

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für  
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development  
Institute

**Academia and the climate**

## On the dilemma of flying for sustainability

By Anna Schwachula, Okka Lou Mathis,  
Daniele Malerba and Ramona Hägele  
*German Development Institute /  
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

# The Current Column

*of 27 September 2019*

## On the dilemma of flying for sustainability

Bonn, 27 September 2019. Last Friday, millions of citizens around the world joined a global climate strike demanding bold political action on climate change, while the German Climate Cabinet met in Berlin. This week, heads of state gathered for the UN Sustainability Summit and the New York Climate Week. Civil society action hopefully raises the sense of urgency of policy makers to finally come up with transformative agendas. Against this background, the German Climate Cabinet will certainly have to sharpen its deeply disappointing policy package, proposed last week.

While there is no doubt that the world needs a political leap to get on track to reaching the Paris climate goals, it is also on each and every one of us to take climate action. Especially as researchers in the field of sustainable development, we should not only provide scientific results and policy recommendations for the transformation to sustainability. We should also reflect about, and try to minimize, the trade-offs between the potential impact of our research and policy advice on the one hand, and our direct individual impact on climate on the other hand. By combining scientifically sound analysis with a more coherent behavior, we could even strengthen our edge towards the sustainability transformation.

Questions of transformative change and global cooperation lie at the heart of sustainable development research. However, we as researchers confront a moral dilemma: While trying to figure out how to halt global warming, deal with its impacts, alleviate poverty and fight inequality, we are busy flying around the globe. No doubt: challenges are global, thus they require global cooperation. Travel to meetings, workshops, conferences and field trips are instrumental for our work. Yet we know about the negative consequences of this working mode on climate change and, especially, on the poorest and most vulnerable people around the globe.

True, aviation only amounts to an estimated five percent of anthropogenic climate impacts. This may sound insignificant; but in fact, it stinks: Only around three percent of the global population flies during one year. For this minority, air travel quickly inflates the individual carbon footprint: One return flight from London to New York causes higher carbon emissions than the average citizens of 56 countries worldwide produce annually per capita. And it accounts for almost half of the estimated annual individual emissions considered in line with the Paris

climate goals. Researchers have a carbon footprint that is twice as high as that of an average citizen of Canada, . This raises questions of climate justice. What if we all flew? Emissions from the aviation sector are already rocketing due to more people flying each year.

In our private lives, mindsets have begun to change: Flying is now debated between flight shaming and individual freedom to explore the globe. This debate needs to enter our professional context, too. We need to address trade-offs and reflect about necessities of flights, because it is incoherent to preach one thing (deep and urgent transformations) while practicing another. As an additional benefit, walking our talk could increase the credibility and trust in science.

Obviously, as researchers, we are part of a larger system: We need strong public policies to reduce emissions from transport and aviation. The culture in academia, its rewards system and definitions of success also need to change: Currently, the informally prevailing norm in global sustainable development research is being on the constant international move, rooted in beliefs that international conferences are steppingstones for academic success – which has, however, not found to be true.

What can we do? Avoiding, reducing, compensating is the magical triad that allows us to act in coherence with our scientific findings. It needs to become “the new normal” in academia to cooperate virtually in order to reduce physical meetings. Improvements in video or multiple site conferences as well as technical solutions for informal online networking are required. Institutional travel guidelines have to be adjusted to climate urgency on top of cost efficiency. We need clear criteria for decisions about the necessity or dispensability of certain work trips. Further, CO2 budgets assigned to each researcher or research project may be an instrument to reduce the number of flights and increase transparency.

Change starts with each one of us. As researchers on sustainable development and climate change, our perspective is permeated by knowledge, values and norms on global challenges. With these moral foundations, we should engage in a process of openly discussing how academia can contribute to reaching the Paris climate goals beyond study results and recommendations. We are in charge to change ourselves, and our institutions, despite of all inertia in politics. Let's practice what we preach!