

**The First African Conference of Road Maintenance Funds
(From December 15 to 18, 2003)**

Introductory Speech by The Minister of Public Works, Equipment and Building

Theme: “What road maintenance strategy for Gabon,”

During the colonial period, roads were essentially built and maintained by lumber companies and artisanal goal diggers.

After independence in 1960, and until 1990, their maintenance was totally covered by the territorial subdivisions of the Ministry in charge of Public Works. The observation made concerning the very bad condition of roads throughout the national territory, shortly after the great economic crisis around 1985, led the Government of the Republic, at that time, to carry out a rehabilitation study for the renewal of the national road network. This vast programme, co-financed for the work by donors representing international funds and the Gabonese State, up to a total amount of 50 billion Cfa francs, and spread out over three years, from 1991 to 1994, and had the participation of administrative operators (government administration) as well as private operators. This three-year programme for road maintenance (called P.T.E.R. in French) aimed not only at improving the level of road service offered to users, but also at setting up managerial procedures (technical as well as financial execution, follow-up and control) in order to reinforce the effectiveness of governmental administrative services. This objective had been attained and was to be pursued each year by a maintenance programme.

It is after this experience that the principle of partial privatisation of road maintenance was adopted. Therefore, upon the recommendation of the World Bank, a Road Maintenance Fund (RMF) was created by Law N° 2 /97 of June 25th, 1997, in order to guarantee the financing of the different annual maintenance programmes.

The years between the PTER and the creation of the FER (1995 to 1997), as well as the period covering the years from 2000 to 2002, did not witness the road maintenance expected, since the FER bank account at the Central Bank did not have adequate funds as had been the case during the first two years after its creation (1998 and 1999).

The inevitable consequence of this problem was the continued degradation of the road conditions of our national network, forcing us to lose the benefit of what had been acquired by the PTER concerning the dirt roads.

This observation is also valid for the paved roads, the majority of which are over 20 years old. Therefore as in the case of the city road network and the national road network, these paved roads should have benefited from a renewal operation of an added layer of pavement after 8 to 10 years of use. This is the case, for example, of the National Route N°1, going from the Ocean Boulevard at Medoumane, or the belt line around the city of Libreville.

With the beginning operations of the Transgabonese Railroad, forestry companies, who until then had operated along the navigable part of the Ogooué River, began to develop

new zones located along the railway. The removal of logs from these new zones and the intensification of forestry production in the regions of southern Gabon, have also led to the serious degradation of the road network. This situation which, according to comparative experiences, is peculiarly Gabonese, is reinforced by the absence of appropriate regulations.

Today any road rehabilitation operation, whether of a dirt road or paved road, will cost 3 to 4 times more than a few years back, based on the fact that this maintenance work had not been taken into consideration starting with the first appearance of degradation. This was confirmed with the carrying out of the recent rehabilitation programme and the reinforcement of the road network in Libreville initiated in 2001.

The experience of past road maintenance campaigns is sufficient to show and even prove that our governmental administration alone cannot cover the maintenance needs of the vast road network in Gabon, without more and more involving private companies. The two experiences carried out in this area have allowed us to verify the effectiveness of three types of contracts signed with private operators:

- a contract with a unit pricing list;
- a contract with the making available of construction materials;
- and a contract at the level of services.

The mediocre results obtained from these experiences requires us today to review, reflect upon and reorient. This is why we have asked the question, "What road maintenance strategy for Gabon?"

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Gabonese road network includes 9,170 km of classified and non classified roads, only 936 km of which are paved. It also includes 7,600 km of dirt roads and 630 km of ordinary pathways, and to complete the description, 156 finished and semi-finished works of art, 650 wooden bridges and 6 ferries still in service.

With 41 km of roads per 1000 km² and 10% paved roads, we have the weakest road density and the weakest rate of paved roads in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 1997, the average was, in fact, 16.3.

