

Is a new era for rail on the horizon?

Over the last two years the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA) has started implementing a turnaround strategy for commuter rail aimed at avoiding total collapse of the system. CEO Lucky Montana briefed the Transport Portfolio Committee in Parliament about some of the dilemmas he faces.

Prasa, the former South African Rail Commuter Corporation (SARCC), is confronting a number of challenges flowing from decades of under-investment and poor management. Now it has to decide whether it is worth sinking more money into the beast, while the potential for a new era of rail lies just over the horizon.

In a frank and often-critical discussion with members of the committee Montana sketched a grim picture. In South Africa, rail has suffered from a capital investment shortfall of around R500 million a year. The last significant investment in tracks and coaches took place in the 1980s, and large amounts of infrastructure and rolling stock date as far back as the 1950s.

Prasa's first intervention has been on the refurbishment of out-of-service coaches, which three years ago accounted for about one-third of all rolling stock. So far, 1 500 coaches have been repaired and upgraded at a cost of around R5 million each, giving them an extra 20 years lifespan. The cost amounts to around 80% of Prasa's unprecedented R14 billion capital expenditure budget for 2008/09, and should see another 700 coaches put into service by March next year.

Prasa has also spent R1.8 billion on '2010 projects', which are mostly infrastructure refurbishments and upgrades at key stations. These include platform re-levelling, new facades, footbridge rehabilitation and signage. To reduce crime on trains 4 600 new railway police will be ready for service by the World Cup. Quality management systems, safety management systems, retention of critical skills and customer satisfaction programmes have also been embarked on.



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Montana says the interventions have achieved what they were designed to do. 'Today Metrorail is a more stable business. Before the timetable didn't even matter, and now we have improved reliability by reducing cancellations, which has also led to a 9.2% increase in passenger trips. But it is only buying us a bit more time. It is not the future,' he warned.

Some aspects of the new approach have not gone so well. Prasa aimed for a 20% reduction in accidents per million kilometres, and instead there was a 26.2% increase. Montana says that the 'human factor' has played a major role in recent accidents, because the decline of infrastructure has required that more work be done manually, making the system vulnerable to mistakes.

The spending dilemma

Prasa is about to enter a 'consolidation phase' where it hopes to invest in brand new rolling stock and operating systems and standardise technology, while arresting the decline in passenger numbers. However

in the next two years, refurbishing existing rolling stock will still require more than half of Prasa's capital allocation.

This means that Prasa is facing the danger of over-capitalising on an increasingly obsolete system. Although new rolling stock is extremely expensive, the cost of the refurbishments is approaching that of totally new coaches with updated technology. And, with 30% of rolling stock needing to be retired in the next four years, the expensive refurbishment process has only been able to provide six years of breathing space for Prasa.

There is a clear need to order new coaches, especially since the procurement process will take around three years. South African trains are missing almost all of the basic technology of modern trains, particularly related to safety, energy efficient power systems and passenger information, access and comfort. But expensive new coaches can only be part of the solution.

Trains travelling on the current narrow-gauge rail networks cannot go much faster than 50km/h, resulting in a trip on the Shosholozu Meyl taking 24 hours from Johannesburg to Cape Town. But updating the system to high-speed rail will require that new standard-gauge rail tracks be laid down alongside the existing narrow-gauge tracks. Large amounts of infrastructure on the existing rail networks is also starting to collapse from age and neglect, with 86% of signalling installations having exceeded their design life.

Montana is clearly aiming to make a break with the past. Cabinet has already approved a new R8.6 billion high-speed rail link connecting Sekhukhuleni and Moloto in Mpumalanga with Gauteng, and Montana is also planning for a 320km/h high-speed rail link between Durban and Johannesburg.

He says that South Africa's existing rail network is designed for a 1960s South Africa, when development was taking place in very different places to today, and where vastly different political

attitudes guided the way transport was used for national integration. Montana argues that 'our current land use is killing our railway system'.


A modernising vision

Prasa expect its modernising vision to be implemented from 2015, with new routes based on better rural mobility and integration with key industries and with neighbouring countries. In addition to new rail systems and routes, Prasa hopes to develop key stations into sophisticated transport and economic hubs, where private business can provide funding for infrastructure upgrades. (Montana criticised designs of many of our railway stations, describing Mabopane Station in Tshwane as 'a dungeon').

An important priority will be creating the institutional space for Prasa to leverage large amounts of funding for mega-projects from alternative sources. And the current financial climate may jeopardise even the most basic investments.

Many of the problems are not infrastructure related. Montana is quick to recognise that Prasa needs a thorough institutional refurbishment. 'Many of our own employees do not believe in quality services. They will say to you, "the service people are getting is cheap, so they deserve to get this kind of treatment",' he commented. He also criticised the unions for creating a situation where 'we pay people to come to work, and we pay them overtime if we actually want them to do anything'.

Prasa has been trying to 'steer and develop modern, harmonious and productive relationships with labour', with Montana arguing that it is in the interests of unions to save jobs by helping to prevent the system from collapsing.

Faced with challenges at every turn, Prasa will need to become a much more efficient organisation if it hopes to lever the funding needed to revolutionise long-distance public transport in South Africa. Progress so far suggests that they may have a fighting chance. 



Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA) CEO, Lucky Montana.