

1. Opinions



Mobilities: the French government has to back up its environmental ambitions with the means to achieve them

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In the field of transport, the ecological transition is inadequate to meet the challenge set by the targets. An ambitious planning policy must cover all areas related to our travels: work, health, education and land management.

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Reducing emissions by 40% by 2030 compared to 1990: that's the commitment made by the French government under the Paris Agreement. And the courts have just given the State three months to prove that it can meet this target. In terms of mobility, however, the transition implemented by the government is far from living up to its ambitions. Between 2015 and 2018, transport-related greenhouse gas emissions exceeded the targets set by the SNBC (National Low Carbon Strategy) in 2015 by almost 10%. Instead of quickly rectifying the situation and rethinking its transition policy, the government pushed the problem back by raising the sector's short- and medium-term emissions ceiling by 15% in the SNBC's updated version in 2020, deferring most of the required efforts.

This discrepancy between objectives and results should have been an opportunity to reflect on the reasons why the transition policy is failing. This can be explained in at least two ways.

First, because of prioritising the wrong policies. While the government agrees on the need to limit the carbon footprint of mobility, it keeps on trying above all else to improve and expand the transport supply in order to make travel easier, relegating the objective of limiting its carbon footprint. This leads it to favor technological solutions (electric and autonomous cars, etc.) to reconcile increased travel with a reduced carbon impact. And some may continue to hope that the two are not incompatible, but the latest research shows that technological solutions are, at best, not sufficiently effective at the moment, and at worse, may never be.

The silo approach

This failure is also due to a silo approach within the governmental departments responsible for these issues. Indeed, the public authorities haven't understood that the subject isn't transport but rather the place that travel should occupy in our lifestyles in times of climate change. If we travel so much, it's to go somewhere (work, leisure, housing,...) and if it takes us so long, it's because these activities are scattered throughout the territory. And if we do this, it's because it seems normal or acceptable to us. These are all areas of public policy that need to be thought of in conjunction with transport policies.

Yet, policies focus on transport and forget all other dimensions related to mobility that structure our lifestyles: work, health, education, land use planning, etc. At the national and local levels, there is no cross-sectorial policy that encompasses mobility, the environment, social and economic issues. Indeed, the governmental departments in charge of these issues pursue their own objectives. This situation is the same within the Ministry of Transition, where energy, transport, land use and, more radically, aviation, operate separately without any coherence to their strategies.

Furthermore, this type of organization doesn't promote the idea of avoiding trips, which remains a blind spot despite the fact that an analysis of transport-related carbon emissions clearly shows that since 1960, the curve of CO2 emissions closely follows that of increasing travel.

Inter-departmental ecological planning

A realistic transition policy must therefore be based on inter-departmental ecological planning, which would allow for a joined up approach to mobility. This policy, which could radically change our lifestyles in the years to come, must be developed hand in hand with a citizen's parliament, in order to take into account their aspirations and the place they wish to give to mobility in their lifestyles.

This plan would democratically define policies for land management, relocation of businesses, changes in the organization of work and education in order to allow more local lifestyles and thus facilitate the use of bicycles, walking and public transport when the territory allows it. For the rest, a new industrial policy for automobiles will have to be established to immediately promote radically less polluting vehicles, especially lighter vehicles. The work of the Citizens' Convention for Climate shows that citizens are ready to do without the heaviest SUV-type vehicles, but that it is the industry that refuses to evolve.

When more than 80% of French people aspire to slow down, 42% want to live in greater physical proximity (without public transport and individual mobility) and the rest don't want to spend more than thirty minutes in transport, it appears that this cross-sectional policy would promote the transition to desirable and more sustainable lifestyles.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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1 <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/project/2018/05/17/decarbonizing-mobility-what-policies-france-12424>