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BLOG POST October 13th 2022

Implementing low-emission mobility zones: it is possible, but under certain conditions

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Reading time: 6 min

The French Climate and Resilience Law has enacted the introduction of low-emission mobility zones (zones à faibles émissions mobilité, ZFE-m) in all urban areas of more than 150,000 inhabitants by 2025. ZFE-m are undeniably a powerful lever for transforming the vehicle fleet, changing modes of transport, and improving air quality and the health of the most vulnerable populations, which are both social and environmental issues. However, their implementation is controversial due to the economic and social impacts on the most economically constrained users, whether individuals or businesses. The successful implementation of such a system and the generation of a collective dynamic of acceptability will require a refocusing of the debate onto the conditions of implementation and stakeholder consultation.

ZFE-m, a necessary mechanism for the transition and the improvement of air quality

The objective of ZFE-m implementation is to reduce air pollution in urban areas, since road transport is the main source of these pollutant emissions (particularly NOx, the health impacts of which are increasingly well understood). According to a *Santé Publique France* study1 , air pollution causes 48,000 premature deaths annually. ZFE-m are a key driver for improving air quality and achieving CO2 emission reduction objectives in the vehicle fleet.

This system is in line with a well-defined French and European framework of regulations and penalties, supported by associations that campaign for the health of urban inhabitants, which requires compliance with air quality standards and provides for the gradual elimination of emission-intensive vehicles from our roads, in line with CAFE2 and EURO 3 regulations, which progressively oblige manufacturers to offer vehicles with zero exhaust emissions (mainly electric).

Timelines, which are sometimes considered too ambitious, are a source of tension and concern for affected vulnerable populations

Despite the urgency of climate and health issues, the timelines of the traffic restriction phases envisaged by some local authorities are considered overly ambitious by some in terms of the economic and social impact on the most vulnerable users, whether businesses or individuals, but also from a technical and practical point of view, particularly regarding the means of control.

The potential social and economic consequences constitute a major issue of acceptability that impacts the local authorities responsible for implementing restriction measures. These authorities have generally made a good assessment of the issues and have undertaken the necessary investment programmes, as well as the associated communication and consultation work. The most proactive authorities have even started broadening the range of private car alternatives for individuals. In the knowledge that such provision will be insufficient to meet the needs of populations that depend heavily on their own vehicles, financial support systems for conversion to less polluting solutions or temporary or targeted exemption systems are being considered.

The quality of consultation and the relevance and accuracy of the targeting of support measures must be guaranteed through in-depth work to characterize the issues at stake according to the type of user, to the sub-region and to social situations. Sharing this impartial understanding of the needs and possible options is a prerequisite for more productive and calmer discussions, and for the effectiveness of targeted and co-constructed solutions. It also enables public decision-makers to back up their decisions by precisely describing the budgetary requirements for support measures, or by specifying eligibility criteria to increase fairness and, by the same token, their acceptance, but also to accurately define any exemptions according to an evaluation of social costs and associated health benefits.

While several cities are ahead of schedule with ZFE-m implementation and are aiming to ban vehicles with a Crit’Air 2 rating4 , surveys have shown that the level of information and preparedness of affected users is far from satisfactory. This gap represents a potential source of tension linked to the cost of the transition for households and companies, or to the individual difficulties encountered when implementing such technical or operational transformations within relatively short timescales. Restrictions and accompanying measures must be targeted and proportionate to avoid such approaches being perceived simply as impositions on the most economically vulnerable (owners of the oldest and most polluting vehicles) for the benefit of the collective good, while more affluent people

have the means to access recent technologies that meet all new requirements or live in city centres where modal shifts are more easily available than in suburban areas.

This observation has led IDDRI to propose a methodology along with innovative tools for characterizing these socio-economic impacts, to provide support for dialogue, consultation and decision-making. This approach particularly aims to describe possible and/or desirable options in terms of exemptions or the discretization of constraints, without losing sight of health objectives, which must remain the benchmark by which actions are measured. This is also the purpose of the impact studies required by the regulatory process prior to the implementation of ZFE-m regulations.

Refocusing the debate on the conditions for implementation and success

Supporting vulnerable and car-dependent people is not an excuse to reduce health and environmental ambitions, or to question the purpose of ZFE-m5 .

The challenge is to succeed in defining effective implementation conditions to achieve the objectives, without weakening or excluding populations who are more constrained in terms of transport. This implementation requires preparation and support on an unprecedented scale, whether in terms of investment, infrastructure development, monitoring resources or support measures to meet specific needs (leasing schemes to improve access to new vehicles, particularly electric vehicles; temporary or one-off exemptions; infrastructure; recharging points; financial assistance; etc.).

Implementation conditions are an integral part of the debate on ZFE-m and require in-depth work that will determine the acceptability of the process.

Towards scheduling harmonization

Finally, the disparity of the timelines implemented in urban centres does not contribute to the clarity of the system. Some cities impose very ambitious timelines that can be politically risky or create tension or rejection due to insufficient preparation or work on implementation conditions, while the failure of a pioneer project could damage the whole concept. Harmonization of timelines, particularly regarding the exclusion of Crit'Air category 2 vehicles, which represents a key stage in the transition, could enable local authorities to carry out in-depth work on the conditions for implementation and acceptability.

Conclusion

Following the publication of the results of the "flash" mission6 on the measures to accompany the creation of ZFE-m, it is important to ensure that the debate focuses on the conditions of implementation and consultation with stakeholders, rather than the appropriateness of the measure itself. The challenge is to ensure the acceptability and success of local schemes that constitute an effective means of addressing two vital priorities: health and climate.

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1 Santé Publique France study, June 2016 : https://www.santepubliquef

2 Corporate Average Fuel Economy

3 https://www.ecologie.gouv.fr/normes-euros-demissions-polluants-vehicules-lourds-vehicules-propres#:~:text=Pour%20limiter%20les%20%C3%A9missions%20de,(HC)%20et%20des%20particules .

4 As of January 1, 2019, Crit'Air 2 vehicles represented 33% of the fleet in circulation. SDES data: (https://www.statistiques.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/une-voiture-sur-deux-est-eligible-la-vignette-critair-1-ou-2).

5 Bill to ban ZFE-m, proposed by a Rassemblement National MP and supported by the association "40 million motorists".

6 On October 12, 2022, the National Assembly's Sustainable Development Committee presented the conclusions of the "flash" mission on measures to accompany the creation of ZFE-m (co-rapporteurs: Gérard Leseul and Bruno Millienne).

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