

IASS-Blogpost

Datum: 20.10.2017
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Projekt: 11310 SR

[Dachzeile]

Is it Still OK to Fly?

Despite the fact that every single plane journey compounds climate change, many people still decide to fly. False incentives are to blame, says Katharina Beyerl.

I was recently asked to answer the question “Is it still OK to fly?” for a TV programme – in just ten sentences. It is, of course, impossible to cover all aspects of this complex issue in such a short text, but the main points can be summarised in the following ten paragraphs.

A statistic quoted on German radio (Deutschlandfunk) last autumn has stuck in my mind: a return flight from Germany to New York releases about one ton of carbon dioxide (CO₂) into the atmosphere per passenger. In absolute terms, that means that each and every one of those passengers is responsible for the loss of three square metres of Arctic sea ice.

Even when we know deep down that we shouldn't fly, flying is a normal part of life for many people. Travelling by plane is relatively affordable and easy to organise – all it takes is a few clicks of a mouse. When deciding whether or not to fly, we are usually guided by short-term interests. Even people who are well aware of the CO₂ emissions caused by each flight, and can gauge the impact of that on the climate, fly anyway – despite their qualms of conscience.

So flying is a classic example of a commons dilemma. In the short term, the individual passenger stands to gain, but in the long term we all suffer – from the effects of climate change. Nobody actually wants these negative consequences, but we often knowingly accept them. Given the vast numbers of people who board planes every day, the choices we make as individuals don't seem to make a difference, and it's easy to hide behind that argument.

Once emitted, the CO₂ remains in the atmosphere for several hundreds of years, contributing not just to the greenhouse effect and sea-level rise, but also to ocean acidification and coral

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Zitation: Beyerl, Katharina (2017): Is it Still OK to Fly? – IASS-Blogpost, 20.10.2017.

URL: <https://www.iass-potsdam.de/en/blog/2017/20/it-still-ok-fly>



bleaching. While there are projects to offset the emissions released per flight, their effect is very minimal.

The development of more fuel-efficient aircraft will not solve the problem in the near future, since passenger numbers are also on the rise. And other technologies to tackle climate change are not unproblematic: various measures to either remove CO₂ from the atmosphere and store it or reflect sunlight away from the Earth to counteract global warming are often referred to collectively as climate engineering. If those technologies were ever to be implemented on a large scale, they would probably lead to additional problems with regard to governance and unforeseen ecological side effects. So they too are not the answer in the short to medium term.

But the question of whether it is still ok to fly has to be approached from the broader perspective of our modern way of life. Like so many activities, flying is part and parcel of a global economic system that encourages and promotes lifestyles that adversely affect the basis of existence on our planet in the long run. At the same time, this economic system creates wealth. So despite our best intentions and attitudes, we continue to make unsustainable decisions because our daily lives are oriented towards short-term needs. The global interdependencies of production and investment are also complex and not always easy for the individual to understand. That is a barrier to sustainable behaviour. For change to happen, sustainable choices need to become the norm: easy to implement, inexpensive and accessible. That's often not the case today.

For this reason, we need a global transformation of our business practices towards the preservation of the common good and the implementation of sustainable alternatives, which should be more lucrative than environmental destruction and social exploitation. In its current report, the Club of Rome describes some promising approaches to such a transformation.

A societal transition to sustainable lifestyles may seem somewhat fanciful given current conditions. But it could work: Since many global problems are caused by human actions, our actions can also contribute to solving those problems.

Each individual on this planet is, in their private and professional capacities, a decision-maker. That means that decisions consistent with a sustainable way of life are possible at all levels – in politics, in business, in our locality, and in our own homes. Societal dialogue, role models, and a sound education play an important role not only in raising awareness of problems, but also in finding attractive solutions and implementing them together.

To sum up, there is no simple answer to the question of whether it is still OK for us to fly. Global mobility is increasingly integral to our way of life, and we live in a world where cooperation and communications across borders are essential. But bearing in mind the ecological effects of our travels, we should consider whether each individual flight is strictly necessary and explore more sustainable alternatives. The same is true for other consumer choices, be they in relation to food, clothing, or consumer electronics. The list is long. Change depends on two things: the decisions of individuals and circumstances conducive to their implementation.



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