Railways and governments around the world need to focus on modal shift if they are to achieve the urgently needed decarbonisation of the transport sector, believes François Davenne, Director-General at the International Union of Railways.

Pointing out that with the policies currently in place, transporters, financial institutions, regional development banks and other super national bodies..."The rail sector can be seen..."
"We are all facing in the same direction, with a common strategy. The contexts may be very different, in terms of freight or passenger, or the scale of railway development, but we are all on the same page when it comes to taking action against climate change. We are all looking to make rail a powerful player for decarbonisation. “We have a very big responsibility. We have 10 years to make a difference. And there are huge expectations on the rail sector, particularly from young people, who want more rail and public transport.”

Davenne believes that customer focus is an essential element in driving modal shift, mobilising public opinion both to increase rail use directly and to put pressure on decision-makers to bring forward the right policies and investment priorities.

“For a number of years, I lived in Switzerland, where the culture of referenda means that “the people are sovereign”. All the reforms in the transport system have had a referendum, especially financial measures. At one time the government was preparing proposals for big cuts in rail, including bus replacement on rural lines, and greater reliance on road transport. But the people voted for more rail not less, and they voted to pay for it. Today the people voted for more rail not less, and we are all on the same page when it comes to taking action against climate change. We are all looking to make rail a powerful player for decarbonisation.

“We are trying to build a consistent vision for what railways should include. How do we go from the vision to the implementation, and deliver on the promise? We will deliver if we build confidence, every concrete step to achievement with basic building blocks.”

The last part of the manifesto will include selected examples of what is already being achieved in different places — railways achieving a very high market share for passengers or freight, or offering convenient connectivity. How do they do it, what are the essential requirements, and how can we make those examples into a common reality?

“It’s all about sharing best practice. We want everyone to do better, but they do not necessarily have to match the reality. We can increase the average level significantly, that would represent real progress.”

Asked whether embedding a change of mindset is the key to improving service quality, how we organise our activities, manage and maintain our tracks, data, telecommunications and signalling, Digital technologies will enable us to do more, and drive our costs down. And they will also provide new ways to communicate with our customers. Cybersecurity is a growing challenge, although we are looking at global solutions.

Reflecting remarks by acting TCDD Chairman Metin Abbas, Davenne says rail needs to be a good neighbour. ‘We need to preserve natural resources and be aware of biodiversity. Using more rail and public transport in cities can reduce congestion and free up public space for trees, contributing to a greener and more liveable environment. We need to work on this.’

Fig 1 Scenarios presented by the International Transport Forum show how reducing transport demand and modal shift to rail could contribute to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Culture of reliability

Asked whether embedding a change of culture depends on attracting a new generation of railway staff with a different skillset, Davenne says he is ‘not that convinced. The main effort is to look at what our citizens actually want — those people who take the train and bus. Any successful company must have a clear picture of what their customers want.

“That’s already the case for successful freight operators. Despite the complexity of the railway “machine”, big freight railways in places like the USA or Russia have a very clear picture of their customers and what they require — and they just get on and do it. That doesn’t necessarily mean advanced control systems, but having a focus to deliver on time. I think the average speed on the Trans-Siberian Railway is not much more than 30 km/h — but it is highly reliable.

“In our passenger sector, look at Switzerland. Swiss railways don’t have spectacular rolling stock, but their services are attractive because they are reliable and on time. The stations are well designed and convenient, and they offer excellent connectivity with public transport. That’s because it is mandated, but the people put pressure on the politicians to make it happen.”

Five key themes

Summing up the symposium, Davenne homes in on five key themes. Starting with a comment from European MEP Anna Deputny-Gruenenberg that rail needs to be a ‘network, not a patchwork’, he says it is more international than national thinking that is needed.

He emphasises too that rail must be cost effective, warning that the sector cannot expect a ‘perfect level playing field, however desirable that would be. ‘The pricing of carbon is a complex process, and raises lot of social questions.’ With fewer politicians seemingly willing to tackle the thorny challenge of discouraging the use of more polluting modes, the rail sector will have to ‘work together to improve the cost structure of rolling stock and infrastructure’, through research and innovation.

Software will help, he says. ‘Digitalisation is key to improving service quality, how we organise our activities, manage and maintain our tracks, data, telecommunications and signalling. Digital technologies will enable us to do more, and drive our costs down. And they will also provide new ways to communicate with our customers.’

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And again he returns to the importance of being customer-oriented. ‘We need to change the perception, and talk to people as customers and as citizens. We need to have the people with us.’

Manifesto

Davenne says the next step will be the publication later this month of a ‘manifesto’ setting out the workstreams that UIC is looking to take forward from the symposium.

“We are trying to build a consistent vision for what railways should include. How do we go from the vision to the implementation, and deliver on the promise? We will deliver if we build confidence, every concrete step to achievement with basic building blocks.”

The last part of the manifesto will include selected examples of what is already being achieved in different places — railways achieving a very high market share for passengers or freight, or offering convenient connectivity. How do they do it, what are the essential requirements, and how can we make those examples into a common reality?

“It’s all about sharing best practice. We want everyone to do better, but they do not necessarily have to match the reality. We can increase the average level significantly, that would represent real progress.”

Davenne brings the closing session of the UK symposium to a conclusion.