



Rail transport

The sustainable alternative for air travel in Europe

Most flights in Europe are short haul flights. Most of the air traffic is within the bigger countries or in the economic centre of the EU, the zone between London, Paris Frankfurt and Amsterdam. For these flights and many others rail transport is a viable and far more sustainable alternative.

Short distance flights are relatively (per km, per Euro) even more polluting than long distance flights due to the bigger impact of landing and take off. The same is true for the noise burden. (Infras 2004)

The solution: rail and bus transport

Modern buses are the most environmentally friendly means of public transport. But, for longer distances, trains are the most important alternative to air travel because they also offer comfort and speed for the traveller as well as improved environmental performance.

The problem: aviation too cheap

Unfortunately aviation enjoys huge tax breaks and is therefore far too cheap. There is no tax on aviation fuel. Aviation fuel costs the airlines just 26 Euro cents a litre. Compare this with motoring taxes. Petrol costs around 1 Euro a litre in the EU most of which is tax. Additionally, no VAT is paid on aviation transactions (although the majority of EU states impose VAT on domestic air travel). All this means that each year the aviation industry in the European Union receives over 45 billion in tax concessions and other subsidies (Van de Pol 1999).

The alternative is ready

A European high-speed rail network is available for connections between the main cities. Rail links are available between the cities with the heaviest air traffic.

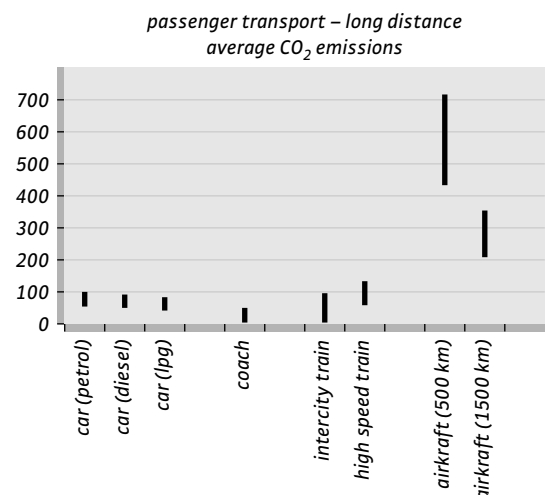
Advantages of rail networks

International trains give easy connections to national rail networks. Railway stations in town centres are an

advantage for most travellers. They also boost city development and local public transport. In fact, the economic effects of international railway stations are comparable to those of airports. Lille-Europe is a well-known example. They become focal points of economic and cultural development. Railway stations are situated in town centres. Therefore new developments are less visible around railway stations than around airports in the open fields.

Trains save the environment

Trains have a relatively small impact on the environment, as long as there is a limit on the number of new (high-speed) rail corridors built. High-speed trains use more energy than conventional trains, make more noise and new rail corridors tend to destroy nature and landscapes.



Emissions per passenger-kilometre for passenger transport (>250km) in 2000 (CE 2003)

Objections to high speed rail

1. *It can permit more long-distance flights to use airport capacity.*

When short haul flights are cut back because passengers transfer to high-speed rail, capacity at airports comes available, that can be used to accommodate more long haul flights. This allows aviation to continue to expand. Therefore high-speed rail, of itself, is unlikely to bring about a reduction of flights at most airports.

2. *It can encourage longer journeys.*

Many journeys currently made using high-speed rail – or air – are not trips that people made before by some other means. They are new journeys. Moreover, they are new, longer journeys, being made because of the speed (and sometimes the affordability) of high speed rail and short haul flights.

“it is not sustainable to carry on satisfying ever higher demands for mobility. On a global scale our mobility could never be replicated by counties like China and India without huge environmental consequences. The onus is on the rich world to reduce its levels of mobility. The more we emphasise time savings, the more poor people lose out. High speed rail exploits the environmentally friendly characteristics of rail travel to increase passenger demand, space, energy consumption and the distances that separate activities.” (Whitelegg 1993)

3. *It is hugely expensive and favours the better-off*
4. *Investments in conventional railways, reliable and frequent trains are the efficient way to ensure good connections in Europe*

75% of journeys made in the UK, for example, are less than 5 miles in length. Most people travel within their own region. Instead of spending billions of pounds on high-speed lines, we should build up our local and regional transport infrastructure.

Conclusions

Even if many high speed rail options may need to be ruled out for environmental and economic reasons, the success of EuroStar and the TGV shows that a limited network of high speed lines in Europe can have a role to play in reducing the number of short-haul flights using Europe's airports.

What is most important for sustainable connections in and between European countries is high quality rail. The emphasis should be on frequent connections rather than on high-speed.

However, on its own, high speed rail will not reduce the demand for air travel. The tax concessions enjoyed by the aviation industry need to be removed in order to cut back the demand for both short and long haul flights.

References

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