Governing logistics corridors – scope and limitations of inter-territorial coordination

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A case study of the Seine Valley

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Introduction

Logistics corridors pose significant economic and ecological challenges that require coordinated action and cooperation among local stakeholders. For example collaborative efforts between upstream and downstream territories are crucial, particularly with regard to regulating flows and their supporting infrastructures. These concerns may affect the supply chain directly (optimization, multimodality, etc.) or relate to broader issues that arise during logistic operations (preservation of biodiversity, land consumption, etc.). Thus, corridors are a critical scale for strategic planning. Despite the emergence of several inter-territorial projects over the last 15 years, such as soft spaces resembling gateways (Atlantic Gateway, Thames Gateway), results remain incomplete and their progress precarious (Allmendinger et al., 2015). In this chapter, after detailing the issues specific to the governance of logistics corridors, we will focus on the case of the Seine Valley to highlight the scope and limitations of the cooperation mechanisms at play.

As the main artery linking the Paris metropolis to the port of Le Havre, the Seine Valley corridor has long been singled out as a critical development issue for the French territory. Following the launch of a major initiative in 2008 by President Nicolas Sarkozy as part of the Grand Paris project, many local and regional actors have attempted to organize themselves at the interregional scale and put forward numerous projects. Nevertheless, tangible results remain scarce, largely due to a lack of coordination between local actors. Through this case study, we will show that cooperation difficulties can stem from various interrelated institutional, geopolitical, and ideological factors. In the Seine Valley, the main factor in the lack of coordination stems from the hesitancy of the central government, against a backdrop of rampant centralism in which local authorities have limited scope for action.

The governance of logistics corridors

Logistics corridors as strategic spaces

Corridors can be viewed from two angles. On the one hand, corridors can be considered from a functional perspective: they refer to clusters of (multimodal)

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infrastructures, generally linear, around which urbanization, economic development, and transport-related services (logistics) are concentrated (Alix, 2012). On the other hand, corridors can be viewed as institutional spaces aimed at planning the interconnection of a port terminal with its hinterland and promoting the development of the resulting logistics system (Priemus & Zonneveld, 2003; Debrie & Comtois, 2010; Beziat et al., 2014).

The objectives of these planning policies are diverse. Historically, the main focus was on stimulating economic development by improving the connectivity of a region (Trip & Zonneveld, 2003). These development plans were aimed at increasing port traffic and creating added value in the hinterland. Over time, new objectives related to sustainable development were integrated into these planning efforts (Debrie & Comtois, 2010). Corridors were designed to connect territories through larger-scale and greener modes of transport (waterways, rail); to reduce the reliance on road transport; and preserve the quality of ecosystems that are often rich in biodiversity. Moreover, corridors can also serve as a means to rally local actors around a shared goal, particularly when it comes to facilitating dialogue between private and public entities (Beziat et al., 2014). Faced with the increasing demand for flexibility due to the evolution of supply chains, the massification and diversification of transported goods, as well as increased standardization stemming from the rise of containerization, public and private actors stand to benefit greatly from enhanced coordination (Hesse & Rodrigue, 2004).

Looking at corridors from various perspectives, they can be seen as "logistics integration axes" (Rodrigue, 2007) that pave the way for greater fluidity, competitiveness, and multimodality. Depending on state traditions (Loughlin & Peters, 1997), this integration can be top-down, that is initiated and driven by the central state or bottom-up, mobilizing the participation of local and regional actors (Beziat et al., 2014). This latter form of integration is particularly important, but its implementation remains complex.

The multiple dimensions of corridor governance

To govern corridors successfully, cooperation is necessary in various aspects. Because of their vast scale, corridors often extend beyond the administrative boundaries of their integrated territories (Trip & Zonneveld, 2003), calling for inter-territorial cooperation (Perrin, 2012) within the framework of "soft spaces" (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009; Allmendinger et al., 2015).

