



# **Transport and sustainable development, in communication and in practice: A comparative analysis of the strategies of three French firms**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this paper is to compare the discourse of sustainable development (SD) with concrete actions implemented on the field. To do this, strategies of three major French transport firms were explored. A search for SD-related information on the firms' websites was first carried out, and then structured interviews were conducted with branch managers of the companies to discuss the actual implementation of SD strategies. Based on this information, a typology is drawn up reflecting different degrees of involvement in SD.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development, Strategic Analysis, Transport sector

**JEL Classification:** M14, L91

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## **Introduction**

Sustainable development is not a theory, but rather a frame of reference that is both analytic and normative. Analytic, insofar as it examines the interdependencies between fields (economic, social, and ecological), timescales (short/long term) and geographic levels (local, national, and global). Normative, insofar as it is reflected in recommended actions for public- and private-sector players. This frame of reference dates back to the 1970s, acquiring genuine international recognition following the Brundtland Commission's Report in 1987. Sustainable development (or SD) is defined in the report as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." According to this report, four components make up the foundations for SD: economic efficiency, social equity, environmental preservation, and participative democracy. Now a topic for academic research in its own right, SD has become the cornerstone for thinking about "collective response[s] to a coordination problem between the market economy and the societal sphere in a context of market deregulation and globalisation" (Wolff, 2007).

The transport sector – at the heart of trade, mobility, and economic growth – is undoubtedly one of the economic sectors in which SD concerns are the most pressing (Bernadet, 2008). Transport in general is often associated with the idea of the pollution it causes. Its negative externalities are widely acknowledged and decried, notably on an environmental level. So it is no surprise that the concept of "sustainable transport" came into being as early as 1991 in Europe. At present, transport firms are actively addressing this issue. They have noted the danger of ignoring issues that are sources of concern for a growing number of citizens, associations, NGOs, etc., and that are encouraging lawmakers to intervene. Over the past few years, we have seen a raft of proposals on labour and environmental matters from major European transport firms, who claim to be curbing emissions of environmentally-harmful substances (for road transport in particular), reducing hard working conditions and work-related risks for employees (notably at warehousing sites), etc. Yet these strategies, by definition designed at the head office and relayed through skilful communications materials, do not necessarily result in concrete actions on the field.

This paper will compare and contrast the discourse on SD, as presented in transport firms' official communications materials, with concrete actions implemented on the field. This research builds on a previous work that highlighted the communications strategies used by major French and European transport and logistics firms with regard to sustainable development (Senkel, 2008; Koleva and Senkel, 2009). The purpose is thus to round out prior research by exploring the situation on the ground. The first section will review some studies on the link

between transport and SD, and discuss their limitations. In the second section, we will show the value of a strategic analysis of organisations in order to understand the various stances adopted by firms with regard to SD. The third section will study the SD strategies of three major French transport firms. Lastly, the conclusion will summarise and discuss the initial findings of our study.

### **Some insights from the existing literature**

#### *The dimensions of sustainability in the transport sector*

The concept of “sustainable transport” appeared in Europe in 1991 during the European Conference of Ministers of Transport (ECMT). By asserting that sustainable transport must “contribute to economic prosperity, social wellbeing, without harming the environment or human health” (ECMT, 1991), this definition appears to be directly inspired from the Brundtland Report and encompasses the main dimensions of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental. SD was officially integrated into the European transport sector in a 2001 white paper entitled “European transport policy for 2010: time to decide”. This paper highlighted three major problems: “unequal growth in the different modes of transport”, “congestion on the main road and rail routes”, and “harmful effects on the environment and public health”. Road transport is in fact the mode of transport to have seen the strongest growth over the past years (see table1), as it is better suited to the needs of the modern economy, yet it is the mode of transport that generates the most pollution.

