

Your Excellencies,
Honorable Prime Minister,
Honorable Minister for Public Works, Equipment, and Building,
Good morning!

I am extremely pleased to be here in Libreville, and honored to be given this opportunity to say a few words at the beginning of what promises to be a unique and exciting meeting.

The occasion is doubly satisfying for the SSATP. On the one hand, to be able to play a part in the first meeting of the new association of African Road Fund Managers, and on the other, to personally welcome Gabon to the SSATP family. Gabon's engagement with the Program goes back some little time, but this is the first function, which has a clear SSATP connection, to take place on Gabonese soil.

Without taking up too much of your time, I would like to touch on one or two topics in the general arena of road funds themselves, and then take a very brief glance at the developmental context within which they and wider transport sector issues are located, and on which the SSATP is focusing during the coming and future years.

Firstly, to make some road fund notes: It is not my intention to preach to the converted, or elaborate on why we believe that well-arranged road funds provide a good, practical, answer to the question of sustainable financing of road maintenance. The fact that you are here indicates your conviction that road funds are right for your transport communities.

And, if I may say so, the fact that a meeting like this is honored by the presence of the Prime Minister, and Minister for Public Works, sends a very strong signal of Gabon's commitment to the concept and, I believe, to the SSATP.

In a short time Steve Brushett, our distinguished RMI component manager, will be making a comprehensive and articulate presentation, reviewing the achievements of African countries to date, and the constraints and challenges which must be faced now and in the future. I have no intention of encroaching on the messages he will deliver, but would like to emphasize those which have to do with what can be broadly described as governance issues.

As many of you are aware, the concept of establishing institutionally sound and acceptable mechanisms for collecting and channeling road user charges into maintenance where more orthodox fiscal and budgetary arrangements have proved inadequate, has not been without its opponents. I will not weary you with a recapitulation of their arguments, nor will I stray into the area of the presentation which Steve Brushett is going to make.

But I will mention the fact that opponents are still out there, and in spite of the widespread, continuing and expanding engagement by African countries with the institutional developments needed to put sound, "second generation" road funds in place, opposition continues and needs to be countered.

For our part, the SSATP team will continue to highlight the case for road funds where appropriate, and where demanded, and will continue to seek ways of ensuring that the arguments and evidence are properly marshaled, and effectively presented in appropriate forums.

However, the best defenders of the concept, and the principles, are the practitioners themselves. I believe that through this association, your voices will be amplified, your experiences shared, and your position most effectively presented. But this does entail a continuing dedication to the principles underlying the approach, continuing conviction, and continuing efforts to emulate good practice.

Where do road funds fit into the broader context of transport and development? Indeed, where do transport services fit into national development and planning? These are questions which our Program is facing as we respond to stakeholders' demands that transport strategies be anchored in the implementation of growth and poverty reduction strategies.

We are painfully aware that the Millennium Development Goals seem, at least on the surface, to incorporate no roles for improved transport services. Apart from one goal, to do with measures to ease the plight of landlocked countries and small island states, the omission is difficult to understand, and erodes our confidence in the part we know we must play.

The SSATP, in the approach it has adopted to promote the notion of responsive transport strategies, has begun to highlight certain matters which may begin to indicate how the disconnect between transport and the MDGs has come about.

Pilot studies in 3 member countries, testing an analytical methodology for examining PRSP and transport strategies, generated some startling findings: that PRSP frameworks within which transport strategies should find their place, are generally weak in this regard, and rarely discuss issues of mobility; transport strategies themselves, in the countries concerned, although formulated through elaborate processes involving sectoral stakeholders, had little connection with PRSPs; most telling of all, perhaps, was the fact that in these 3 countries, there was little or no dialogue between transport professionals and other sectoral representatives of civil society and interest groups. Not only was there no dialogue, there was no mechanism for dialogue in the planning processes.

What has this got to do with Road Funds? Road Funds, in an institutional sense, are a vital component of the structural arrangements of the roads sub-sector, which, as we know, in Africa is the most dominant element of the transport picture as a whole.

I sincerely hope that some of the countries represented here, will, in 2004, participate in undertaking the next round of poverty/transport strategy reviews, which will be an extremely important part of the SSATP work program.

Issues which you may be discussing during this meeting may well feature in those reviews. Issues such as funds allocation criteria, minimum infrastructure platforms, right-sizing networks, financing of very low volume roads, mobility and access questions, are all matters of key importance to development as a whole, and in particular the coherence of growth and poverty reduction strategies with transport. Transport is, of course, a cross-cutting service to all other sectors.

Road fund managers did participate in one or two of the pilot case study countries' analytical work to which I referred. And I very much hope that in the next round of reviews, which we hope will commence early in 2004, road fund managers will participate, and engage in a dialogue where your views and experience can be understood by key players in other sectors.

There is another aspect of the SSATP 2004 Work Program with which your countries may become involved. And that is the matter of transport performance indicators. Running in tandem with the transport/poverty reviews, and in response to SSATP members' demands, the program will be devoting resources to countries to help develop and strengthen databases and data collection, so as to be able to generate, in a sustainable fashion, a number of performance indicators.

A small number of "high level" indicators which can demonstrably be linked to MDGs, and which have global application, are being proposed. Alongside these there are likely to be a larger number of "secondary" indicators, which will best suit the needs of SSATP members.

An example of a high level indicator is that to do with rural transport, and it will quantify the percentage of rural populations living within 2 kms of an all-weather road. The results, no doubt, will be interesting!

Secondary indicators will inevitably include things like measures of the effectiveness of road maintenance, probably enabling the relationship between maintenance funding, institutional arrangements, and road conditions to be better understood.

Clearly, Road Fund Managers will play a key role in helping to develop the datasets and databases, and the SSATP will be offering support to all member countries in their efforts.

Your excellencies, distinguished delegates. I would like to draw these remarks to a close with a brief reflection on how the SSATP as a Program may see the possible development of its relationship with AFERA, and other similar associations of African professionals and practitioners.

Early in 2002, at the 12th meeting of African Ministers of Transport and communications in Addis Ababa, I said that it was the intention of the SSATP to endure unambiguous ownership of the program by its partners.

It will be very interesting to see AFERA develop, over the years of the Program's Long Term Development Plan, as the premier instrument of road fund development in Africa, becoming a center of excellence, and a repository of good practice and high principles. One can envisage, in future, countries which wish to embark on the road fund path, turning to AFERA for advice, support, encouragement. If AFERA, over the course of time, feels willing and able to undertake these sorts of roles, then I believe it will be able to make a very strong case for SSATP support. After all, who better to guide, advise, teach, than the practitioners themselves?

These are early days, and I know you are preoccupied with establishing the association, but you may wish to keep in mind a possibly broader vision of what AFERA could become.

Your Excellencies, distinguished delegates, I cannot conclude without recording appreciation to the organizers of this meeting. The government of Gabon who so generously are hosting the event, and M Leyama, whose drive and enthusiasm lie behind the gathering. I'm also grateful to the SATP team and the work that they have done, especially the redoubtable Louis Fernique. For myself, thank you again for giving me this platform, and let my final words be to wish the meeting well, in the expectation that it will achieve all it sets out to do.

Thanks you