Global transport trends completely at odds with Climate Change aspirations

“Trends in transport are completely at odds with the political aspirations on Climate Change” said Jack Short, Secretary General of the OECD based International Transport Forum, at Michelin Challenge Bibendum 2007 in Shanghai last week.

Transport emissions are increasing and this is set to continue well into the future. For example, globally, aviation is set to double in less than 20 years as is container traffic by sea and car ownership and use. Yet, at the same time, many governments and international bodies are setting targets of 50% and more for reductions in total emissions.

Achieving significant reductions in Transport is “an unprecedented challenge for the Sector” and will require both technological advances and major policy initiatives. Political expectations about technological change are “probably too high” said Mr. Short. Technology takes time and large research spending to develop, and further time to bring to markets. Crucially this depends on the costs, which still remain too high.

In the shorter term, there are many cost effective actions that can make a valuable difference. These include actions on tyres, lubricants, lights, air conditioners and on driving behaviour. All of these add up and can reduce emissions by more than 10%. These actions can be taken now, said Mr. Short.

A single instrument, especially a carbon tax, would in many ways be ideal; but differences of view on it are so entrenched that, in order to make progress, a variety of instruments are likely to be needed in the medium term. Regulations are among them. A voluntary
approach for vehicles, as tried in Europe, could not deliver enough “more because Governments did not support it with the necessary instruments” than through a failure by Industry.

Mr. Short underlined that most Countries still put the main accent on traditional measures of transport Policy, such as traffic management, encouraging modal switch, supporting public transport and investment. These measures remain essential to meet transport policy objectives in general. He said, in particular, that continuing investment in transport was essential; “sustainable transport does not mean spending less”, he said.

But the particular challenge of climate change will require new instruments and policies. It will also need much stronger coordination between the public and private sectors, for example, on incentives consumers face in relation to fuel efficiency when they purchase cars.

Please click here to read Mr. Short’s speech.

If you would like further information, please contact if.contact@oecd.org.

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