

# **After the flood is before the flood**

## **unless Europe introduces a more sustainable transport policy**

### **Every cloud has a silver lining**

Unless they are of an apocalyptic nature, disasters like the recent European floods are likely to revitalise interest in environmental issues and highlight the need for more sustainable development. Tackling the consequences of the floods in Germany, Austria, Slovakia and The Czech Republic can thus be a big impetus for a reform of European policies that have had a role to play in this environmental disaster – amongst them transportation. The urgent need for transport reform is reflected in the scope of the floods' impacts on both local life and national economies estimated to be more than € 25 billion. Such impacts underline the fragile balance between nature and culture – between water systems and transport systems. In doing so, they stress the need for a European transport policy that turns away from dominant “predict and supply policies” towards more sustainable transport demand management.

### **How transport leads to floods**

European transport policy seems to be guided by one overarching principle – that is to say, the free movement of goods and people within the Union. Although this principle is now positioned next to more humanitarian principles like “improving the quality of live” it still appears to be the sine qua non of European transport planning and policy. Dismantling all sorts of political, legal and geographical borders in order to make way for passenger and goods transport has led to a Europe-wide acceleration programme that causes more problems than it solves. The flooded cities and towns along rivers like Elbe, Odder and Danube are shattering illustrations of transportation's unintended consequences. They reveal how modern societies have created a risky transport system that has come to threaten their social, economic and ecological foundation.

But apart from being an illustration of an omnipresent “risk society”, this year's summer floods invite a closer look at some of the systemic consequences of unsustainable transport policies and programmes. The floods show how manifold the environmental implications of modern transport systems are – ranging from local pollution and degradation to global climate change. They offer a good opportunity to unravel how transport is tied to the environment – whether we like it or not – and how important a change in the European Common Transport Policy has become.

What led to the floods were extreme weather conditions, which broke long-standing rainfall records. Climate change is blamed for such extreme weather. Experts frequently point at the increased frequency with which storms, floods and droughts occur throughout the globe and link their cause to man-made global warming. The greenhouse gas emissions that are warming the atmosphere transform certain regions into permanent wetlands and others into deserts. With almost 30% of all CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions, transportation is a major contributor to such greenhouse effect.

Climate change, however, is not the only cause. The hazardous implications of extreme rainfalls in Europe can only come into being because of the anthropogenic alterations along Europe's rivers and wetlands. These alterations entail, for example, the draining of floodplains for new settlements and transport infrastructure. With this land-take, the soil has little chance to absorb enough rainwater to prevent the water levels from rising. The rivers themselves have been regulated into streamlined inland waterways in order to facilitate the traffic of ever faster and bigger ships. Particularly the extension and embankment of rivers in conjunction with the disappearance of river branches, islands and banks dramatically increase the potential for

extreme hydrological events. The European Environmental Agency sees the main driving forces for floods as “climate change, land sealing, changes in the catchment and in the flood-plain land use, population growth, urbanisation and increasing settlement, roads and railways and hydraulic engineering measures”.

But transportation is not only one of the most important causes of flooding: it is also hardest hit when the dikes collapse. First estimates of the destruction of national roads along the Elbe in Germany put the damage at more than € 200 million. In addition, railroads and local transport systems in that area, like the Dresden's tramways, have suffered from damages, which will certainly be greater. In other words, we are seeing a boomerang effect that exposes unsustainable transport systems to their own negative external effects.

The worst thing about governments' responses to provide flood relief is that some measures are likely to reinforce that boomerang effect. This self-destructive tendency, which seems to be characteristic to any sort of unsustainable policy is exemplified by the Disaster Relief Fund that was proposed by the European Commission at the end of August. Although this proposal may provide aid for the flooded cities and towns in Germany, Austria, Slovakia and The Czech Republic, it misses a unique opportunity to prevent such disasters from happening again. Instead of tackling some of the causes of the floods by reforming the Common Transport Policy, the European Union now wants to spend up to €1 billion per year to relieve the consequences of similar disasters.

Certain forms of relief and protection are merely designed to reproduce past mistakes without preventing the floods in the same old way. Re-establishing a destroyed transport system with many of its unsustainable features will not help to induce the shift that is needed towards a socially just, economically fair, and ecologically sound European transport policy.

### **What have we learned – less disasters and more sustainable mobility**

The European Union now has the chance to revise some of its transport policy goals and programmes in its response to the floods. They are justification enough to reconsider questionable decisions that merely stimulate further transport growth and do little to shift transport to less climate-damaging modes. Moreover, the floods also challenge the myth that inland navigation with its reckless regulation of rivers and flood plains is a genuinely environmentally sound transport mode. European waterways may very well make a contribution to sustainable transport by allowing road freight transport to shift to inland navigation. However, such modal shift is only economically fair, environmentally just and environmentally sound if the draining of wetlands and dredging of rivers comes to an end. What is needed is an intermodal transport system that integrates environmental aspects by using existing capacities more efficiently. Such integrated mobility management has to be accompanied by a fairer charging of infrastructure use that ends with the hidden subsidies for unsustainable transport modes. Europe's Common Transport Policy must be guided by a decoupling of transport growth and economic growth. It needs to promote spatial patterns that allow for a less transport-intensive production, distribution and consumption of goods. At least it must ensure the use of cleaner fuels and the progressive reduction of transport emissions by forcing the right kind of technology. Only with less transport and more sustainable mobility will Europe make certain that its rivers stay in their beds.

#### **More information**

Jörg Beckmann, Policy Officer, T&E, [joerg.beckmann@t-e.eu](mailto:joerg.beckmann@t-e.eu) or +32-2-502 9909

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