



**HAL**  
open science

# PLANNING THE REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION NETWORKS IN A RECENTLY DECENTRALIZED CONTEXT: THE CASE OF FRANCE

Pierre Zembri

► **To cite this version:**

Pierre Zembri. PLANNING THE REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION NETWORKS IN A RECENTLY DECENTRALIZED CONTEXT: THE CASE OF FRANCE. 8th AESOP (Association of European Schools of Planning) annual Congress, Aug 1994, Istanbul, Turkey. hal-03551600

**HAL Id: hal-03551600**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03551600>**

Submitted on 1 Feb 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# **PLANNING THE REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION NETWORKS IN A RECENTLY DECENTRALIZED CONTEXT : THE CASE OF FRANCE**

**Pierre ZEMBRI, Institut d'Urbanisme de Paris, Université Paris XII-Créteil.**

**Address : LATTS - Central II - La Courtine - 93167 NOISY-le-GRAND  
CEDEX - FRANCE.**

**Tel : (33-1) 49.14.35.98, Fax : (33-1) 49.14.36.00.**

## **Key-Words :**

*France, Regions, Public Transportation, Interurban Transportation, Railways Systems, Networks, Intra-Regional Planning, Transportation Policy, Decentralization.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to assess the situation of short- and medium-distance intercity public transportation in France (excluding the Ile-de-France) after ten years of regional action, by taking into account the following aspects :

- the financial realities : regional transportation is not profitable ;
- the historical background, which can partly explain the interplay of the different actants ;
- the frequently contradictory logical arguments which have sometimes been modified over the course of this period ;
- a sometimes heavy legacy from the past : configurations of sub-systems which do not always follow regional boundaries, the quality of the actual facilities, the (sometimes low) level of demand,...

## **2.0 The background : a recent decentralization**

2.1 - Decentralization occurred in France in 1982, with two laws called "Lois Defferre" (That was the name of the Minister in charge of Planning, Security and ... Decentralization). Many competences have been transferred from the national level to the three other levels of management : the local authorities ("communes", groups of "communes"), the "departements" (96 for the metropolitan part of the country), and the regions (22). The organization of transports is ruled by a specific law, dated december 31st, 1982, and called "Loi d'Orientation des Transports Intérieurs" (LOTI).

Our purpose is to appreciate the involvement of regions in transportation planning, but we have to take into account the actions of all the others actants at differents levels,

because of the **overlapping of competences** in the French system.

2.2 - What about the competences transferred in the domain of land and transportation planning ?

- the local authorities received very powerful competences in urbanism and land use management : delivrance of planning permissions, elaboration of planning documents like the "Plan d'Occupation des Sols" (POS), opposable to any land owner as a law. They also have to organize the local public transportation (1) system, and to contract with operators ;

- departements don't really have any competence in land use planning. They otherwise have to organize school transportation (if specific lines are needed) and interurban transportation only in the departement ;

- **regions** have a competence in regional planning, and can organize all interurban transportation systems crossing inter-departemental boundaries in the limits of their territories (2). In fact, they manage the regional railways services, the former "omnibus" trains.

National planning and organization of inter-regional transportation have in theory to be still ruled by the state.

2.3 - If we focus on Regions, we have first of all to note that the **transportation competence is not compulsory**. So, regional councils have to be convinced of the necessity of taking in charge regional services. At this day, only one region is not yet convinced, for ideological reasons : Poitou-Charentes. The 19 others did progressively from 1979 (3) to 1989 take in charge their transportation competences.

This is not an easy decision to make : regional transportation, which is not a profitable activity, needs continuous financing (mainly provided by the State, which pays 3,5 billions of FF per year), and/or sometimes painful restructuring. In the 1970's, some drastic cuts (5.000 km closed) provoked lots of demonstrations. The public service culture is still very strongly implanted in France. To accept the management of regional transportation networks means to accept **a political responsibility which might be dangerous**.

Moreover, transferring the transportation competence does not mean transferring funds or specific resources. The regions have to finance all actions they want to carry out. So there is a clear alternative : more regional taxes or less money for the other competences (including the management (4) of Universities, High schools, regional planning and economic action). It depends on the political will of the region.

