The road transport network of any country plays a vital role in its economy, and the physical condition of its infrastructure is critical. Without adequate and timely maintenance, highways and rural roads alike inexorably deteriorate, leading to higher vehicle operating costs, increased numbers of accidents, and reduced reliability of transport services. When repair work can no longer be delayed it will often involve extensive rehabilitation, and even reconstruction, costing many times more than simpler maintenance treatment carried out earlier. The need to protect the existing network and keep it in good condition is paramount, often taking precedence over new investment.

PIARC has been in the forefront in promoting this message and in drawing attention to the dangers of neglect. The matter has become increasingly important in recent years for all the highways of the world, but especially so for those in developing countries where there is constant pressure on slender budgets and, in many, an urgent need to cater for growing traffic loads and volumes.

In the late 1970's, the aid ministries of France, the Federal Republic of Germany and the United Kingdom joined forces to produce a "Road Maintenance Handbook" for maintenance foremen and workers in Africa. Published in 1982 under the auspices of the Economic Commission for Africa, the three volumes - in French and English - soon became widely known and used. By the end of the decade their use had spread far beyond Africa, and their straightforward instructions were being used for training purposes as well as for
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On-the-job guidance in many countries. The need to reprint provided the opportunity to review the contents in the light of experience and make them more suitable for the wider audience now commanded. PIARC's Committee on Technology Transfer and Development, formerly the Committee on Roads in Developing Regions, undertook to help with this review, which was generously funded by the UK Overseas Development Administration. A sub-committee was established, embracing the three original donor countries, other developed and developing countries, and the World Bank. Although much of the original text has been retained, the new handbooks incorporate more information on labour and tractor-based techniques, and on the development of manpower management and the all-important question of safety at work. The range of maintenance problems addressed has been extended to strengthen their international appeal.

The past ten years have seen major reforms in the general thrust of maintenance policy and in its organisation, management and execution. These changes will continue, and PIARC will play its part along with other institutions in encouraging the process and pressing for further progress. Only a full appreciation of maintenance at the highest levels of policy-making and financial planning can ensure success. But these handbooks have a humbler task—to ensure that the men and women at the operational level are suitably skilled and trained and are using the appropriate tools and techniques, and have interest and motivation in their work.
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PIARC has been proud to nurture this project to the point where the new handbooks are available, but its involvement will reach far beyond that. It will provide the necessary international framework within which the handbooks can be translated and printed in many languages. Its worldwide membership of key figures in the national provision and management of highways will assist with their dissemination, ensuring that they find their way into the most appropriate hands in both the public and private sectors. Collectively, these hands will play a fundamental part in sustaining the vital asset which our roadway networks truly represent.

Victor J Mahbub,
President of PIARC.