Post-COP21: Decarbonising challenges ahead for transport sector

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Decarbonising the transport sector is both a challenge and an opportunity for European innovators, writes Jos Delbeke.

As part of its contribution to the global climate deal sealed at the COP21 Paris climate conference, the EU set itself a target of reducing its domestic greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40 per cent by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. This was one of the most ambitious pledges on the table in Paris. Now is the time for implementation.

The transport sector, which accounts for almost one-quarter of the EU's total greenhouse gas emissions, will play an important role in achieving the 2030 target. Looking beyond the next decade, EU leaders have agreed on the objective of reducing transport emissions by 60 per cent by 2050.

This will be no mean feat. In fact, transport is the only main European economic sector where emissions have increased since 1990. While they have started to fall since 2008, further efforts are
needed to accelerate the transition to a cleaner and greener European transport sector.

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Achieving the EU's overall target for 2030 means that emissions from the sectors covered by the EU emissions trading system (EU ETS) will need to be reduced by 43 per cent from 2005 levels, while emissions from the non-ETS sectors - transport, building and agriculture - need to fall by 30 per cent.

What does this mean for transport emissions? The effort sharing decision to be put forward by the European Commission before the summer will define the targets each member state needs to reach to allow the EU as a whole to meet its 30 per cent target for the sectors not covered by emissions trading.

In addition, the Commission will also present a communication on the decarbonisation of the transport sector. This will provide an outlook on the policies, both at European and national level, to ensure the sector's contribution to achieving the overall objective.

The decarbonisation challenge is not just about hitting the climate targets we have committed to. It is also about accelerating the transformation of our entire energy system and about maintaining and strengthening Europe's technological leadership.

This requires a holistic, comprehensive approach. Europe's transport challenges are closely linked with the issues addressed by the EU's Energy Union strategy launched last year. Alongside decarbonisation, this aims at strengthening the security of our energy supplies, improving our internal energy market, increasing energy efficiency, and boosting research and innovation.

Making progress in these interconnected areas requires a truly integrated approach and the involvement of all parts of the transport sector and other stakeholders - from vehicle manufacturers, parts suppliers, technology developers, energy and fuel providers, infrastructure managers, local authorities and many more. Consumers, too, will have an important role to play.

Developing innovative solutions to these challenges also opens up international opportunities for European companies working in areas such as emissions-saving technologies, energy efficiency and the use of electric transport and renewable energy in the transport sector. The global market for these technologies is large and rapidly expanding.

European industry has already shown it can deliver. In the road transport sector, which accounts for about one-fifth of the EU's total carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions, ambitious EU standards have supported technological innovation and optimisation, leading to more emissions-efficient vehicles.

For example, the emission reduction target set for new cars registered in the EU - an average of 130 grams of CO2 per kilometre by 2015 - was reached two years in advance. Since monitoring started under the current legislation in 2010, emissions have decreased by 17 g CO2/km. The effectiveness of the targets is also confirmed by decreasing fuel sales.
However, continued efforts are needed to ensure Europe remains at the forefront of the technology race. This is why the European Commission will present new post-2020 CO2 emission standards for light-duty vehicles early next year.

These targets will be based on a new, globally harmonised test procedure to be put in place by September 2017 ensuring more accurate and realistic test results.

The Commission has also made proposals to strengthen the type approval and market surveillance system and reinforce the independence of vehicle testing. These changes are essential in ensuring that flexibilities in the test procedure are reduced and, where still needed, are not abused.

In addition, a new CO2 emissions certification and monitoring system will be proposed to address the knowledge gap for heavy-duty vehicles.

Studies show that reaching our climate and energy targets also mean that in 2030 a significantly larger proportion of new cars should be low emissions, such as electric, plug-in hybrids or fuel cells.

Boosting the development and uptake of low-emissions vehicles requires solving a puzzle of many pieces, ranging from the roll-out of infrastructures to setting the right incentives and standards and fostering client acceptance of new technologies.

The transport sector plays a vital role in our society as an important economic sector and an essential way for people and goods to move from one place to another. By working together, we can ensure it also contributes to building a more energy-secure, climate-friendly future for Europe.

About the author

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