Table 1. Modal split of inland freight transport in France, 2000 and 2010  
(% of total inland tkm)

	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>Roads</b>	76	82,2
<b>Railways</b>	20,6	13,5
<b>Inland waterways</b>	3,4	4,3

*Source : Eurostat*

With regard to France, in 2006, the Forum for Companies and SD (Forum des entreprises et du développement durable) noted that “the transport sector, a major consumer of fossil energy resources in a context of tight oil supplies, is the largest source of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (149 million tonnes of CO2 equivalent in 2004). Reflecting the increasing mobility of people and goods in our society, it generates more than one-quarter of emissions in France (27% of GHG and 34% of

CO2). It is also the fastest-growing sector (+23% between 1990 and 2004).” Since the Barnier Law on environmental protection (2 February 1995), France has begun to implement a legislative arsenal to meet its commitments on sustainable development in general and sustainable transport in particular. Between 1995 and 2006, no fewer than 29 laws involving the institutional SD framework were passed, covering the many objectives generally attributed to SD to varying degrees and respects. Some of these laws aim to reconcile the present and the future. Others seek to reconcile the environment, economic growth, and social progress, while still others target environmental protection or tackling the greenhouse effect (Dablanc, 2007). One example directly affecting the transport sector is LOADDT, the Law on Guidelines for Regional Development and Sustainable Development, dated 25 June 1999, stipulates that “the domestic transport system shall satisfy the needs of users under the most advantageous economic, social, and environmental conditions for the community. It contributes to national unity and solidarity, national defence, economic and social development, balanced and sustainable development of [national] territory, as well as to the expansion of international trade, notably on a European level.”

However, the legal framework does not merely set targets; it also proposes means for achieving these targets. In France, the Grenelle Environmental Consultation in 2007 and the resulting 2010 law drew up a series of ambitious measures to reach the target of a 20% reduction in current emissions levels for all transport in France by 2020. On the EU level, in comparing the stress on the environment with the economic changes causing such stress, the 2001 white paper proposes a solution of “decoupling” of economic growth and transport growth. This decoupling can be either absolute or relative. In the former, the main idea is to reduce mobility, whereas in the latter, the aim is to shift flows to less polluting modes of transport such as rail. Initially, the white paper highlighted and recommended relative decoupling. However, a 2006 revision called for co-modality. This aims to use different modes of transport efficiently, in isolation or in combination. The 2006 foray seems to indicate that economic concerns are now the priority for SD issues, to the detriment of the social and environmental aspects, as the aim is to optimise each mode of transport by seeking primarily economic efficiency. By slowing down the demand for road transport services, the 2008-2009 economic crisis has further reinforced this trend.

As this brief overview shows, the link between transport and SD appears to be widely acknowledged by policymakers in France and elsewhere in Europe. However, apart from debates about whether projects are realistic – this question is not the key focus of this paper – existing transport research suffers from several shortcomings.

*Weaknesses in sustainable transport research*

We can identify three main weaknesses in sustainable transport research. These are of a theoretical, methodological, and semantic nature, respectively.

- *Difficulty in conceiving an appropriate theoretical framework*

At present, there is a paradoxical gap between the legitimacy of the sustainable transport concept and its weak theoretical framework. Indeed, the concept of SD does not seem to upend the three main existing approaches to transport analysis: neoclassical economics, ecology, and spatial planning (Baeten, 2000). Each of these can lay a claim to having indirectly incorporated sustainable transport into its conceptual framework. The neoclassical approach asserts that the negative environmental effects of transport are attributable to excess demand, linked in turn to an “incorrect” pricing policy. As the use of roadways is highly subsidised (road infrastructure is funded by national and local governments), users do not have to pay the external marginal cost (i.e. the cost to the entire community of pollution and congestion resulting from one additional traffic unit). Thus, creating a free market for common goods such as access to cities and clean air would be enough to balance transport demand and supply, thereby helping reduce pollution. Ecological and spatial planning approaches also insist on the need to reduce traffic, but they consider the solution to be an increase in public transport supply, not a market mechanism. Their aim is notably to conceive of new spatial configurations in order to enable this kind of “sustainable” transport to expand. As a result, existing research in transport economics appears to restrict SD questions to debates about the economic roles of the market and the government.

