

THE TRAVELING URBAN SUSTAINABILITY RESEARCHER: ADDRESSING A CONFLICTUAL TOPIC

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ABSTRACT

Research-related business travel occupies a pivotal position in the climate change discourse. While it significantly contributes to universities' greenhouse gas emissions, it also underpins scientific progress, academic identity, and the production of socially relevant knowledge. For instance, ETH Zurich reported in 2019 that around half of its total emissions stemmed from travel-related activities. Yet travel remains central to institutional exchange and to advancing urban sustainability research, generating inherent tensions within climate protection efforts in academia.

This presentation asks: how can scientific exchange and international collaboration be made more climate-friendly without compromising the quality and reach of research on climate and sustainability? Drawing on the Karlsruhe Real-world Lab for Sustainable Climate Protection (KAR-LA, 2021–2024), the study explores strategies for climate-friendly academic travel through collaborative workshops, emissions calculations, and sustainability assessments.

A key challenge identified concerns implicit justice dimensions of travel reduction policies. Early-career researchers, in particular, worry about career disadvantages, often voicing these concerns through emotional narratives rather than systematic critique. This reluctance can hinder experimentation with socio-technical innovations for reducing emissions.

Findings reveal a gap in the literature: while guidelines for sustainable academic travel exist, structured, justice-oriented approaches are lacking. To address this, the project proposes a multidimensional framework that (a) incorporates intra- and intergenerational justice via a travel reflection tool based on the IKONE sustainability framework; (b) identifies potential lines of conflict; and (c) develops context-specific, equity-informed solutions.

By presenting this framework, the paper advances climate-friendly and conflict-sensitive models for urban research that are both environmentally effective and socially equitable.