Moreover, effective corridor governance requires cooperation between actors operating at different levels, within a dynamic multilevel governance system (Hooghe et al., 2016; Poupeau, 2017). It also requires the support of multiscale institutions such as the European Union, central states (one or more depending on the case), and local authorities. Ultimately, corridor governance involves reconciling actors with varying and, at times, conflicting agendas and resources. For example public actors (government agencies, elected officials, etc.) generally have broader expectations than business leaders, who tend to prioritize freight transport optimization (Beziat et al., 2014). In addition, various business sectors within a given corridor may

have divergent interests depending on the type of goods they exchange and produce. Unions, particularly those representing port and rail workers, also play a major role, and their priorities sometimes differ from those of other private stakeholders.

As a result, in many corridors, governance stands as a key issue, even an obstacle, to achieving coordination between stakeholders. For example in the context of the international Randstad–Flanders megacorridor, Romein et al. (2003) observed a lack of multilevel governance, with decisions still being made at the national level when there was a clear need to scale up decision-making procedures. Likewise, in the context of Canada's Asia Pacific Gateway and Corridor project, Debrie & Comtois (2010) noted that although the horizontal integration of the corridor resulted in the rapid merger of the three ports of Vancouver, interest in the project dwindled over time, and interests between the provinces of Quebec and Ontario became increasingly divergent.[1]

The risks of non-cooperation

A lack of coordination between stakeholders in territorial planning can have significant negative consequences. One of the most significant risks is the potential for rivalry between territories for hosting infrastructure such as multimodal platforms, landing quays, and training centres. When managed poorly, failed cooperative efforts can also result in land-use-related conflicts, in particular along riverbanks, where opposing productive, residential, and ecological functions can collide.

Inadequate coordination may also lead to scattered efforts and investments, thereby preventing local actors from tackling important larger-scale issues that require substantial resources, such as the construction of new infrastructure, investment in alternative energy resources, as well as research and development. Furthermore, the compartmentalization of territorial strategies may hinder the development of economies of scale that will allow economic actors to benefit from positive externalities, such as the promotion of new business sectors.

In addition, a lack of inter-territorial coordination means that the challenges of interdependence between the territories forming a given corridor cannot be addressed, particularly with regards to economic development, spatial planning, and environmental preservation. From an economic point of view, it is necessary, for example, to link the downstream gateway (the harbour) with its hinterland, not only for the management of import and export flows but also for a concerted integration of productive sectors.

The absence of integrated planning between dense and non-dense areas can also lead to spatial fragmentation, with activities distributed according to commercial logics of polarization that pit gentrified urban centres against peripheral areas hosting activities with high environmental impact (pollution, land use, etc.). In the end, corridors constitute rich and integrated ecological systems in terms of biodiversity, which require coherence and respect for continuities and ecosystem interdependencies within the river basin.

Given all the reasons outlined earlier, corridor governance is undeniably a crucial issue (Comtois & Debrie, 2010). The poor coordination observed in various

corridors hinders the implementation of sustainable development and management policies, as the situation in the Seine Valley in France serves to illustrate. Despite numerous political initiatives since 2008, progress has been slow, a testament to the multiple constraints impacting territorial cooperation at the corridor level.

Territorial cooperation initiatives: the case of the Seine Valley corridor

As early as the Middle Ages, the Seine Valley has served as a major axis for penetration and circulation throughout France and Northwest Europe. It also has the particularity of being home to Paris, a major geopolitical and geo-economic powerhouse (Braudel, 1986). The Seine Valley is divided between two administrative regions (Île-de-France and Normandy) and features a conurbation of three main cities (Paris, Rouen, and Le Havre), which also house three functionally complementary yet institutionally competitive port facilities. Today, the Seine Valley faces a new set of challenges related to the economic and ecological transition.

Despite its long history (Saunier, 2006), the idea of turning the Seine Valley into a strategic axis has sparked renewed interest since 2008 as discussions on the development of Greater Paris came to the fore. Since then, the Seine Valley has been the subject of numerous integration proposals. However, despite the abundance of suggestions and initiatives, progress has been limited to modest achievements.

