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A green vision for our mobility system in 2050

Tackling air pollution and protecting citizens health

On 26 June, thanks to an initiative from Brussels residents and campaign group ClientEarth, the European Union Court of Justice ruled that European cities need to do much more effort to reduce pollution levels. The level of pollution in European cities - particularly from vehicle diesel engines - has become a major threat to public health: the sector emits greenhouse gases, contributes to poor air quality and noise pollution, and damages habitats and wildlife. It has also negative impacts on human health, such as accidents, and busy roads in towns and cities reduce quality of life.

A report from the European Court of Auditors published last year shows that about half a million people die prematurely each year in the EU and that air pollution represents hundreds of billions of euros in health-related external costs. Today more people than live in Germany and the Netherlands combined are exposed to noise pollution from road traffic at levels at which negative health effects can occur. The effect worsened during heatwaves such as the one which hit the North East of Europe last June, particularly affecting the elderly population, children and individuals with respiratory conditions and requiring lots of effort from the local governments to ensure the security of it residents. Global warming now being stronger than a decade ago, cities are under growing pressure to quickly adapt and mitigate its impacts.

Clearly, the recent decision from the local government of Madrid to suspend the low emission scheme Madrid central goes totally against what is required to protect citizens but also improve their quality of life. Drastically reduce transport emissions must now be one of the top priorities of each EU country.

A year ago, the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament requested a study to picture what a truly sustainable mobility sector in 2050 would look like. The work, done by CE Delft, analyses the different challenges linked to mobility and underlines the different range of policies and combination of instruments to put in place to make European cities attractive in the future.

If it is to support a green Europe by the half of this century, the transport system will have to have zero emissions of GHGs, air pollutants and noise and be an integral part of a circular economy that minimizes resource use and waste. The development of transport infrastructure should result in no net loss of habitat, and its use should have a minimal impact on wildlife and the services that nature provides. Sustainable mobility will have to made more attractive and the most obvious choice. A sustainable transport sector should also be made safer and more practical. Today cars - with often one single passenger only - take far more space than any other means of transport.

Clearly greening the transport sector will not happen on its own. Policies, innovation but also sound investments are necessary. Urban planning pricing policies and environmental zoning will be key. Urban areas must prioritize cycling and walking whenever possible. Collective transport system need to be made available and easier to access. To ensure the attractiveness of our cities and protect our health, road space needs to be reallocated away from private motorized vehicle. Private cars should not be dominant anymore, and used in combination with other modes of transport if really necessary.
Access to zero-emission technology will need to be facilitated. This requires a good mix of policies to accelerate the availabilities of zero emission vehicles on the market as well as the development of the energy infrastructure that will support this project. And last but certainly not least, all parts of the population must have an easy, fair and equitable access to mobility.

When it comes to policies at EU level, a lot can be done to quickly help improving air quality. For this, the market for zero-emissions vehicle technology needs to make much quicker progress. The Greens in the European Parliament calls for coordinated EU action to clean up the existing fleet and phase out new combustion engines by 2035 at the latest. It also wants to end car manufacturer's illegal license to pollute and ensure that car manufacturers comply with binding air pollutant limits on road. It also pushes for support for the implementation of sustainable urban mobility plans to stimulate more sustainable modes of transport in cities such as walking, cycling, public transport, intermodality and shared mobility. Finally, it also urgently calls for updating the EU air quality legislation to meet World Health Organisation Guidelines: According to the latest data reported by more than 2 500 monitoring stations across Europe in 2016, 74-85% of the EU urban population were exposed to concentration of particulate matter exceeding the WHO guidelines...

Building a green mobility system requires a lot of change, but the impacts will be extremely positive and largely outcome the investment costs: who would not want to live, work and commute in a green city with greener areas, very good air quality, less noise, more spacious, safer and with regular and affordable public transport?

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