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Environmental ethics beyond conferences: A response to the WCB bioethics in Qatar

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Abstract

Rieke van der Graaf, Karin Jongmsa, Martine de Vries, Suzanne van de Vathorst, and Ineke Bolt have done well to voice ethical concerns over the decision of the IAB to host the next WCB in Qatar. Conferences *should* be more sustainable. Yet, attention to the carbon impact of conferences—and, perhaps, any country that a person might travel to for business or pleasure—are only one small part of environmentally responsible citizenship, especially for those trained in ethics and committed to health. Both bioethics as a discipline and bioethicists as individuals need to interrogate their environmental choices. To this end, some ecological choices are more obvious targets of ethical scrutiny—diet and travel—while others appear sacrosanct, like reproduction and even healthcare use. This underscores the importance of making sustainable and ethical organizational choices, such as where to hold a conference, without absolving environmental accountability in other ethical calculations. Many organizations in academic and clinical medicine need to make drastic alterations in their practices and policies to effectively mitigate carbon. While the burden is not only on bioethics alone, the expectation that it *should be* remains.

KEYWORDS

climate change, environmental bioethics, organizational ethics, sustainable conference

My colleagues in the Netherlands, Rieke van der Graaf, Karin Jongmsa, Martine de Vries, Suzanne van de Vathorst, and Ineke Bolt,¹ have done well to voice ethical concerns over the decision of the IAB to host the next WCB in Qatar.² It was an announcement that certainly shook the delegates who attended the previous congress in Basel in 2022, with reverberations continuing months after. Indeed, where the moral evaluation of host countries for an ethics conference—particularly one that focuses on bioethics—is up for debate, no country is above reproach. Previous congresses, including the one in Switzerland, could be subject to a number of

ethical criticisms, such as violation of refugee, migrant, and LGBTI rights, as well as discrimination.³ Nonetheless, ethical evaluation of conferences and their host country is increasingly part of personal and professional integrity in the academic community, especially around the topic of climate, carbon impact of conferences, and sustainability.⁴

Medical doctors were among the first to point out the carbon impact of conferences. In 2007, the then-editor of the *British Medical Journal*, Fiona Godlee, and professor of epidemiology and population health, Ian Roberts, wrote an editorial stating that “doctors must lead

¹van der Graaf, R., Jongmsa, K., van de Vathorst, S., de Vries, M., & Bolt, I. (2023). The ethics of ethics conferences: Is Qatar a desirable location for a bioethics conference? *Bioethics*, 37(4), 319–322.

²International Association of Bioethics. (2022). *Selection of Qatar to host the 2024 WCB*. <https://iabioethics.org/2024-congress>

³Amnesty International. (2022). Amnesty International Report 2021/22: The State of the World's Human Rights (pp. 351–353). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/4870/2022/en/>

⁴Callister, M., & Griffiths, M. (2007). The carbon footprint of the American Thoracic Society meeting. *American Journal Of Respiratory And Critical Care Medicine*, 175(4), 417.

by example in reducing the carbon footprint of medical conferences.”⁵ Drawing on earlier studies on the carbon impact of the European Respiratory Society and the American Thoracic Society annual conferences, authors indicated that an online meeting would save carbon from transportation, thus reducing climate change health hazards and saving lives. Some academic organizations have enacted initiatives for more sustainable conferences, including the American Philosophical Association,⁶ whilst others—like the European Astronomical Society—have begun the work of carbon calculation accompanied by calls for more sustainable conferences.⁷ It is fitting that this dialogue has entered the biomedical community in such a prominent outlet as *Bioethics*, even though the topic has been discussed by the members of the American Society of Bioethics and Humanities Environmental Bioethics affinity group for many years.