### **3.0 New actants, new and various policies**

3.1 - The french region is the newest actant in the territorial management. If departements are now 200 years-old, the first occurrence of the regions as authorities is only 22 years-old (1972). The first directly-elected regional councils have been installed in 1986 !

So there is a **huge will of affirmation, and of image-building**. Regional transportation might be an appropriate support for these needs.

3.2 - What are the motivations of the regions when they take into account the regional transportation services ? In fact, there are several reasons among which we can find :

- simply maintaining the existing services : this defensive vision has been preponderant in the first years of regionalization. As said by a specialized journalist, Pierre-Henri Emangard, in La Vie du Rail : "*Signing an agreement (with the French Railways - SNCF), meant to the mind of several regional councils, that they've got a lightning conductor protecting themselves against closures and substitution by coach services*".

- developing the services and building a positive image : some well-urbanized regions like Nord-Pas de Calais or Languedoc-Roussillon thought (and they were right) that there was a traffic potential, which would become real traffic if there was an upgrading of existing services, managed until this time at a national level (that means far from the realities). This positive action might contribute to the building of a nice regional image.

- using the regional system as a planning tool : a few regions consider that the management of the transportation network is necessary in order to run a voluntarist regional planning policy. The aims of this kind of policy are generally (i) to structure the territory around the regional capital (5), (ii) to open up outlying spaces attracted by cities of other regions, or really isolated, (iii) to homogenize the accessibility to the different parts of the regional space.

Some regions took also an interest in infrastructures (motorways, high speed railway lines) which fall outside the scope of their competence, but which could modify the accessibility conditions of their territory. A few of them proposed a financial contribution in order to have the right to participate in decision-making process.

3.3 - But these new authorities have a weak experience of transportation network management. Facing a national operator like SNCF, an engineer world in which technical aspects are preponderant, they have a lack of counter-expert evaluation, and they can't verify the financial reports provided by SNCF. So **there is a serious problem of inequality between the actors of regional transportation**, that is not for instance the case between the actors of urban transportation.

Regions can therefore have recourse to some national bodies specialized in transport expert evaluation, like INRETS (National Institute for Research on transport and his security). But they use to be suspicious of state administrations, which would be a discreet mean of re-centralization. So they make private research units' fortune, but the figures they use are provided... by the SNCF, and the results are logically favourable to the national company.

## 4.0 The tools

4.1 - Regions can intervene in day-to-day management of the regional rail services. So they can sign with the SNCF a **management convention** (in French : "convention d'exploitation"), valid for four years, and automatically renewable. If there is no management convention, SNCF can make all service changes (including line closures) required by the demand level, according to its schedule of conditions.

If regions want to invest in utilities upgrading (tracks, signalling, etc.), they can sign, for a single project or a whole program, an **investment convention** (in French : "convention d'investissement"), in which means of financing are detailed. The State participates to

the first investments after the signature of a management convention.

Some other kinds of conventions have been signed, concerning for instance the purchase of personalized rolling stock, the personalization of existing rolling stock (6), specific tariffs, etc.

4.2 - The management conventions detail the conditions of taking into account regional services by the regions. There are two kinds of conventions, with two degrees of financial risk for the region :

- With a **global convention**, the region takes the whole risk, on all regional services . Only two regions (Nord-Pas de Calais, Languedoc-Roussillon) have chosen this sort of contract. The annual result is worked out like this :

$$S_n = C_n - R_n - A_n$$

**S<sub>n</sub>** = Final result for the year "n"

**C<sub>n</sub>** = Total cost ; **R<sub>n</sub>** = Total resources from users

**A<sub>n</sub>** = Non-commercial resources : state subsidies for social tariffs and public services.

- With a **marginal convention**, the risk taken by the authority is less important. The region is only responsible of the consequences of her action, of the service changes it orders. The existing servicing when the signature occurs (listed in annex, and called "reference service" is balanced by the state subsidies (traffic and tariff structure remaining constant). So they don't appear in the calculation of the final result, which is :

$$S_n = CS_n - (R_n - R_o)$$

**S<sub>n</sub>** = Final result for the year "n"

**CS<sub>n</sub>** = additional cost linked to service changes ordered by the region

**R<sub>n</sub>** = Total resources from users in the year "n"

**R<sub>o</sub>** = Total resources from users in the reference year, upgraded according to the economic conditions of year "n".