A territory claimed by a diverse set of stakeholders

Table 9.1 identifies three distinct phases in the mobilization of actors within the Seine Valley. The initial phase (2008–2012) coincides with President N. Sarkozy's term of office, characterized by ambitious plans to promote economic growth by connecting Paris to the sea (Brennetot et al., 2013). A high-speed rail line linking Paris to Normandy was announced for 2017, including a new station in Rouen to be located in a future business district. Plans were also made for major infrastructure projects, such as the development of a major motorway ring road in Rouen; the merger of the ports of Paris, Rouen, and Le Havre; and the construction of a river access route to the main maritime container terminals. In addition to these logistic advancements, the objective was to improve higher education and research facilities; foster industrial innovation; and enhance local attractivity in terms of tourism, services, and quality of life. The cost of these projects was estimated at €18 billion by the General Commissioner for the development of the Seine Valley, Antoine Rufenacht, former mayor of Le Havre and historical figure of the French right.

In 2011, a public debate was held on the Ligne Nouvelle Paris Normandie (LNPN) project, plans for a high-speed rail line linking Paris to Normandy. This was followed by the creation of an Economic Interest Grouping (EIG) called "Haropa" in 2012, intended to unify the commercial offer of the three ports of the Seine Valley – Paris, Rouen, and Le Havre. For the first time, the mayors of the major cities in the Seine Valley (Paris, Rouen, Le Havre, and Caen), together with urban planning agencies and the Chambers of Commerce and Industry, began

Table 9.1 Main phases of mobilization of Seine Axis actors.

Period	*Characteristics*	*Main actors*	*Main objectives*
2008–2012	Wide range of proposals	Various (the architect Antoine Grumbach, the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, the government, Chambers of Commerce, urban planning agencies, and local elected officials)	Geo-economic: improving the competitiveness of Paris and France
2013–2020	Institutionalization of the corridor Partial demobilization of economic actors	Interdepartmental delegation Regions Members of parliament	Sustainable development: reconciling economic growth and balanced regional development
2021 to present	Remobilization following the Haropa port venture	Haropa port Elected officials of major cities Port communities	Ecological transition and decarbonization as factors of attractiveness

holding regular meetings to express their support for the initiatives launched by the central government. In 2012, the central government created a Seine Valley Development Conference to coordinate all stakeholders' efforts.

The period of 2012–2020 gave way to a second phase of the Seine Axis' development, this time marked by a partial reduction in mobilization. Shortly after being elected President of the Republic in 2012, François Hollande disbanded both the Commission and the Conference for the Development of the Seine Valley. In their place, an Interministerial Delegation for the Development of the Seine Valley was created, which was headed by F. Philizot, a member of the prefectural corps. This new delegation has limited resources and lacks the political authority of its predecessor, led by the former minister and mayor A. Rufenacht. This delegation has two main missions: to develop a strategy for 2030 and to draw up a State-Region Interregional Project Contract aimed at initial implementation. Passed in 2015 with a budget of just under €900 million, this interregional contract aims to finance various infrastructure projects, including the modernization of a rail section for freight between the Caux plateau and the Vexin near Paris. Nonetheless, this freight line remains the only significant infrastructure project that has seen completion for the development of the Seine Valley since 2008.

In 2013, the central government announced that the LNPN project would be divided into three phases, with the first phase postponed until 2025, the second until 2030, and the last to an undetermined date. In 2018, the government announced that the various sections of the first two phases were being re-evaluated and pushed back

to a date between 2027 and 2037, or beyond, and the timeframe remains unspecified to this day. These successive postponements, accompanied by an increasingly vague timetable, ushered in a progressive demobilization of the actors involved. By 2018, the president of the Normandy Region, H. Morin, openly expressed his doubts about the State's willingness to support the LNPN project. Elected officials of the Île-de-France region, for their part, remain hostile to the idea of hosting the infrastructure required for the passage of the LNPN, especially the construction of a railway bridge at Clichy-sur-Seine. Still, with works being postponed until 2032, their discontent has been somewhat tempered. Norman decision-makers, on the other hand, fear that the State, the SNCF,[2] and elected officials in the Île-de-France region will prioritize suburban connections at the expense of the LNPN, illustrating the diverging interests between the different sections of the valley in terms of rail infrastructure development.

