



**BRITISH ACADEMY
OF MANAGEMENT**

Sustainability at conferences

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Introduction

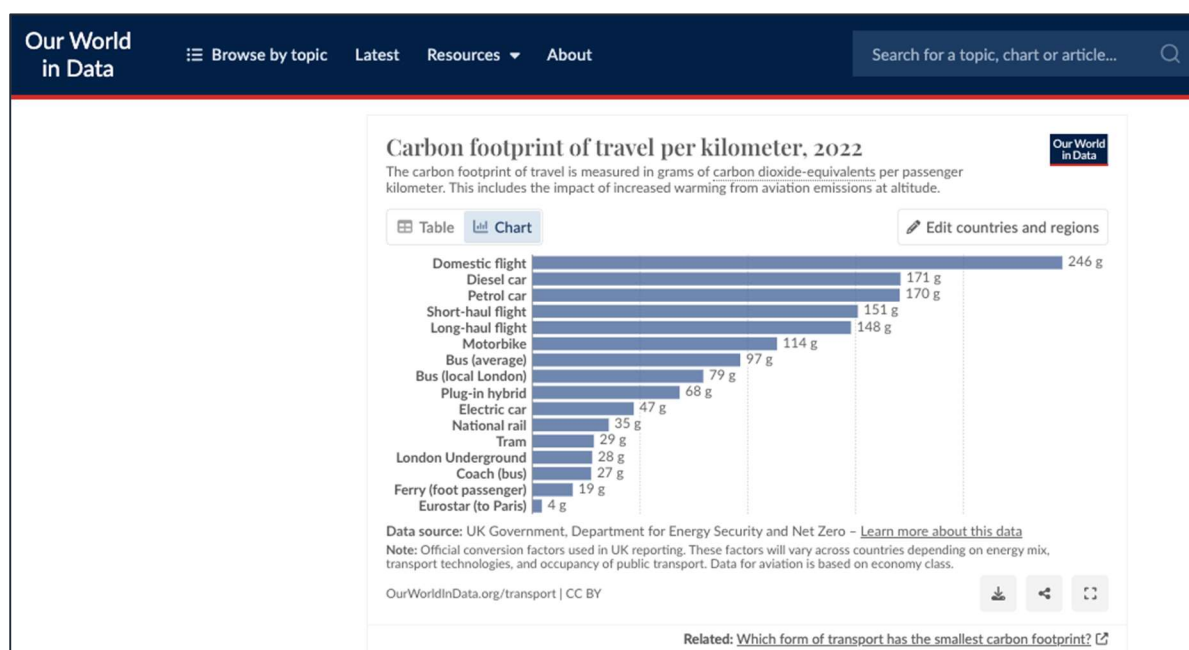
The desire to be less unsustainable is prompted by the concern that combined human activities are creating environmental problems that are systemic in nature and that these problems will threaten human wellbeing. At the same time, sustainability concerns also relate to social equity with an ethically-based desire to ensure that all people have the chance to have their needs met. These concerns infuse conference organisation and also the choices made by academics over which conferences to attend.

The following material lays out some of the issues at stake in terms of environmental sustainability at conferences and it should become apparent that it is impossible to easily be categorical about what 'best' practice is. Rather this short guide provides 'points to ponder' in thinking about conference attendance and organisation.

Attending a conference creates impacts from two sets of activities, namely: getting to the conference and impacts that arise during the conference itself.

Travel to and from a conference

Travel choices generate carbon impacts as travel requires energy. While there are also impacts from building transport infrastructure and from manufacturing vehicles in which we travel, these are largely outside of the control of a transport user and not included in the figures below. Different forms of transport have varying degrees of carbon intensity and are usually arranged in the form of a transport hierarchy. This hierarchy is not definitive as there are complicating factors because carbon intensity varies by country depending (for example) on how electricity is generated that underpins transport options such as train transport. That being said, a good ‘rule of thumb’ for carbon intensity by mode of transport follows (most to least intensive per mile/km travelled and based on UK data).



Of course, there is also an equalities angle to travel, and it might be that you need to take a more carbon intensive method of travel to ensure you are able to attend a conference as well as return home afterwards quickly to resume caring responsibilities. It is also the case, that not everyone is equally able to undertake active travel and may require a vehicle to get around. An effective way to reduce travel impacts is to plan for more than one activity in the course of a piece of travel (if possible). In addition, sharing transport (for private cars) is another way to reduce carbon emissions per person.