If  $S_n < 0$ , the region pays it to the SNCF ; if  $S_n > 0$ , the result is divided between SNCF and the region in two equal parts. The regional part has to be invested in public transportation.

4.3 - In both cases, **the financial support provided by the State is essential**. The whole sum is paid to SNCF, which distributes it among the regional services accounts. One of the strongest demands of regional councils is to get directly the money, with more transparency in the sharing out. That will be done in the next years.

Concerning investment, the State gives some money to the region within the context of pluriannual contracts called "Contrats de Plan". But investment in road works is preponderant in these contracts. A (partial) readjustment between road and rail works will take place in the next generation of contracts (1995-1999).

When a region asks for an investment in utilities, it has to pay the difference between the real cost and the acceptable cost for SNCF (permitting a return on investments higher than 8 %).

## 5.0 Some results in 1992

It seems obvious that all the results depend on the geographic and economic conditions observable in each regional territory. Some rural regions like Auvergne or Limousin suffer from the crisis of agriculture, and from a constant loss of population and activities. The financial means of action are linked to the level of the fiscal resources.

**5.1 - 19 on 20 regions signed one or more convention(s)** with SNCF (at least a management convention). If there has been some mistrust at the beginning, the relationships were ameliorated year after year. In fact, regions have been convinced that the costs were well-controlled, and that a significative action provoked interesting results concerning traffic evolution. For instance, between 1977 and 1987, regional supply (in all regions) increased from index 100 to index 112 ; traffic to index 140 ; costs to index 122. In the meantime, the coefficient costs / resources decreased from 2,95 to 2,53.

The proposal of marginal conventions, from 1985, did speed up the regional involvement in transportation management. 17 regions signed this kind of convention (called "Convention Limousin", from the name of the first region involved in 1985), that seemed to become a standard. But, since 1992, there has been a reversal in favour of the global convention, now accepted by some more regions, interested in taking into account all the short-distance trains (some of them are still "national", and there is no state subsidiary for them) running on their network.

**5.2 - The supply evolution** is the most evident indicator of regional policies. It may make us understand the priorities defined by the authorities (adaptation to the demand, will of opening up, or of creating new links, in order to make the network more efficient, etc.).

From a global point of view, no region did decrease a major part of the initial supply. When there has been cuts, even in "dynamic" regions like Nord-Pas de Calais or Alsace, they essentially took place on sundays. But the supply increases are a majority : on working days, 11 regions on 20 created more trains or buses on their networks. Among these regions, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur increased the supply on 91 % of her lines.

The reasons of the creations are various :

- Demand increases, around Paris (but beyond the Ile-de-France boundaries)(7), and around the major towns like Lyons, Lille, Marseilles, Nantes, Toulouse, etc. The evolution of supply has been locally very important : up to 50 %. For instance, all the suburban services around Toulouse had an average increase of 30 % (+ 54 trains on 6 lines) ;
- Some regions want to develop intercity services. That's especially the case of multi-polarized territories like Alsace, Languedoc-Roussillon, or Centre. The most important increases take place in Languedoc-Roussillon : + 500 % between Montpellier and Béziers, + 300 % between Avignon and Nîmes. Maximum speed can be increased, as it has been done in Alsace, from 140 km/h to 200 km/h ("TER 200").
- Opening up services for outlying spaces are developped, especially in large regions like Languedoc-Roussillon, Provence-Côte d'Azur (for instance Marseilles-Gap-Briançon) or Burgundy (Dijon-Nevers).

On some rural lines, trains have been cancelled, or replaced by bus services. That's especially the case of Limousin, Auvergne and Rhône-Alpes.