Meanwhile, port cooperation continued, but there were no significant concrete achievements until 2018. The Normandy Region proposed to take over the management of the two major seaports of the Lower Seine (Le Havre and Rouen) but was unsuccessful. The region then reproached the State for having abandoned plans for a new river access to the port of Le Havre and decided to go about the project alone. From 2014 onwards, there was a decline in communication between major cities at the local level, while the cooperative efforts of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry and the urban planning agencies waned. During this period, the economic decline of the Seine estuary increased, out of step with the ambitions stated at the beginning of the project. The governance of the Seine Valley therefore faced significant difficulties that have compromised the achievement of its initial objectives.

Starting in 2021, the development of the Seine Axis has entered a third phase, marked by a remobilization of its various stakeholders. The appointment of E. Philippe, mayor of Le Havre, as Prime Minister (2017–2020), breathed new life into the Haropa merger project, which was eventually achieved in June 2021. Following controversies surrounding the location of the headquarters of the new port institution in Le Havre, the Normandy Region and private companies in the port sector are now criticizing the State for their lack of representation on Haropa's Supervisory Board. This institutional merger has failed to resolve the issue of the broader strategy, particularly in relation to other upcoming projects such as the Seine–Northern Europe canal, which is expected to rival the Seine Valley for the supply of the Île-de-France region. The success of these port synergies across the Seine Valley will hinge on the ability of Haropa's management to effectively coordinate the three territorial divisions of Paris, Rouen, and Le Havre and to move developments forward in a coherent and concerted manner. Since 2021, after being put on hold for several years, there has also been a revival of inter-municipal cooperation between Paris, Rouen, and Le Havre, this time to promote the decarbonization of the Seine Valley. However, this initiative is in direct competition with a similar project under way in the regions of Normandy and Île-de-France.

Coordinating actions has proved challenging, as evidenced by the two-year standstill in negotiations that preceded the renewal of the planning contracts between the central government and French regions, with an agreement finally being reached in October 2022. In the meantime, the Interministerial Delegation for the Development of the Seine Valley has been discreetly preparing to update the state's strategy. On the railway front, disagreements persist among the SNCF (a state-owned company), the Normandy Region, elected officials in Île-de-France, and user associations over issues such as the management of halts and timetables, maintenance of lines and rolling stock, and recurrent failures. Despite the repeated efforts of the various stakeholders, these discussions have not led to any significant improvement in relations, nor has anyone suggested the shortening the timeframe for completion of the LNPN. While the structuring of actors on the scale of the Seine Valley is much more developed than in the other major French corridors such as the Northern Axis and the Mediterranean Rhone–Saine Axis, concrete achievements remain rare. At the same time, there is a continued lack of coordination between the various stakeholders in their initiatives.

Factors explaining the lack of cooperation in the Seine Axis

This failing governance can be viewed through a neo-institutionalist lens, whereby a complex interplay of institutions, interests, and ideas allow for an understanding of political blockages and changes (Hall & Taylor, 1996). From a political standpoint, France is often defined as a "Napoleonic" state, characterizing its unitary, centralized, and technocratic nature (Loughlin & Peters, 1997; Painter & Peters, 2010). Still, the influence of local figures should not be disregarded (Grémion, 1976). Despite the process of decentralization that France has undergone since the 1980s, the organization of political power remains centralized compared to its Western European neighbours (Hooghe et al., 2016). The state is therefore a central actor in territorial development through the legal and financial control it exercises over local authorities. Moreover, the state's involvement is critical as agencies, companies, and public establishments, such as the SNCF or port facilities, play a determining role in the spatial organization of corridors.

In the Seine Valley corridor, this state dominance is particularly strong. Unlike other European harbours such as the ports of Rotterdam or Antwerp, where local governments and economic actors have substantial representation, French ports are administered by the state and managed by senior officials. Business actors, in contrast, merely serve in an advisory capacity in governance. Despite repeated official statements advocating for the development of the Seine Valley over the past decade, the state has not fully assumed its leadership responsibilities by developing a clear strategy with sufficient funding and a management team capable of bridging the divisions and rivalries among local actors. This "wait-and-see attitude" allows the state to avoid committing to significant investments and implementing a multilevel governance that could lead to concrete outcomes.