- *Essentially macro- and mesoeconomic approaches*

When studying the underpinnings of sustainable transport, most existing analysis emphasise the major role of the government, which, through its policies, can guide the choices of private-sector players. Hence these analyses are mainly macro- or mesoeconomic, making it difficult to understand the role of non-government stakeholders in sustainable transport. Yet according to the Brundtland Report, democratic procedures are a necessary condition for achieving SD. Geographical economics casts additional light on this question. For example, Bénit (2005) studies the numerous stakeholders (e.g. users’ associations or landowners’ associations) that public transport authorities in Los Angeles must face. Likewise, by focusing on how Montreal reconciles the imperatives of improved mobility, economic growth, road safety, and environmental protection, Gauthier (2005)

highlights the large number of stakeholders in the public debate and concludes that institutional and procedural innovations are needed for these debates to become genuine instruments for sustainable development, able to take into consideration the entire metropolitan road network. Lastly, in an article based on 22 case studies in Asian cities, Matsumoto et al. (2007) identify the key stakeholders in the transmission of sustainable transport “best practices” on an international level. These stakeholders notably include civil servants, lobbying groups, multinational corporations, international organisations, and citizens. However, the three aforementioned studies fail to address the strategies of transport firms, as these are considered to be simply the result of the configuration of interests of other stakeholders. In addition, Matsumoto et al. (2007) only focus on the “environment” aspect, ignoring the labour-related aspects of “sustainability”. This weakness points to a frequent problem in SD research; insofar as there is no explicit definition to be used as a frame of reference, these studies tend to disconnect the components of SD even though these are clearly identified in the Brundtland Report.

- *“Narrow” vs. “broader” sustainability*

By focusing on a single type of implications (labour-related or environmental) of transport organisations, some research adopts a narrow view of SD. Two examples illustrate this approach. On the one hand, the National Transport Statements (Comptes de transport de la nation) published annually in France by the Ministry of Transport have included a chapter on “Transport and SD” for the past few years, but the SD study is limited to accident statistics, local pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions. On the other hand, studies on working conditions in the transport sector unfortunately no longer make an explicit link between this topic and SD. The following excerpts from Carré (2007) illustrate this: “Road haulage drivers, whose pay is a substantial portion of the cost price of transport services, suffer from being far removed from the economic and legal relationships between sellers and buyers and between shippers and hauliers. [...] Working conditions for road haulage drivers will not improve unless the relationships between shippers and hauliers change considerably. [...] The growing difficulty of resorting solely to road transport attributable to expensive and polluting fuel [is] perhaps able to transform these relationships” (emphasis added).

However, other research shows a slight foray into broader sustainability, by citing both the labour-related and environmental aspects of transport. This is notably the case of the document published following the Forum for Companies and SD (2006): “Road haulage, significantly affected by the economic factor, ‘just-in-time’, and some disparities in labour conditions in an enlarged EU, benefits from

definite technological optimisations, notably regarding engines and fuels. However, these are insufficient to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions substantially. These improvements must come hand in hand with measures to enhance awareness and provide ecodriving training for firms and drivers.” This foray resulted from companies’ participation in the debates.

In the present paper, we propose to focus on the role of transport firms in implementing SD in the broader sense. To do so, we believe it appropriate not to use transport policy as a starting point, but rather the actual strategies of transport firms.

## **Transport firms’ SD strategies**

### *A tentative typology*

Martinet and Reynaud (2004) are satisfied that “the strategic [aspect] is expressed fully: maintain and develop, over the long term, the value creation potential with regard to the various stakeholders, while cultivating environmental interdependencies and without sacrificing the firm’s autonomy”. Management research yields various typologies for strategies implemented by firms faced with the varying demands of stakeholders. Carroll’s model (1979) measures the firm’s sensitivity to social responsibility. This model defines four positions. The firm can either be in a position of refusal, protest (it does only the minimum required), adaptation, or anticipation (in this case, it has a proactive position and acts as a leader in the field). Hart’s classification (1995), used by Buysse and Verbeke (2003), applies resource and skills theory. Hart (1995) classifies firms’ strategic behaviour regarding their natural environment, and he, too, defines four strategies: a reactive strategy, a pollution prevention strategy, an environmental leadership strategy, and lastly, a “sustainable development” strategy, which, according to the author, requires a long-term view that few firms have.

