International Transport Forum

POLICY BRIEF

Keeping 1.5°C Alive: Transport at COP26

The transport sector has played an increasingly prominent role in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings over the past few years. Does this signal a shift in global climate governance to embrace multi-stakeholder engagement?

The issue

Without more ambitious policies, transport CO_2 emissions will grow 16% by 2050

Transport is the largest energy end-use sector with growing CO_2 emissions

The total energy use in the transport sector is responsible for 25% of direct carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions from fuel combustion. Transport is also a sector that depends on oil more than any other sector, as more than 90% of transport energy use still comes from petroleum products. Without more ambitious policies, the global demand for passenger travel and movement of goods is expected to more than double from 2015 to 2050, leading to a 16% growth in CO_2 emissions by 2050. Improvements in fuel and vehicle efficiencies are not advancing fast enough to reduce overall emissions because transport demand is increasing due to population and GDP growth. Reducing transport CO_2 emissions is critical to meet the overall emission targets and the goals of the Paris Agreement.

Transport stakeholders need a voice in climate change policy processes

Transport stakeholders, including transport ministers, have been largely missing from COP meetings and other climate change policy processes since the creation of the Convention in 1994. In fact, the transport sector has often been coupled with the energy sector at COP meetings, where transport mitigation actions under discussion were limited to alternative fuel sources. However, the transport sector has been progressing in innovative ways where mitigation measures have gone far and beyond energy-related solutions. Initiatives to decarbonise the sector while allowing for more inclusive mobility include managing transport demand and mode shift using economic instruments, infrastructure improvements, shared mobility services, traffic management, integrated land use and transport planning and changes in regulatory frameworks, including parking and vehicle restrictions. These transport measures are effective climate action and support the advancement of national climate goals while building more ambition.

Key insights

Transport sector achievements at COP26 marked a change in how transport is perceived by the climate change community and how climate change should be governed

COP26 marked an important transport milestone, with multi-level, multi-stakeholder representation

The United Kingdom (UK) COP Presidency dedicated a "Transport Day" in the official COP programme on 10 November 2021. It was only the second time a COP Presidency had created thematic "days" during the two-week meeting, following the example set by Chile in 2019. The relatively new thematic days concept is attributable to the approach of the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action (MP-GCA), which identified thematic areas for climate action when it was first launched in 2016. The thematic days enabled the substantive engagement of Parties, including and especially from line ministries critical to the various transformation pathways, such as transport, in multiple activities at COP.

At COP26, the UK Secretary of State for Transport played a major role in inviting his fellow transport ministers from around the world to participate in transport events. A special Transport Ministers Meeting with roundtable discussion was attended by more than 20 transport ministers, leaders of international organisations and CEOs. It was the first high-level transport event seen at a COP meeting. Outputs from this meeting will contribute to the International Transport Forum (ITF) Ministers' Roundtable on "Transport and Climate Change: Moving forward from COP26" during the ITF Summit in May 2022. The Roundtable will form a sequence of high-level dialogues with transport ministers, building a momentum of increasing ambition to be carried forward at COP27.

"Decarbonise Transport! A Call from Business Leaders for Climate Action and Collaboration with Governments" was also presented to transport ministers at COP26, outlining key points and priorities for transport decarbonisation from CEOs and high-level representatives of the ITF's Corporate Partnership Board. It highlights the need for new and innovative public and private sector collaboration to reach transport decarbonisation by 2050.

ITF's Secretary-General delivered a statement in the high-level segment of the COP26 session, focusing on the role of transport in mitigating climate change, key policy actions and the need to increase ambition and boost collaboration.

In addition to high-level events led by the COP Presidency, there were also more than 100 transport-related side events organised by governments, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other stakeholder groups. The topics covered all transport modes and explored cross-cutting themes, including gender and synergies between the transformation of the global vehicle fleet and other sectors, including aviation, maritime and heavy-duty freight. Events organised by ITF enabled different stakeholder groups to engage and exchange respective insights.

Impact of COP26 outcomes for transport

Around 25% of the Parties to the Convention (PDF) had official delegates from transport ministries at COP26 who joined delegation teams led by environment ministers. Despite the relatively small representation, the transport sector will be significantly affected by the outcomes of COP26.

First, a strong signal to begin phasing out fossil fuels is clear from the COP26 final decision text, the Glasgow Climate Pact (PDF). All 197 Parties agreed to accelerate the end of fossil fuel subsidies and reduce the use of coal while recognising the need for a just transition at the same time. The transport sector must accelerate the development, deployment and dissemination of technologies and implement policies to transition to low-emission systems. Given that the sector is still heavily dependent upon fossil fuels, this transition will require critical policy guidance to help lead infrastructure investment, including enhancing and integrating sustainable transport modes, such as public transport, walking, and cycling.

Second, the Glasgow Declaration on Zero-Emission Cars and Vans was signed at COP26 by governments, businesses, and other organisations for all sales of new cars and vans being zero-emission globally by 2040 and by no later than 2035 in leading markets. Although the declaration was not part of the official negotiation process, it was an effort led by the UK COP Presidency, and its target could be aligned with transport goals included in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). More governments and businesses than those that have signed the declaration would be required to commit to the transition to zero emission, but different pathways or timelines may be necessary depending on their constraints and needs. The "Securing Global Fleet Transformation: GFEI's ZERO Pathway" report, also launched at COP26, presents key actions to transition to zero-emission vehicles not just for leading markets but also for "close followers", "aggressive importers", and the "rest of the world" by 2040. Achieving a 100% sales share of electric vehicles in all markets globally by 2040 could lead to a 77% CO_2 reduction in 2050 relative to a business-as-usual case. However, this will also imply significant shifts in materials required for batteries and electric motors, taxation on transport fuels and the transport workforce.