The state's relative passivity leads us to the second contributing factor: the inability of regional and local authorities to collectively initiate their own development dynamics. Indeed, these authorities face limited regulatory and financial capacities, which prevent them from carrying out large-scale projects. Moreover, the proliferation and fragmentation of local and regional institutions are hardly conducive to cooperation. No local authority has sufficient power to promote bottom-up synergies, except perhaps the Île-de-France region. Given the lack of leadership among local authorities, we are unlikely to see an end to the frequent resurgence of old or emerging geopolitical rivalries, whether between territories vying for infrastructure investments and the installation of new activities or between levels of government competing for more competencies or specific prerogatives.

For several decades now, a key geographical factor has also hindered cooperative efforts. The Seine corridor is divided into two institutional regions: Normandy and Île-de-France. These two regions differ greatly in terms of population (3.3 and 12.3 million inhabitants, respectively), economic power, as well as their dynamics and priorities. Historically, planning in the Paris region has been centred on the Île-de-France area and has tended to neglect interdependencies with the downstream part of the corridor, as shown by the concentration of logistics sites in the eastern part of the region without any links to the megaregion's seafront (Figure 9.1). However, because of their demographic and economic weight, the involvement of Île-de-France stakeholders is essential to the development of the Seine Valley.

Finally, to fully understand the political rifts within the Seine Valley corridor, certain ideological factors must also be taken into account. Although common discourses and objectives can a priori be observed surrounding the development projects of the Seine Axis, when transport and logistics-related projects take shape, deep-seated ideological divisions begin to surface. This often boils down to divisions between two main camps: on the one hand, supporters of a sustainable development strategy that balances economic interests and emerging consideration of socio-environmental issues; and, on the other hand, those who champion a more ecologically driven approach. The socialist mayors of Rouen and Paris, committed to a post-productivist transition, regularly clash with business and right-wing actors on the issue of transport (speed regulation, restriction of the presence of motor vehicles in city centres, opposition to ring road projects). Activities deemed harmful to the environment, such as the construction of port infrastructures or the establishment of logistics warehouses, have also given rise to frontal disagreements between stakeholders.

Conclusion

Though the difficulty of governing the Seine corridor can be attributed to various factors, the absence of a comprehensive territorial strategy, coupled with the inadequacy of resources granted by the central state, is clearly fundamental. An examination of the achievements made within the corridor over the last few decades reveals that direct involvement of the state is essential when it comes to the mobilization and involvement of local actors. The role of the Seine–Normandy