The starting point for our study is a simple typology inspired by Capron and Quairel-Lanoizelée (2004) that enables us to highlight two ways for firms to incorporate SD issues: symbolically or substantively. The latter can be further broken down into reactive and proactive strategies.

In the “symbolic” strategy, focused on image and reputation, the firm adopts the concept of SD formally, implementing limited “responsible” measures. The main target of these measures is not to take certain labour issues into real consideration, but rather to provide the basis for an external communications strategy to protect itself from pressure from societal stakeholders. Conversely, the “substantive”

strategy genuinely seeks to reconcile the firm's economic interests with demands from various societal stakeholders, either because the firm is proactive and can anticipate these demands, or because it reacts positively to the constraints of its environment by adopting concrete measures.

*Publishing information on the Internet as a means to implementing the symbolic strategy*

Given the growing interest in SD, the need for information about these issues has been rising over the past few years. The business activity report, traditionally a medium for reporting financial information to shareholders, now enables many firms to communicate on their labour, environmental, and societal efforts. But firms use other tools, notably websites, because they offer new functionalities for relationships with stakeholders, such as interactivity (Oxibar, 2005).

Williams and Ho Wern Pei (1999) even assert that websites are a more efficient means for publicising information about social responsibility than annual reports. The Internet has undoubtedly become an important tool for corporate communication, presenting undeniable advantages: continuous accessibility from any computer, information search tools, low access cost, low communication costs, flexible design, information customisation, information updates, the possibility of combining various presentation formats (text, graphics, sound, video), the possibility of monitoring web users in order to track the number of visitors, which site pages are visited, etc. The Internet also offers the very real innovation of interaction. With the web, each web-connected party (an individual, special interest group, organisation, government agency, etc.) can publish or access information 24 hours a day. Websites can be updated instantly. They provide for accessibility from any location at any time. The website is thus a favoured medium for establishing a one-on-one relationship, unlike printed reports, for instance (Lodhia, 2004). It is also a less costly communications medium (Hill and White, 2000).

Studies of major firms specialised in transport and logistics in France and elsewhere in Europe (see Senkel in this issue) show that these firms are increasingly incorporating the SD theme into their official discourse on the Internet. Thus, an analysis of the institutional communications materials of 40 benchmark firms in Europe reveals that more than half communicate on this subject (Senkel, 2008). Moreover, they appear to favour mainly the topics related to the environment, natural resources, and their conservation. Conversely, it is surprising to note that these specialised firms, at the "heart" of the logistics chain connecting clients, consumers, public entities, etc., do not focus their communications more on joint efforts, notably in coordination with their suppliers



or clients. Therefore, on a discursive level, we note an asymmetrical responsibility in which transport firms use the ecological factor as a symbol of sustainable development. This managerial position appears to fit within a more general trend towards valuing selective dimensions of responsibility, as shown in the analyses of the discourse of major European firms from different economic sectors (Attarça and Jacquot, 2005).

By using a typology that distinguishes between symbolic and substantive strategies, we have endeavoured to find out whether the SD communications presented in transport firms' institutional materials (i.e. official websites) are backed by concrete actions on the ground, and if so, which position managers have adopted: reactive or proactive.

## **Results of the case study of three French transport firms**

### *Presentation of the firms and study methodology*

Our investigation is based on a study of the strategies of three major French transport firms. Our initial hypothesis was that large-scale firms were more likely to have an Internet site giving them better "visibility" with potential clients and a modern communications tool for conveying the group's image. We also sought to obtain a diversified "sample" to take into account the wide range of transport-related activities. Thus, the firms presented are active in three different segments: urban passenger transport, road haulage, and industrial transport/logistics. Moreover, all these firms have international operations (see Table 2).

