

More Co-operation - Better Research?

A FLOCK OF PROJECTS OR A FLOOD OF PROGRAMS, WILL WE EVER LEARN TO FOCUS?

Anders HH Jansson
Finnish Road Administration
Finland
anders.jansson@tiehallinto.fi

The Finnish Road Administration's (Finnra) annual research budget is approximately 9 Million Euro. This sum is divided into road research and development, data management development and administration process development. "Traditional" road r&d expenditure is some 3.5 Million Euro. Since the late 1990's, there has been a slightly over 50% reduction. The reduction is partly due to the fact that the production division of Finnra, and thus also actual production development, was formed into a separate state-owned enterprise, now Destia, in the year 2000. But one can also see a general funding reduction for the whole transport and infrastructure research and development sector in Finland. At the same time, the challenges we face are increasing. The need to find efficient methodologies for development is pressing. We can be more efficient either by making each project, and synergy between projects, more effective, by sharpening our focus towards truly effective projects, or by cumulating our research resources with other actors in the field.

On focusing

When resources are limited, it is important to focus action towards the really important needs. This is a principle we have stated, and repeated many times, also for our own research and development. But still, we seem always to end up with research needs identification leading to a too large number of projects that are all equally important, though we know that our resources allow implementing only a few of them.

In 1991, our road r&d program had 9 focus areas and 151 project areas, including one or several projects each. In the year 2000, there were 24 focus areas and 158 project areas. In 2007, we've managed to cut down our focus areas to 6, but there were still 141 project areas, for a total of 207 projects.

With such a number of projects, average expenditure per project has remained ca 15 000 - 20 000 Euro. For managing these projects, on an average 15 man-years, in full time equivalents, is available and it is this resource that carries the responsibility for what happens after a project is finished (the number of persons involved is of course much larger, as r&d management for most is a strictly part-time activity). This means that, to reach results that can be implemented, great reliance is placed on actions outside the project frame: that somebody is interested enough to read the report, in a position to use the result and willing to make the changes implied by the research.

But however few people and little money one has, it is not possible simply to decree that less will be researched, as long as the field of responsibility of the Administration is not radically reduced. An overall objective of focusing and prioritising does not serve, either, unless one can point out the themes and fields to be left out, or give well motivated, neutral criteria for abolishing projects. Researchers do not react positively to limitations they feel are arbitrary or unbalanced.

For some time, we took the numbers as our basis and set a target of increasing project size, within a constant total budget, each year, thus also reducing the number of projects. This was not very suc-

cessful, mainly because the target aimed at symptoms, not the causes. Now, our target is to improve project performance and implementation. We are, in a way, going backwards from the actual changes we expect, towards the way projects need to be programmed and selected to create such change. For the time being, we monitor implementation of 67 of the projects, but as yet, only 8 of these are finished. The evaluation we have shows that improving implementation is seen as especially important and thus we hope that this will serve to redistribute resources towards a more complete range of project finalising and implementation measures, instead of initiating ever new projects.

This is a by now very typical matter of understanding client needs. In this case, the clients are not primarily road users, but road managers and road and transport sector partners. When a project is finished, the researcher and project manager are always willing to go on to the next; they know what the results have been and instantly see what is missing and should be continued with. But now we ask them to stop right there: until the clients, the road managers, have understood and assimilated the results and in their turn identified the possible remaining problems, the new project cannot start. This can mean an additional year or three on the schedule, but also that the results of project nr 1 actually are tested in use by the time project nr 2 comes on line.

In short: we seek a sharper focus not by looking at the numbers, but by looking at what our clients really need.

On co-operation

About half of our projects are co-operation projects, with one or more partners in the project consortium. About 67% of expenditure for the year 2007 was used for co-operation projects. Most of these are national projects; international partners, such as other road administrations, are as yet involved in only 4%. The national funding share for international project participation - COST, EU Framework Program projects - is not included in this sum, but can be calculated as 7%, most of which in the sphere of telematics r&d.

In international co-operation, resource limits are even more stringent. We - at least in this end of Europe - don't have very many people to handle international programs and projects, and the 'overhead' is much larger than in own-country projects, because of the need to cope with very different interests and methodologies when many countries are concerned. From previous EU Framework Program tradition we know that a major part of the efforts will go to administrative tasks and what remains may produce results we didn't really need.

Now, we aim at increasing our international action. This is in line with the European Research Area idea, as well as our own realisation that many of the challenges we face, especially in regard of climate change or mobility management, can no longer be resolved at a national level. But have we by now found out how to focus?

This is perhaps also what the EU Commission had realised, when it initiated the ERA-NET scheme. Through this scheme, the responsibility for choosing objectives, programming and criteria for acquiring projects is shifted to the administrations participating in each ERA-NET. It is the no fault of the Commission, if the process proves cumbersome or expensive. We, the administrations, want to respond by developing truly simple, straightforward procedures, based on trust, that can then be made into a consensus methodology for our sector.

We will hear more about ERA-NET ROAD and about a similar co-operation program in the Nordic context, the NordFoU road & traffic. At this stage, I'd like to note that these initiatives can be very

successful, if we, as participants, learn how to use them fully and if others, for instance the EU Commission, also understand that the innovations of these schemes must be given room to move into practice, before new demands can be met. For the next stage of ERA-NET Transport and ERA-NET ROAD, the Commission has demanded building a common Transport/Road research platform by 2010. This may be a fairly unrealistic demand, considering that each ERA-NET at the same time needs to build common methodologies for up to 27 different participants, where by now for instance in ERA-NET ROAD I only 11 administrations have worked together.

For co-operation, trust is the essential element. Without trust, co-operation turns into a legal exercise instead of efficient action. Building trust is easiest for partners who know each other as closely as for instance the Nordic countries. The larger the group is, the more time it will take. There is a risk that the Commission, by cutting timetables and funds for ERA-NET development, is making a rush job out of it.

On focusing co-operation

Aiming at creating a new truck or gaining a significant market share gives co-operation a very clear focus. For administrations, the target is usually much more diffuse. What do we expect of our partners if we decide to co-operate on creating a sustainable transport system? There has, at least to some extent, been an in-built conflict in almost all of our co-operation: our primary motive for building a co-operation program is because the task is so large that we cannot succeed by ourselves. But these large tasks tend to be very complex, often with broad political implications and thus almost by definition unsolvable.

Perhaps this dilemma can be resolved by, in a way, standing the matter on its head: instead of first looking at the problem for ourselves and then, when that fails, spreading an ever larger net to find enough partners and resources to get anywhere, we start by checking if the solution already exists somewhere out there, and if not, which are the right partners to approach for working on it - be it at home or abroad. There is actually a five step Swedish model for this procedure, where doing it by ourselves is the absolutely last resort.

In this procedure, the question of how to focus co-operation is not necessarily relevant, because it always starts by the needs that we ourselves have now. It is not first building a network, then asking what it could do. On the other hand, doing it this way presupposes the existence of many networks and lines of communication and this is, I think, a fundamental change in our situation that we only slowly learn how to utilise.

Earlier, building a network was heavy work and it was seen as something extra to the normal job, just as development projects were seen as outside the scope of daily tasks. Today, in an administration, every employee has to be a potential developer and networker, and for many it is the job itself. On the job, development and networking is actually one and the same thing, for one is useless without the other.

This brings us back to trust: focusing co-operation by turning it into an aspect of daily job procedures demands at least two kinds of trust. You need to trust that Your partners will perform and You need to trust that their results are true and useful. In such a sector as road management, this may be easier than in many others, simply because we do know very much about one another, for instance meeting in Nordic Road, CEDR, PIARC and many other contexts.