These weak values result especially from the heavy investments that Gabon had made in the development of other means of transport; notably:

- the building of the railway tying Libreville to Franceville over 669 km and finished in 1998, whereas some other African countries benefited from a railway network built during the colonial period;
- the building of several airports in the country, thereby favouring the increase in the use of planes to the detriment of the road network;
- the building of the deep-water port in Owendo.

Our country Gabon, where you have just arrived, has an equatorial, hot and humid climate. It rains 10 months out of 12, with an average of 2.5 meters of water per year,

which is enormous. Its surface is quite irregular, its water routes quite vast (3,300 km), the forest omnipresent covering 85% of its land surface.

To these geographical factors (climate, land surface, forest and hydrography) all of which are unfavourable for road building, can be added the quality of the base soil (mud stone, clay, decomposed shale in primary forest zones and clay-like sand in savannah zones), as well as bad conditions of use since they are tied to heavy transport trucks that are overloaded.

Despite these difficulties, Gabon's major objective is to maintain the road network in a good and permanent state of use all year long.

To do so, the ministerial department was reorganised in 2002 in order to better guarantee the building and maintenance of the road network, in deciding:

- to refocus the Government administration upon a sizeable piece of the road network that it can handle and maintain, and give the rest of the road network to the private sector;
- to reinforce the capacity of the department in the area of maintenance, in order to have better control and management.

The new organisation therefore set up a General Direction of road maintenance and a general direction of public works. The creation of an environmental service is significant in the fact that it reveals a new awareness of the responsibility for environmental concerns.

Therefore, after the reorganisation of our ministerial department, the general orientation to be given to our system of road maintenance provides for:

- 1) the setting up of a new type of contract based on a fixed amount per kilometre, which consists in paying for the kilometre of finished road delivered by the operator after the final reception by the Administrative governmental services of the work or tasks actually done, in road network renewal;
- 2) then immediately after the renewal of the road, the signing of a road maintenance contract aiming at constant road maintenance in every season, thereby offering road users a better service.

This strategy, unfortunately, can only be effective if Gabon decides upon the signing of a second-generation Road Fund, with the support of the donors for financial support, as is done by the great majority of African Road Funds.

The adoption of the signing of the second generation road fund presents the following advantages:

- the autonomy of the management organism of the Fund, co-directed by the Government Administration and the road users;

- the guarantee of the fund to be used exclusively for maintenance operations;
- the payment of road maintenance expenditure by the road users;
- the financing by non-fiscal receipts, such as road usage fees, generally based on an increase in the price of fuel at the gasoline pump;
- the efficient programming of annual maintenance operations;
- the guarantee of regular payment for the companies and suppliers doing the maintenance work;
- the guarantee of fulfilling road maintenance objectives;
- a fixed-rate tax (and not a percentage), since receipts have no reason to fluctuate according to fuel or gasoline prices;
- the payment of receipts by collecting organisms directly into a bank account opened in the name of the Fund;
- no more budgetary expense, since the receipts should cover expenses.

The signing of such a fund shall also present the following constraints for the Fund:

- an impact of the loss of receipts for the State budget;
- the capacity of businesses (especially small and medium-sized businesses) to respond to the growth in the maintenance market;
- the representation of professional road transport and similar organisations who will need to be restructured.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To accompany the strategic road maintenance structure described above, the Gabonese Government has drawn up a draft law which is now being examined by the Parliament, on the protection of the road patrimony. The main clauses laid down by this law concern the limiting of the total loading weight authorised (PTAC), by the setting up on paved roads of drive-on weigh stations, and on the dirt roads or non-paved roads, the setting up of rain gates.

This law shall give the double advantage of limiting and repressing the abusive use of the road network by conforming to the norms of the Community Road Code in application in the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC).

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Because of its specific characteristics and, as you already know, the road in Gabon is very expensive both for building and for maintenance. However, if it is not maintained, it costs even more for the State in terms of rebuilding it and for the users in terms of repairing their vehicles.

This is why, only a second-generation Fund, capable of guaranteeing the permanent and durable financing of our road maintenance programs shall thereby allow the roads in Gabon to become a real vector for development.

I thank you!