Conferences *should* be more sustainable. To this end, the recent IAB call for Expressions of Interest in hosting the 18th World Congress of Bioethics in 2026 specifically includes a “commitment to minimizing the event’s carbon footprint by offering shared transport, accommodations near the conference facility, sustainable food options and packaging, and other innovations demonstrating environmental stewardship” as a consideration for selecting the host location.⁸ These developments at the Board level are undoubtedly influenced by the work that IAB scholars have been doing, particularly in the Environmental Bioethics⁹ and Public Health Ethics Networks.¹⁰

Beyond this, Nancy Jecker and Vardit Ravitsky note other strategies for a more sustainable WCB in their response, which include a virtual option.¹¹ As the American Philosophical Association has noted, having a virtual option *in addition to* a physical option does expand the carbon impact of the conferences.¹² But this assumes that all attendees would attend virtually and in person and does not account for the net carbon savings of those who only attend virtually, especially when those who may choose this option would have the longest commutes. Even if the carbon of a hybrid conference is higher overall, the trade-off in expanded accessibility, particularly for those with mobility issues, financial constraints, and other factors may be “worth” the carbon. Justice is multifaceted and environmental sustainability is one among many values that needs to be considered.

As suggested by the initial article by van der Graaf, Jongsma, de Vries, van de Vathorst, and Bolt, attention to the carbon impact of conferences—and, perhaps, any country that a person might travel to for business or pleasure—are only one small part of environmentally responsible citizenship, especially for those trained in ethics and committed to health—thus their call to have the IAB “draft climate statements urging the government of Qatar for change.”

Beyond this, both bioethics as a discipline and bioethicists as individuals need to interrogate their personal environmental choices.¹³ For instance, “a person’s reproductive choices must be considered along with his (sic) day-to-day activities when assessing his ultimate impact on the global environment” since no individual measures can offset the carbon impact of even one biological child in many countries, for instance, the United States.¹⁴ This fact has relevance not only for how bioethicists assess biomedical technologies that are developed and used, such as fertility-enhancing procedures,¹⁵ but also for individuals as they trade off values in life, including sustainability, biological reproduction, and duties to others.

To this end, some ecological choices are more obvious targets of ethical scrutiny—diet and travel—while others appear sacrosanct, like reproduction and even healthcare use.¹⁶ This underscores the importance of making sustainable and ethical organizational choices, such as where to hold a conference, without absolving environmental accountability in other ethical calculations, particularly for bioethicists and clinicians who participate in the carbon-intensive healthcare industry.¹⁷

At the same time, and along with these lines, the other ethical considerations raised by the debate in this *Bioethics* issue remain. On these points, I agree with the concerns raised by van der Graaf, Jongsma, van de Vathorst, de Vries, and Bolt and addressed by Ghaly, El Akoum, Afdhal,¹⁸ Jecker, and Ravitsky.¹⁹ However, contextualization, in relationship to sustainable countries and university travel policies vary widely across the globe.

In the Netherlands, we are fortunate to have the Green Health Care Deal, which “sets out agreements to reduce the sector’s impact on the environment, by cutting carbon emissions, for instance.”²⁰ On the other hand, the Dutch healthcare industry accounts for 8.1% of the country’s total national carbon, the highest percentage of any country to date.²¹

⁵Roberts, I., & Godlee, F. (2007). Reducing the carbon footprint of medical conferences. *BMJ*, 334(7589), 324–325.

⁶American Philosophical Association. (2022). *The APA 2 + 1 campaign: An achievable step towards mitigating North American philosophers’ climate impacts*. <https://www.apaonline.org/news/news.asp?id=610518>

⁷Burtscher, L., Barret, D., Borkar, A. P., Grinberg, V., Jahnke, K., Kendrew, S., Maffey, G., & McCaughrean, M. J. (2020). The carbon footprint of large astronomy meetings. *Nature Astronomy*, 4(9), 823–825.

⁸International Association of Bioethics. (2023). *Call for ‘Expressions of Interest’ in hosting the 18th World Congress of Bioethics in 2026*. <https://iabiethics.org/call-for-2026>

⁹International Association of Bioethics. (2023). *Environmental bioethics*. <https://iabiethics.org/environmental-bioethics-1>

¹⁰International Association of Bioethics. (2023). *Public health ethics network*. <https://iabiethics.org/public-health-ethics-1>

¹¹Jecker, N., & Ravitsky, V. (2023). The ethics of bioethics conferencing in Qatar. *Bioethics*, 37(4), 323–325.