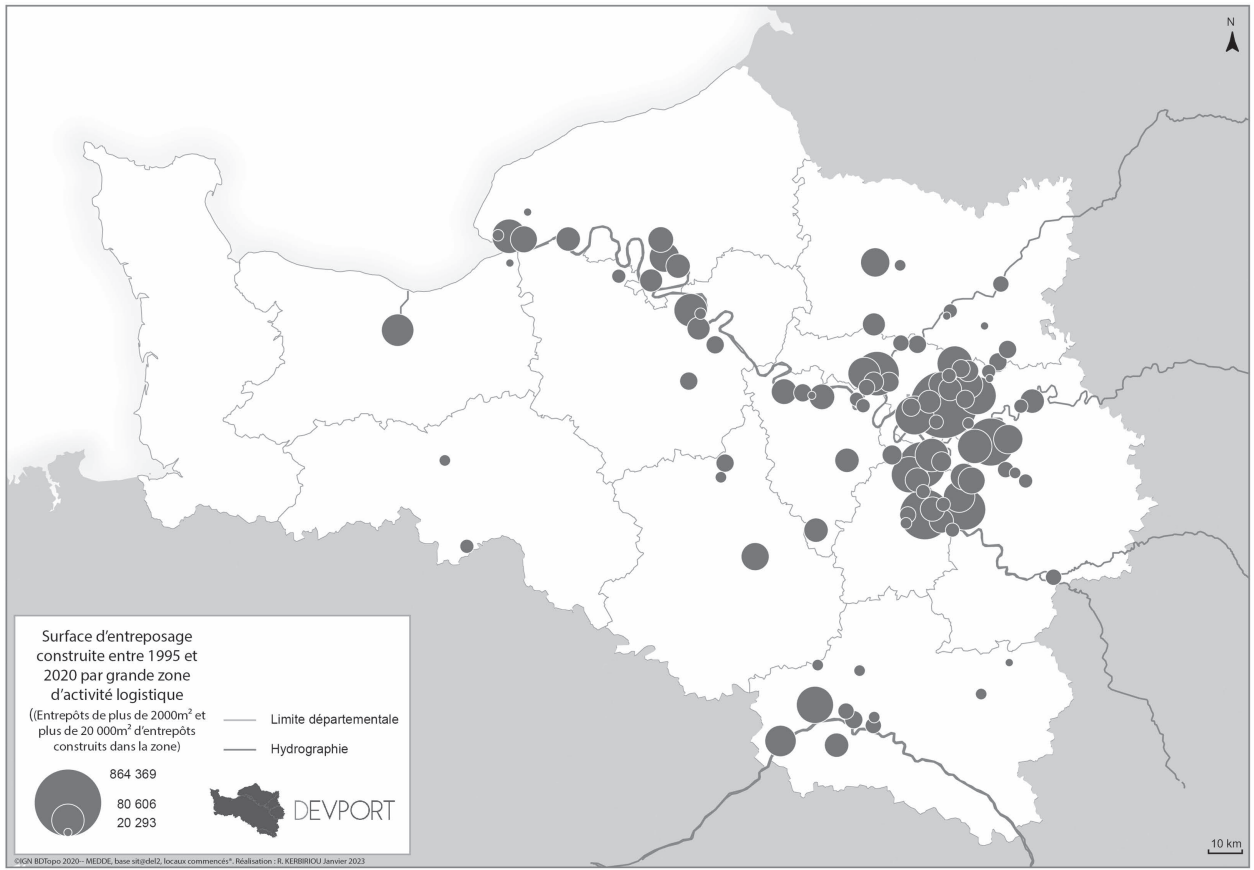

Figure 9.1 The construction of logistics zones exceeding 20,000 m² between 1995 and 2020.

Realization: Ronan Kerbiriou, 2022.

Water Agency created by the state has been crucial in improving river water quality and restoring biodiversity. The completion of the Serqueux–Gisors rail freight line in 2021 is another illustration of the decisive role of the state in the implementation of projects within the Seine corridor (Guihéry, in this book). In addition, the state's decision to merge the three ports in the Seine Valley in 2021 pushed other actors within the corridor to plan and coordinate at this scale to enhance their levels of interaction and visibility. Conversely, when the state adopts a passive approach or delays in taking action, as was the case with the proposed new rail line along the corridor between Paris and Normandy, local actors are often unable to execute collective and coordinated strategies capable of offsetting or compensating for the central government's stance.

The situation in France highlights the challenges of coordinating and implementing development projects in corridors organized as weakly institutionalized soft spaces. The vast geographical scale of these corridors, the number of actors involved, and the significant financing required for their development are not compatible with flexible and poorly centralized cooperation. It remains to be seen whether this constraint is unique to the French political model of territorial governance, characterized by persistent, albeit tempered, centralism, or whether it can be observed in other, more decentralized institutional contexts.

Notes

1 See also Libourel and Schorung for the Mediterranean corridor in Europe and the NAFTA corridor (2016). See Chapman et al. (2003) for the corridor linking the West Midlands to the London corridor in England.
2 The Société nationale des chemins de fer français (SNCF) (National society of French railroads) is a publicly owned company that was nationalized in 1937. It serves as both the manager and operator of the railway network in France. In recent years, there has been a gradual opening up of the network's operation to private companies, allowing for competition.

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