“It is possible to reduce air pollution caused by transportation via simple financial precautions.”

The panel “Reducing Emissions from the Road Transport Sector in Turkey: The Role of Restructured Vehicle Taxes and Congestion Pricing” took place at Istanbul Policy Center on February 17, 2017. The panel was moderated by Senior Scholar and Climate Studies Coordinator Ümit Şahin, while Associate Professor at Istanbul Bilgi University Ayşe Uyduranoğlu and Managing Director at the International Council on Clean Transportation (ICTT) and 2015/16 Mercator-IPC Fellow Peter Mock participated as panelists.

In his opening speech, Ümit Şahin claimed that climate change and air pollution are two interdependent problems. Şahin stated that 25% of energy-based carbon dioxide emission that causes climate change originates from transportation and that one of the most important causes of air pollution in cities is motor vehicles. He emphasized that reducing pollutant emissions from vehicles is of great importance in combating climate change and air pollution. Şahin also pointed out that eight out of ten of the most polluted cities in Europe are in Turkey, while Istanbul remains as the most polluted metropolitan in Europe.

Ayşe Uyduranoğlu explained their study on Congestion Charge at Istanbul Bilgi University and shared the results of their research. She stated that the aim of the research was to show that it is possible to reduce traffic congestion, thus decrease air pollution and the noise problem, by providing paid entrance to areas in big cities where the traffic is busy. She also stated that this practice was initiated in cities such as London, Stockholm, and Milan to prevent traffic density and air pollution. The results obtained were very positive; traffic density has fallen by 18% in London and Stockholm and by 14% in Milan. In parallel with the reduced traffic density, carbon dioxide emissions decreased 16% in London and Stockholm and 14% in Milan, whereas the nitrogen oxides emissions that cause air pollution declined 8% in London, 8.5% in Stockholm, and 17% in Milan. She also noted that the levels of contaminating particle material were also reduced. Uyduranoğlu added that these kind of projects are very difficult to put into practice, but the support of the public is inevitable after achieving success.

Uyduranoğlu underlined that Istanbul, with above 50% traffic congestion, is ranked as one of the top three cities with the worst traffic congestion in the world. Drivers spend 125 hours per year in traffic. She also emphasized the necessity of pilot applications, introduction of the application to the drivers, simple configuration of the system, and the need to direct the revenue to public transportation in order to implement the Congestion Charge system. The result of the research carried out within Istanbul Bilgi University on this subject has showed that when people are well-informed, and especially when the revenue collected is transferred to public transportation, they are much more positive and supportive towards the system.

Peter Mock summarized the main tenets of the vehicle taxation systems in Europe and Turkey. Comparing Turkey and Germany, Mock stated that in 2014, 118 out of 1,000 people in Turkey and 548 out of 1,000 people in Germany had motor vehicles. He pointed out that the growth rate of vehicle sales in Turkey is 7.8%, and if it continues to grow like this, carbon dioxide emission and fuel demand from the road transport sector are expected to double by 2030.
Mock described the practices in Europe of taxing cars based on carbon dioxide emission levels. Mock pointed out that the tax system based on carbon emissions works particularly well in the Netherlands and France. The success of this tax scheme is seen in the increased sales of hybrids, electric vehicles, and vehicles with low emissions. He noted that taxpayers in Turkey pay very high taxes, but the Turkish system is not based on emission. Mock suggested that altering the current system by reducing the percentage of Special Sales Taxes (ÖTV) and creating a tax system based on vehicles’ carbon emissions will lead to the integration of the new system without reducing the total revenue of the government. Mock argued for the promotion of low-emission vehicles, such as hybrid vehicles, which will reduce the amount of emissions of the gasses causing climate change and consequentially contribute to the protection of the environment and the climate.