**5.3 - The networks evolution is quite positive** : 691 km of bus lines have been created, and 292 km of railway lines have been reopened from 1982 to 1990. Since 1991, there has been some other creations in Rhône-Alpes (new suburban train services in the western part of Lyons urban area) and in Limousin (new bus lines in the north-eastern part of the region).

**Most of these changes are linked to regional planning considerations.** In the case of creations or reopenings, profitability has less importance than induced advantages for users, but also for concerned spaces, and future traffic gain perspectives.

Bus services progressively replace train services on existing lines and the proportion of mixed services (trains and buses on the same line) is increasing, from 12,3 % (3027 km) to 19 % (4884 km) on working days, and from 6,2 % (1498 km) to 10,7 % (2649 km) on sundays.

**5.4 - Regions now invest in utilities** : Until 1989, regions have given most of their funds (8) for personalized and recent rolling stock. In 1988, regional investment in infrastructures was weak (100,000,000 FF) in comparison with 1988 SNCF investment (12 billions of FF). From 1989 to 1992, regional subsidies at least tenfold increased.

In fact, regions substitute themselves to SNCF, which now only invests in high-speed-train-linked operations and capacity upgrading on the main lines, or in the main network nodes.

**5.5 - Regions take a stimulation role** : they now want to develop technical innovations, especially in the domain of rolling stock, considered up to the last years, as a private ground for the SNCF engineers ! There has been some hard struggles, during which regions have been supported by users-associations.

We can consider that two technical innovations have been imposed by regions : (i) a light railcar (called "A2E"), tested in Brittany, and linked to a light and cheap operating mode dedicated to rural lines, (ii) a fast and comfortable motorized train ("automoteur TER de l'avenir") for regional services, with electric- and diesel-powered versions, which could run at 160 km/h (diesel) or 200 km/h (electric). 80 of these trains are now in command.

The most important point is now a new operating mode producing less costs. But regions and SNCF have to face the railwaymen-unions attached to all their rights and advantages, and refusing polyvalency.

## **6.0 Problems remaining**

The change from a nationally-managed network to 20 regional sub-systems is not very easy for several reasons :

**6.1 - Regional boundaries cut non-homogeneous sub-systems** out of the national network. This last has been managed by SNCF, following a national operator logic, and having his own division into "regional" sub-systems, which do not coincide with the later political division. **Institutional territoriality imposes itself to networks**

## **territoriality.**

Therefore, some regional networks suffer from a lack of connectivity. That's especially the case of the regions round about Paris region : their networks are a sum of radial lines coming from Paris, and rarely linked one to the other (see attached schemes). These axes have been linked together in the past, before the 1930's restructuring operations ("coordination"), which didn't take into consideration (very logically) a later regionalization.

**6.2 - Cooperation between regions is very weak**, and there can be consequences on services' organization. For instance, there are several ways to deal with inter-regional boundaries (see attached schemes) : some of them permit passing through, but some other ways create an increasing compartmentalization.

In the meantime, the national operator, facing a huge debt and being in deficit since 1991 (traffic decreases), cuts in the most costly services, which are inter-regional short-distance services on trunk-lines. Compartmentalization increases again ...

**6.3 - The last problem brings us to the question of compatibility between the SNCF ways of management and the regional transport policies.** If the regions manage services, the infrastructure belongs to the national operator, and some other national-operated trains (inter-city trains called "Rapides" and "Express", including high-speed trains, freight trains) run on the same lines than regional trains.

The annual accounts are worked out for each line : costs and resources are calculated, and allocated to the different activities : regional, national, and freight in proportion concerning the costs to the use of tracks, rolling stock and work-force. When SNCF runs less national or freight trains, more costs are reported in regional services results, without any regional action. And more deficit weaken the future of the line, and make the regional councils angry ...

Another example of non-compatibility is the setting up of new stations on high-speed lines, non-connected to the existing railway network. Four of these stations exist at this day (Le Creusot, Mâcon-Loché, Vendôme and Ablainville-Gare Picarde), and some other are in project. TGV users have to come to these stations by car, and there is no synergy between the two systems (which are not considered in fact as parts of a single network)(9).