The study ran from October 2007 to March 2008. In an initial stage, it entailed searching for SD-related information on the firms' websites (late 2007), then meeting with branch managers to discuss the actual implementation of SD strategies (early 2008). We referred to branch managers rather than top management because, as explained by Carter and Ellram (1998), SD implementation in a firm depends on middle management. In Carter and Ellram's (1998) model of the internal and external drivers for SD implementation, middle management (which the authors refer to as "policy entrepreneurs") stand out as the players with the communication skills needed to convince other stakeholders and ensure their commitment. A questionnaire was drafted, comprising three parts related to: 1) the reasons that a firm became interested in SD; 2) environmental measures (22 questions); and 3) labour-related measures (9 questions). These questionnaires were given out during face-to-face interviews with each of the managers involved; the interviews lasted two hours on average. In the following

section, we present the strategies adopted by the three firms, one after the other, followed by a summary.

Table 2. Presentation of the firms studied

	A		B		C	
<b>Business activity</b>	International haulage	road	Urban transport	passenger	Industrial and logistics services	transport
<b>Revenues (2007)</b>	EUR3bn		EUR2.8bn		EUR3.7bn	
<b>Headcount</b>	30,000		38,000		10,000	
<b>Fleet size</b>	8,500 vehicles, 9,300 trailers (group total)		15,800 buses and coaches (France)		N/A Road and sea transport	
<b>International footprint</b>	14 European countries		7 European countries + Canada		More than 100 countries	

*Detailed communication supporting a proactive but circumscribed SD strategy*

Firm A’s website has a SD section within the overall group presentation, next to the sections on Key Figures, History, and Organisation. SD is presented as “an assertive strategy, [and a] source of performance”. Thus, measures in favour of SD are presented as coming at the firm’s own initiative, from its “resolutely civic philosophy”. The firm claims ties with the corporate citizenship movement that refers to workers’ rights to information, consultation, or cooperative decision-making instituted on specific terms in developed countries following the Second World War (Streek, 2001). However, unlike this precursor movement to what we now call “Corporate Social Responsibility” (CSR), Firm A apparently wants its communication to give clear emphasis to the numerous stakeholders – not limited to the interaction between employers and employees, but also including clients, partners, and shareholders – and to many environment-related aspects. Four “operating directions” were thus defined: social integration and promotion (within the workforce), reducing GHG, site environmental management, and control of road risks.

In terms of labour issues, Firm A claims that it favours internal promotions, training, and integration of disabled employees. It gives specific figures, for example, a rate of internal promotion of 6.3% in 2006 and training provided for more than half of employees every year. However, this assertion must be considered in light of existing legal requirements. Indeed, in France and many other European countries, the occupation of truck driver is subject to strict

requirements in terms of mandatory training. Therefore, we can wonder whether communication on this issue simply reflects the substantial weight of this occupation for Firm A as an international road haulage company. Moreover, the 6.3% internal promotion rate in 2006, while higher than in 2005 (4.7 %), is probably not an outstanding performance. However, as noted in Guyot *et al.* (2005), the internal promotion rate is low for the ground transport segment as a whole, as the low proportion of executive positions curbs the possibilities for promotions. On this topic, it is interesting to note that while the Firm A's 2007 target was 8%, an update version of its website gives a target of 60%, with no indicative date for achieving it. Lastly, with regard to integrating disabled workers, note that this is a legal requirement in France for companies with more than 20 employees. The lack of figures on this topic on Firm A's website means that we cannot know whether it goes beyond the minimum proportion of 6% required by law. Our analysis of Firm A's communication in terms of labour issues thus prompts us to hypothesise that it only reflects legal requirements on this subject, without necessarily going any further, as indicated in the definition of Corporate Social Responsibility.

Our interview with the head of quality for one of Firm A's branch offices partly confirms this hypothesis. While he asserts that "the standard of living and working conditions for all employees are rather decent", he then cites "continuous monitoring by management via periodical interviews" and "internal surveys enabling employees to communicate problems if needed". Yet these are in fact customary human resource management measures for most firms, regardless of their sector. Conversely, the interview highlighted a unique social initiative that the firm does not mention in its communication, namely, aid for employees in seeking housing through sector-specific mutual insurance companies that provide services such as deposits for signing a lease. Apart from this internal social measure, Firm A also takes part in outside charitable activities, notably by financing automobile racing teams at local and regional events.

