

Minimising the impact of aviation emissions: what way forward?

An expert meeting aiming to lift off sustainable academic travelling

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“Philosophical perspective on compensation”

by Prof dr Marc Davidson

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Biography:

Marc Davidson holds an endowed professorship ‘Philosophy of sustainable development from a humanistic perspective’ at the ICIS research institute of Maastricht University and is lecturer at the University of Amsterdam. He holds a PhD in both physics and philosophy. Between 1994 and 2011, he worked at the economics department of the Dutch environmental policy consultancy CE Delft, where he investigated the external costs of aviation and other transport modes, and economic policy instruments for internalization. Reports for the European Commission contributed to the inclusion of aviation in the European Emission Trading Scheme. Marc’s present work and interest lie at the crossroad of ethics, economics and ecology. He published on intergenerational justice, discounting in climate cost-benefit analysis and the fair national and international allocation of the burdens of climate policy.

Abstract:

Science is an international endeavor and consequently scientists fly around the globe to do research, give lectures and meet each other at congresses and workshops. At the same time, scientists – just as other groups in society – have a responsibility to reduce their contribution to climate change. Compensating greenhouse gas emissions resulting from academic flights by offsetting mechanisms appears a viable option. Examples of such offsets are paying for planting trees, investment in renewable energy or buying and annihilating emission rights from the European emission trading scheme. At closer inspection, however, it is unclear whether such compensation can really justify the act of flying, in other words that the ‘good’ act of compensation cancels the ‘bad’ act of the flight. The reason is that the act of flying and the act of compensation can be performed separately and therefore should be judged independently. If planting trees or investment in renewable energy is good to combat climate change, we do not need to fly to start doing so. As the philosopher Brian Barry stated in *Liberty and Justice* (1991): “if you paid for the realignments of a dangerous highway intersection and saved an average of two lives a year, that would not mean that you could shoot one motorist per year and simply reckon on coming out ahead”. Does that mean that all academic flights are ‘immoral’? No. In an ‘ideal’ society greenhouse gas emissions will not be reduced to absolutely zero. It requires the application of ‘shadow prices’ for carbon emissions to calculate whether particular academic flights are justifiable or not.