## **7.0 Conclusion**

Regionalization of transport management first appears as a success : the involvement of regions is regularly increasing, with political justifications and financial means. Quality of service upgrades, innovations are urged on, regional expertise means appear.

But this success is fragile : the continuation of the essential State's financial contribution is not sure, the SNCF policy can act against the regional efforts, there is a lack of cooperation between regions themselves, and between regions and other authorities.

In fact, the State just pays, and doesn't want to organize inter-regional services, transferring this task to the national railway operator, which is not in his role. **Regional public transportation planning is affected by the absence of a clear national transportation planning policy.**



## 8.0 Notes

(1). Urban transportation is operated in a specific area (one or several communes) called "Perimètre des transports urbains" (PTU), and in which a special tax on the wage bill (companies employing 10 people and more only), the "Versement-transport"(VT) can be instituted.

(2). Two regions keep a special status : Ile-de-France (Paris and suburbs), and Corse. So we don't take these two exceptions into account in this paper.

(3). Regions had a non-compulsory transportation ruling competence before decentralization laws. But up to 1979, there have been only a few isolated operations. The precursory regions (global taking into account) were Nord-Pas de Calais (1979) and Midi-Pyrénées (1981).

(4). Programs are still decided at a national level, and teachers are paid by the State. Regions pay for the buildings (construction, maintenance) and for the educational material.

(5). The division into regions followed only partly some historical boundaries (the ancient "Provinces" for instance like Brittany or Franche-Comté), and some regions are non-coherent : the Région Centre is the best example of rag-bag territory.

(6). The personalization of regional trains and bus is now severely controlled by SNCF : only four colours are available, and there is a common label for all regional trains (TER : Transport Express Régional).

(7). The number of people working in Ile-de-France and leaving in other regions (up to 150 km far from Paris) is regularly increasing. These people take essentially the train, because of the tra-vel duration (one hour or more for a one-way trip), which can be part of working time in the train.

(8). More exactly 1,521,921,000 current FF from the beginning to 1990, among which 515,400,000 FF have been spent by only one region : Nord-Pas de Calais.

(9). In all cases, the new stations have been set up a few kilometers far from crossing points with existing lines, offering numerous connecting possibilities. Non-connection is a choice linked to the national operator's logic, but a choice creating bad consequences for the use of regional transportation as a planning tool, and as a mean of diffusion from the main national lines.

## 9.0 References

- Chesnais, M. (1981) Transports et espace français, Paris, Masson, 216 pages.
- Dobias, G., Dekkers, M.-A., Pêcheur, P. (1991) Les transports régionaux de personnes, Paris, Presses de l'Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées, 194 pages.
- Dupuy, G. & alii (1989) Réseaux territoriaux, Caen, Paradigme.
- INRETS (coll.)(1990) Five billions trips a day, Paris, La Documentation Française, 294 pages.
- Gamon, Ph. (1987) Transport des régions, Caen, Paradigme, 292 pages.
- Lefèvre, Chr. (1989) La crise des transports publics (France, Etats-Unis, R.F.A., Royaume-Uni, Pays-Bas), Paris, La Documentation Française, N.E.D. n° 4900, 144 pages.
- Merlin, P. (1991) Géographie, économie et planification des transports en France, Paris, P.U.F., 472 pages.
- Wolkowitsch, M. (1992) Géographie des Transports, Paris, Armand Colin, 192 pages.
- Zembri, P.(1989) "Des omnibus aux Transports Express Régionaux : 75 ans d'histoire ferroviaire", Transports Urbains, n° 68, pp. 19-26.
- Zembri, P.(1992) "Une région et ses transports collectifs : la région Centre", Noréis, t. 38, n° 152, pp. 377-387 (with abstract in English)
- Zembri, P.(1993) "TGV - Réseau ferré classique : des rendez-vous manqués ?", Annales de Géographie, n° 571, pp. 282-295 (with abstract in English)

Zembri, P.(1993) Les réseaux de transports collectifs régionaux en France depuis la décentralisation : contribution à une approche géographique, Thesis, Paris-Créteil, 492 pages.