While Firm A's communication and practices are hard to classify within the definition of CSR for the moment, the firm appears to be substantially invested in the environmental portion of SD. Our analysis of its communications on the Internet reveals the two main environmental axes in the National Transport Statements (air pollution and road safety), combined with a policy for site environmental management. Regarding pollution due to greenhouse gas emissions, note that for the road transport sector, pollution is directly proportionate to diesel fuel consumption. The indicator of "grams of CO<sub>2</sub> emitted per tonne transported, per kilometre" (g/tkm) is used by the firm to measure progress achieved in reducing fuel consumption, reducing empty hauls, and optimising loading. Data

from 2006 gives a performance indicator of 58g/tkm, and Firm A's target is to reduce this to 50g/tkm in 2010. Furthermore, the firm has signed a partnership agreement with ADEME (the French Environment and Energy Management Agency) aimed at providing support in training and mobilising drivers, giving a detailed analysis of consumption and incentive systems, and reducing maximum vehicle speed. This partnership is not limited to actions involving existing practices, but should also enable new technological solutions to be tested, either in the field of vehicle design or in the fields of alternative fuels, tyres, or additives. The firm's lead on environmental legislation also appears to be confirmed by its decision to adopt the Euro IV standard in 2006. The proportion of vehicles meeting this standard stood at 50% in 2007, with the rest of the fleet comprising vehicles certified Euro III (48%) and Euro II (2%). The firm also takes part in research on the future of road transport via the SD working group set up by AUTP (Freight Transport Users Association). The questions discussed in this working group cover notably greenhouse gas emissions permit markets and fuel taxes.

Firm A developed the "road safety" portion early on through the design, beginning in 1990, of a Good Driving Plan, revised in 2005 to take into account regulatory requirements. The group uses a road risk control indicator. In 2006, this indicator showed an average of one accident attributable to one of the firm's drivers for every 536,000 kilometres driven. Firm A has set a target of 550,000 kilometres. Moreover, the firm is the sole French transport player to have signed the European Road Safety Charter in 2006, alongside 18 other European firms. In its view, this shows its "efforts in terms of civic-mindedness and responsibility".

The last portion of the environmental strategy, site environmental management, consists of adopting a management standard that focuses notably on regulatory compliance, energy consumption, and waste emissions. The group reported that in 2006, one-third of its sites complied with this in-house frame of reference. In parallel with this internal standard, Firm A has committed to the ISO 14001 certification process. This voluntary process involves proving, through external certification, that a firm is able to improve its environmental performances, while respecting regulations. These environmental management processes have economic aims because controlling energy consumption has a direct impact on operating costs.

At our interview with the head of quality during a visit to a branch office of Firm A, we were able to confirm that the abovementioned measures had indeed been implemented (use of vehicles meeting Euro IV standards, ISO 14001 certification of the branch, waste sorting for recycling, etc.). According to his statements, these measures are aimed at boosting sales and cutting costs. However, we noted that the

measures implemented were focused mainly on fields directly related to transport without branching out to other practices that contribute to site and building eco-efficiency, e.g. managing water consumption, regulating heat, reducing vibration levels, etc. The branch that we visited showed no interest in these measures.

Following this analysis, it is apparent that despite institutional communication on SD that seems very considerable at first glance (i.e. a dedicated SD section with four parts and specific indicators), aimed at presenting Firm A as a proactive company, it was mainly focused on the environmental protection aspect. The labour aspect was rudimentary and merely reproduced the main legal requirements in the matter, despite the official message attempting to present it as a strategy specific to the firm. This initial conclusion was backed by the interview conducted at one of the branch offices of Firm A. Both the firm's strategy and its actual practices appear to reflect a "narrow" view of SD, focused chiefly on reducing the negative environmental effects of road transport. Conversely, efforts in the field show the firm's desire to position itself as a sector leader, although we must note that the quantitative targets it has set do not necessarily include specific target dates.