Third, the final agreement of Article 6 of the 2015 Paris Agreement reached at COP26 will also have implications for the transport sector. In general, Article 6 aims to pursue voluntary co-operation to implement NDCs allowing for higher ambition in mitigation and adaptation actions. It includes voluntary bilateral or multilateral co-operative approaches (Article 6.2 (PDF)) and the creation of an international market-based mechanism that would generate credits for businesses or countries to purchase to meet their mitigation targets (Article 6.4 (PDF)). The implementation of Article 6 will therefore allow countries to partially meet their climate targets through offset credits representing emission cuts by others. Such approaches could lead to more ambitious climate action in transport as mitigation outcomes could then be traded accordingly. The ability to evaluate emission changes as a result of specific transport projects or policies will therefore be increasingly important.

Next steps

The transport sector must unite and collaborate with other sectors

Deep partnerships within and between sectors are needed for COP27

The transition to zero carbon will require transport ministries to form deep and radical partnerships with non-transport line ministries such as energy, industry, human settlements, and urban development. Multi-stakeholder engagement within the transport sector also needs further strengthening for more ambitious transport action. High-level transport and climate change policy dialogues at the ITF Summit 2021 and COP26 reveal that international collaboration is a consistent theme and priority for transport ministers. Greater co-operation will align standards and set goals for the private sector across the world to enable an equal playing field to decarbonise transport. Covid-19 recovery also needs to be coupled with transport sector decarbonisation targets.

Building upon the discussion outcomes on transport and climate change at COP26, preparation for COP27 could include better integration of high-level transport and climate change policy dialogues into other transport-related events led by the COP Presidency and the UNFCCC to create a more focused and cohesive narrative. Links across thematic areas could also be captured and reflected in the official COP27 Programme and MP-GCA events. For example, in addition to dedicated thematic days, cross-cutting themes, such as gender, finance, resilience, public-private partnerships, non-Party stakeholder engagement, just transition, and governance could be further highlighted across sectors and reflected in individual thematic days. Horizontal integration between line ministries within countries will continue to be a critical requirement to advance the goals of the Paris Agreement and achieve more ambitious targets and NDCs. Transport ministers will therefore need to continue to play a role in climate change policy processes, participate at COP27 and contribute to the development and implementation of transport action. Lastly, the Transport Ministers Meeting at COP26 could serve as a model for other sectoral ministers to discuss specific climate action topics. These events are not a negotiating forum but are instead focused on sector-specific priorities, including implementation strategies.

The transformation of the transport sector will undoubtedly require greater collaboration and co-operation, as well as the exchange of experience and knowledge, which will facilitate the implementation of innovative measures to enable countries to achieve their climate goals. The ITF's Decarbonising Transport: Driving Implementation Actions (DT Implement) project aims to foster such collaboration and has created three country-led stakeholder "common interest groups". These groups focus on three hard-to-abate sectors; heavy-duty road freight, shipping and aviation transport. The groups bring together experts from governments, industry, the research community and NGOs for peer-to-peer exchange and mutual learning. To date, over 30 countries have joined the DT Implement project to collaborate with other stakeholders on concrete implementation action.

The dialogue between countries and among stakeholders should occur regularly while monitoring progress and aligning decarbonising transport decisions. These dialogues should coincide with significant transport and climate change moments throughout the year in 2022, before convening again at COP27.

Further reading:

ITF Transport Outlook 2021

Transport Climate Action Directory (TCAD)

About

International Transport Forum

Who we are

The International Transport Forum at the OECD is an intergovernmental organisation with 63 member countries. It acts as a think tank for transport policy and organises the Annual Summit of transport ministers. ITF is the only global body that covers all transport modes. The ITF is administratively integrated with the OECD, yet politically autonomous.

What we do

The ITF works for transport policies that improve peoples' lives. Our mission is to foster a deeper understanding of the role of transport in economic growth, environmental sustainability and social inclusion and to raise the public profile of transport policy.

How we do it

The ITF organises global dialogue for better transport. We act as a platform for discussion and pre-negotiation of policy issues across all transport modes. We analyse trends, share knowledge and promote exchange among transport decision-makers and civil society. The ITF's Annual Summit is the world's largest gathering of transport ministers and the leading global platform for dialogue on transport policy.

Decarbonising Transport initiative

The Decarbonising Transport initiative promotes carbon-neutral mobility to help stop climate change. It provides decision makers with tools to select CO_2 mitigation measures that deliver on their climate commitment.

Climate change affects lives around the globe. Rising temperatures cause draughts, rising sea levels threaten low-lying regions, ever more extreme weather leads to severe disruptions. Climate change cannot be stopped without decarbonising transport. Transport emits around 23% of the energy-related CO_2 that feeds global warming.

Without immediate action, its share could reach 40% by 2030. Transport emissions have grown faster than those of any other sector over the past 50 years. Demand for transport will continue to grow massively in the coming decades. As a result, CO_2 emissions from transport activity will not fall, but could increase by 60% by 2050. And because transport relies on oil for 92% of its energy, it is particularly hard to decarbonise.

www.itf-oecd.org/decarbonising-transport