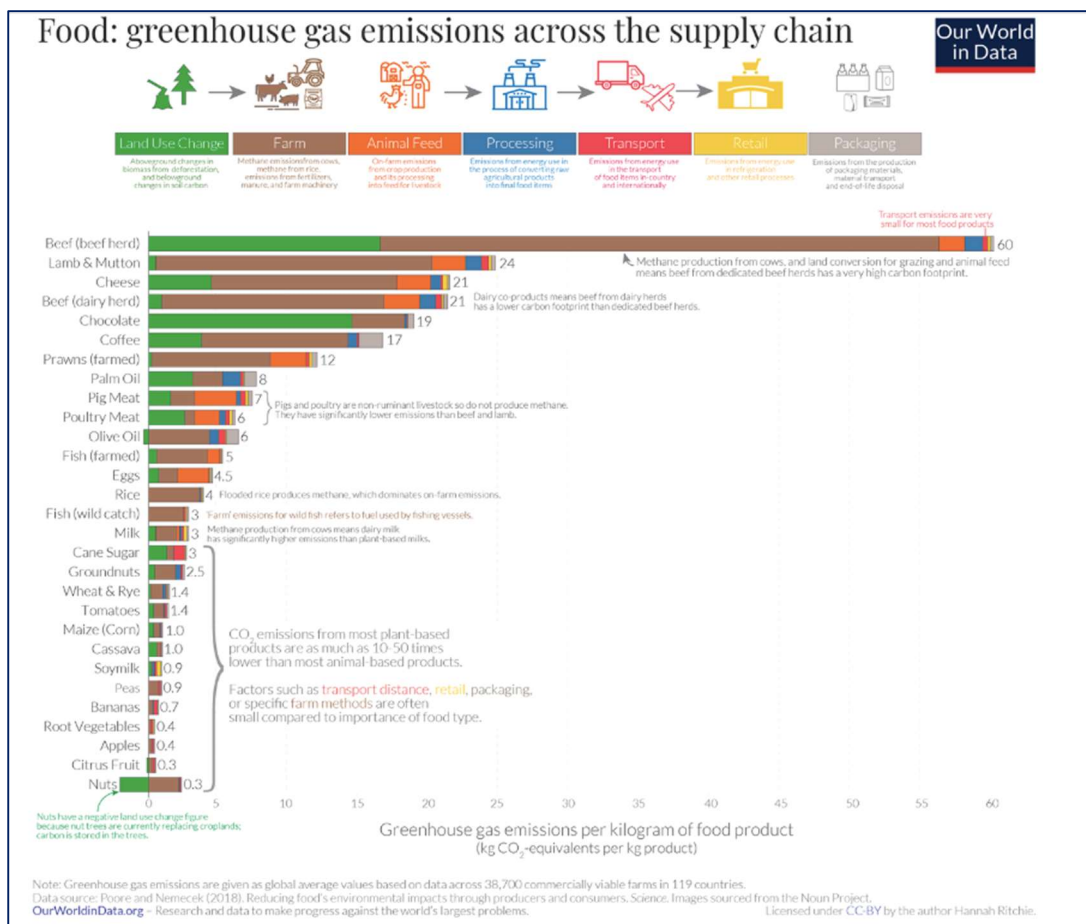
Impacts at the conference

Venue

Conference venues require energy to operate and the amount of energy required will vary by building age, design and the source of electricity used. A newly built energy efficient building at an institution that generates and uses its own renewable energy will be low in carbon terms. At the same time, keeping an older building (which has already generated carbon in its construction and which may be historically significant) and retrofitting it to be more energy efficient might be a good course of action. These examples point to there being two sources of carbon emissions for facilities: carbon generated through constructing buildings and emissions that arise from their operation. Conference organisers are not able to fully control these choices.

Food

Food also has a carbon footprint associated with its growing, processing and transporting, as well as its disposal. The following figures reflect the full life cycle of different food types (that is emissions from all phases of food production). There are also complications in terms of these figures. For example, cutting down forests in the Amazon to raise beef has a very different carbon footprint from growing beef in (say) the UK's Lake District on well-managed upland permanent pastures. That being said, in general vegetarian food generally has a lower footprint than meat which is why conferences often offer only vegetarian and vegan options.



Alongside carbon impacts, food production also has water and biodiversity impacts associated with it. These impacts vary depending on where the food is grown/raised/caught and there is no definitive way to make food choices when it comes to these environmental aspects.

Other activities

The final category of conference impacts relates to materials impacts that arise from activities such as: conference documentation, conference 'freebies' like bags or gifts, and badges/lanyards. Here the general principle would be that less is better. Providing conference documents in a virtual format saves paper, with the proviso that computing has its own impacts. Likewise, having no gifts is likely to be the best option, but may feel less welcoming. Essentials like badges/lanyards (so you can get to know conference participants) are better if they are recycled at the end of the conference or if they are not made of plastic. Even here there are complications; if a plastic-based badge cover means that it can be used many times, over a lifetime it may have a lower materials/carbon footprint than a paper-based badge. I hope our readers can forgive the prevarication on this point: the essential problem with making some of these choices is that they depend on life cycle assessments from which it is very difficult to elicit a singular answer.