*Modest communication backing a reactive strategy*

Like Firm A, Firm B's website has a SD section. SD is defined as reconciling economic efficiency, a social balance, and environmental protection. Thus, this definition borrows the three foundations of SD according to the Brundtland Report, but is unique in placing SD within the "continuity of the public service missions" of the group. Furthermore, as for Firm A, SD is presented as an "assertive commitment", as shown by the firm signing the International Association of Public Transport's (UITP) SD charter in 2004 and its adherence to the United Nations Global Compact.

Firm B identifies five areas of responsibility, some of which cover those already studied: "sustainable mobility, quality customer service, team management, safety and civic-mindedness, [and] respect for the environment". However, it appears to have adopted a more balanced view of SD, with its communication granting as much importance to the labour/societal aspect as to the ecological aspect. In particular, the firm presents itself as a substantial employer at the local level, as well as contributing to the fight against occupational exclusion thanks to its hiring of young people, those at mid-career, or those from rural areas. Among the tools available for subsidiaries, it cites vocational training programmes, regional training centres, jobs centres, or thematic events focused on innovation. Given the unique nature of its business (passenger transport), Firm B also appears to be attentive to

risk prevention for goods and people. It mainly cites awareness measures aimed at drivers, mediation agents, and inspectors. However, CSR is not limited to employees, as the firm takes part in various initiatives aimed at promoting “sustainable mobility”, i.e. using alternative modes of travel that are more environmentally friendly than private cars. Moreover, this is the only labour/societal aspect that gives specific figures, notably related to increasing awareness of school pupils and the general public of the challenges of sustainable mobility through open house events, visits to schools, and participating in the national SD week.

The website mentions the advantages of public transport in the environmental portion of CSR, emphasising notably that “buses pollute 20 times less than private cars”. The firm states that it encourages frequent renewal of its fleet, in addition to the purchase of catalytic converters. In addition, it notes a trend in its fleet in favour of natural gas, hybrid, electric or even fuel-cell vehicles. Also for Firm B, we note concerns related to preventing the risk of pollution in its workshops. Thus, the firm set up an auditing procedure to grant a yearly green seal to subsidiaries that respect environment regulations and an in-house waste management charter, wastewater recovery, etc. According to the information on its website in 2007, more than one-fifth of its subsidiaries had received the green seal or ISO 14001 certification.

The information on the SD policy appears to cover chiefly urban transport. The branch office that we visited for our study is specialised in intercity and school transport, and is therefore unique in some ways. It uses coaches rather than buses. Yet most technological changes in terms of gas pollutant emissions apply solely to buses. From an ecological standpoint, the branch office’s activity thus has a negative environmental impact. However, several measures have been implemented to attempt to curb this impact and thus meet client demand (the main reason for the firm’s SD commitment, according to the manager interviewed). Firstly, the branch trains its drivers on “rational” driving. This one-day training consists of assessing how the driver drives (engine speed, acceleration, etc.). Three specially-equipped vehicles generate computerised data that is then analysed with the trainer (also employed by the firm). The aim of this training is to correct driving techniques that use too much fuel and thus generate too much pollution. In addition, by fuelling all vehicles with a mixture of 80% diesel, 20% water, the branch complies with the group’s SD policy focused on using alternative energy. Moreover, the branch has a green seal for recycling used components: its in-house workshop cooperates with a local company that collects waste such as used motor oil. Lastly, it meets requirements by renewing its fleet so that vehicles on regular lines are never more than 11 years old (18 years old for school transport).

However, as the manager we interviewed indicated, even though fleet renewal is a pro-SD measure, the problem is far from resolved globally, as coaches that are considered too old and too polluting in France are sold in emerging markets. This practice, which is not mentioned in the firm's communications, can be viewed as damaging for SD on an international level.

Despite institutional communications materials that give a significant place to "social responsibility" alongside the importance of the natural environment, few concrete measures were indicated by our interviewee. While in his view, the firm is competitive in terms of benefits and working hours, and tries as much as possible to respect legislation for hiring the disabled, employees are not consulted regarding SD and there are no ties with civil society. Despite more balanced communication on SD components than for Firm A, from a formal standpoint, Firm B's communication is still too general on labour aspects, which do not appear to be a major source of concern on a daily basis. Like Firm A, Firm B also tends to focus on environmental issues, in order to meet the expectations of its clients and public transport authorities as well as possible, and to ensure its good reputation.