¹²Philosophers for Sustainability. (n.d.) *The APA 2 + 1 campaign: An achievable step towards mitigating North American philosophers’ climate impacts*. <https://www.philosophersforsustainability.com/apa-2-plus-1-campaign/>

¹³Richie, C. (2020). Climate change related health hazards and the academic responsibility of evangelical bioethicists. *Ethics & Medicine*, 36(3), 175–188.

¹⁴Murtaugh, P., & Schlax, M. (2009). Reproduction and the carbon legacies of individuals. *Global Environmental Change*, 19(1), 14–20.

¹⁵Richie, C. (2015). What would an environmentally sustainable reproductive technology industry look like? *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 41(5), 383–387.

¹⁶Richie, C., Kesselheim, A., & Jones, D. (2023). Climate change and the prescription pad. *The Lancet*, 401(10372), 178–179.

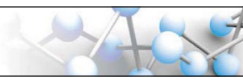
¹⁷Pichler, P.-P., Jaccard, I., Weisz, U., & Weisz, H. (2019). International comparison of health care carbon footprints. *Environmental Research Letters*, 14(6), 064004.

¹⁸Ghaly, M., El Akoum, M., & Afdhal, S. (2023). Bioethics and the thorny question of diversity: The example of Qatar-based institutions hosting the World Congress of Bioethics 2024. *Bioethics*, 37(4), 326–333.

¹⁹International Association of Bioethics, op. cit. note 9.

²⁰Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. (n.d.). *More sustainability in the care sector*. <https://www.government.nl/topics/sustainable-healthcare/more-sustainability-in-the-care-sector>

²¹Richie, C., et al., op. cit. note 16.



Dutch universities are also leading in sustainable travel policies. Leiden University “has decided that travelling by train is the standard mode within a radius of 500 kilometres or a travelling time of six hours or less”²² and TU Delft promotes “online rather than in-person meetings, using trains for relatively short distances in Europe (up to 8 h of travel, or less than 700 km distance) and carbon compensation for long-haul flights.”²³ Utrecht University²⁴ and Erasmus University Rotterdam²⁵ also have sustainable travel policies.

Local travel options, when possible, are important for all scholars, even those in oppressive countries and varying the location of academic conferences allows for greater participation from those who might have fewer opportunities, or indeed, good environmental reasons, not to travel extensively. For now, Qatar is not linked with other Gulf States by train, but inter-country metro options are available.

To be sure, many organizations in academic and clinical medicine need to make drastic alterations in their practices and policies to effectively mitigate carbon. While the burden is not only on bioethics alone, the expectation that it *should be* remains. Climate change is still a bioethics problem.²⁶

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

At the 2022 WCB open session business meeting, Dr Richie suggested that the conference could be made more sustainable.

Her suggestions were received and the Board invited her to speak on paths toward a more sustainable IAB in 2023. She received no compensation for this. Partly as a result of this education, some strategies have been implemented as referenced in the Jecker and Ravitsky article. Richie is the former Head of the American Society of Bioethics and Humanities Environmental Bioethics affinity group (2019–2022).

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²²Leiden University. (n.d.). *Mobility—Business travel*. <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/dossiers/the-sustainable-university/sustainable-campus/mobility>

²³TU Delft. (n.d.). *Sustainability, Sustainability—Mobility—International business travel*. <https://www.tudelft.nl/en/subsites/sustainability/themes/mobility>

²⁴Utrecht University. (n.d.). *Sustainable travel*. <https://www.uu.nl/en/organisation/sustainable-uu/travel-differently>

²⁵Erasmus University Rotterdam. (2023). *A greener campus and more education about sustainability*. <https://www.eur.nl/en/news/greener-campus-and-more-education-about-sustainability>

²⁶Macpherson, C.C. (2013). Climate change is a bioethics problem. *Bioethics*, 27(6), 305–308.