corridors, as the advisory report proposes, which is easier than to change the whole system. Inspired by one of the online viewers (Jaap Modder) the key question for the panel debate is “What do we do tomorrow?”

The panel debate is structured around a poll on a number of prepared statements:

1. National interests are the main factor curtailing the international potential of rail travel.

Some 74% of online voters agrees with this statement. Panellists all agree. They emphasize, however, national and international are two sides of the same coin. National interests are not a bad thing per se, as in Europe a lot of domestic transit in particular around cities is taken care of by rail. The question is how to improve the interconnection between national and international interests. Complexity, however, increases rapidly once you aim to let trains cross borders internationally. It should not be neglected however that good progress is made with the 4th railway package. Since 2019 there is the European Union Agency for Railways Operator that, amongst others, authorizes railway companies and vehicles to operate internationally. This helps. Progress goes slow however, so impatience is justified.

2. Improving international rail requires better cooperation, not investments in infrastructure.

Of the participants, 62% agree with this statement. Obviously, investments in infrastructure are necessary, but not in terms of developing big new lines. Investments that are more specific to increase capacity at certain parts on the corridor is what seems needed. In developing corridors, the thinking has to start from the level of services needed and then go down where it might turn out that specific infrastructure (this could refer to the quality of railway stations as well) is lacking.

One aspect of building corridors is that they become interlinked to complementary transport and mobility services on the local and regional level, in order to create a seamless integrated door-to-door system. Digitalization therefore is very important: link to bus timetables, aviation, cycling and so forth and developing a more intelligent and smart timetable. System architecture standardization is important (in digital sphere) as well as on physical level. Cultural gap between different service providers of different modes of transport and their respective service systems has to be overcome. Once cooperation increases on the digital level, it will subsequently trickle down to the physical level. A disclaimer as regards digitalization however is that in order to get it to work, we have to look to our governments in terms of providing suitable regulations, standardization and transparency.

A generally shared conclusion is that if you focus on high-speed connections, you have to start from the infra. On a corridor level with the aim to offer also slower cross-border rail, or night lines, the focus is also on abovementioned specific infrastructural elements of the corridor, not necessarily high speed rail track. Automating both the infrastructure side and the service side helps.

3. Is the COVID-19 pandemic solely a threat or also an opportunity to international rail?

The pandemic is a terrible event that forces us to rethink our current system and policies. The pandemic influences the balance between market and policymaking in a sense that policymakers are now clearly at the helm. The market will not solve this. When you think about rail to deliver COVID safety compared to air there is an opportunity. Against the car it is a different picture. Yet, it is an opportunity in the sense that Commission president Von der Leyen in general argues about COVID-19 that “We have to rethink, and then rebuild and

build back better and bounce forward.” The story about rail should be told however in a new form, less technically, more passionate. Rail is being liked by most people, from young to old and left to right, and in that sense unites.

“Covid-19 recovery for the rail sector is not about bouncing back, it is about bouncing forward. This is the moment for a boost to international rail services”

The remainder of the panel responds to questions by the viewers:

Can cities join this platform? Here the panellists agree that yes obviously they should. This would be the added value of working in alliances. Cities could in fact well become the launching customer of a corridor by saying “let me be the corridor”.

“Let’s talk about the future of international rail less technically and more passionately”

How is reflected on creating a level playing field within Europe between aviation and rail, for example in terms of VAT? Price, including subsidies and tax, and market forces work to some extent in the rail sector. The key issue here is that railway is affordable and attractive. Base costs are high in terms of infrastructure provision. Important as well as that from an environmental and climate perspective, rail puts much less pressure on society than other modes, because rail is very energy efficient. Compelling argument is making maximum use of infra. Smart use, by maximizing track infra. Price incentives is where balancing (between transport modes) easily can take place. Possibility for member states to reduce the taxes on rail services to boost and bounce back from COVID.

Closing remarks - Cri de Coeur

In a closing address, **Jeroen Kok** thanked all the participants for their contributions and the participants for sharing their experiences. He concluded that it is not about bouncing back and restoring, but about bouncing forward. The European Year of Rail 2021 is fast approaching, the time for action is now. He is enthused by the idea to get a launching customer coalition started. For that, we need to stay connected, channel the enthusiasm for international rail and work towards the ambitious goals of improving an integrating Europe wide international rail passenger transport.



“To push the agenda on improving cross-border services for passengers quickly, we need to look at governance. We need clear rules on sharing data and transparency to successfully cooperate. The corridor approach is a good starting point for this”

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