*Inexistent communication, with limited commitment*

Firm C is very different from the other two firms we studied. In 2007, the website of this transport/logistics service provider, 100%-owned by a major French industrial group, made no explicit references to SD. This lack of interest in SD is not just superficial, as the branch manager we met admitted that he had received no particular recommendations from the head office in terms of SD. In this manager's view, SD entails keeping the site clean and saving energy ("turning off lights and PCs when nobody is using them"). Asked about working and labour conditions applied in the branch, our interviewee pointed out performance in terms of benefits, working hours (a flexible system that employees manage themselves), integrating interns, and managing employee stress and wellbeing. However, SD issues were not considered important enough to request employee involvement in a collaborative planning effort. Moreover, the cost of SD-related investments is deemed to be an obstacle to actual implementation. This notably involves non-polluting vehicles, which are considered too expensive to be purchased. More generally, the question of environmental protection appears to hold less importance for Firm C, because unlike the other two firms studied, the group transports a portion of its finished products by sea.

The case of Firm C indicates that in organisational setups where the transport provider is completely integrated into the client's structure (in this case, an industrial firm), there is no perceptible need for the service provider to implement

its own SD strategy. The client takes care of the institutional communication, while its subsidiary simply fulfils the specifications of the parent company, which do not necessarily include SD requirements.

**Conclusions**

These days, the corporate sector cannot avoid thinking about sustainable development and the related challenges. Regardless of the perception – whether it is seen as a mere fad or a deeper trend – the SD theme demands attention from company managers, as we have endeavoured to show. While the link between transport and SD was acknowledged internationally in 1991, transport firms have apparently only recent begun drafting a strategy and adopting concrete measures. Our “sustainable transport” case study enabled us to compare communication on this topic with the daily practices of three major French firms. These case studies show a differentiated stance to SD. Thus, a typology can be drawn up based on an analysis of official information and answers from middle management (see Table 3).

Table 3. Typology of SD strategies for the firms *studied*

<b>Symbolic strategy</b>	<b>Reactive strategy</b>	<b>Proactive strategy</b>
<b>C</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>A</b>
Differentiation from competitors Better corporate image	Client demand Better corporate image	Increased sales Cost-cutting

For the symbolic strategy, SD communication and practice are driven by a search for a good image compared to competitors, via relatively limited and inexpensive measures (Firm C). The reactive strategy aims to maintain the good SD image that the firm’s business segment enjoys (namely, public transport as opposed to private cars) with concrete measures taken to meet environmental requirements set by regulatory authorities, which are both clients and transport organisers. This is because in France, municipalities, urban area authorities, etc., contract out transport services to operators such as Firm B. These operators’ measures are in fact a reflection of the SD policy and investment choices of local authorities. As the environmental portion of SD is more “visible” to the public than the other portions (notably labour aspects), we can hypothesise that the relatively substantial efforts in the environmental field mainly serve the interests of the authorities (i.e. by establishing a good image in voters’ eyes). Lastly, although there are indeed proactive strategies undertaken by firms themselves for mainly economic reasons, as in the case of Firm A, these are solely focused on the environment and reflect a



narrow view of sustainability. By examining specific examples, these results confirm the conclusions of our previous research, which highlighted the asymmetric nature of SD/CSR communication in broader samples of firms.

Nowadays, awareness of the issues related to SD and the advantages firms can derive from it, while sometimes belated, appears inevitable. Given its inherent marketing potential, the Internet has become the preferred means for firms that wish to publicise changes in their view of SD in “real time”. In this regard, it is worth noting that since we gathered data for our study (2008), Firm C, the only firm that did not communicate on SD, has introduced a basic section on its website dedicated to SD. Albeit anecdotal, this observation backs our idea that SD is not a fixed state, but rather a process. Longitudinal analyses could thus be more suited to understanding the decisive factors for SD and testing their resilience to economic crises.

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