A summary of the "Sustainable travel in the UN" report

What is sustainable travel?

Sustainable travel occurs when the environmental, social and economic impact of transport is minimized, without negatively affecting the ability of the organization to deliver its mandate. Sustainable travel includes not only environmental, but also economic and social considerations, including health and safety.

What's the impact of travel within the UN?

For most UN organizations travel is the major source of greenhouse gas emissions, in some cases contributing over 90 % of their total emissions. For the UN as a whole, travel is responsible for 49% of annual greenhouse gas emissions and costs over 1 US$ billion per year.

What are the costs of travel?

Visible costs are the more obvious costs associated with travel, such as ticket costs, daily subsistence allowance (DSA) and terminal expenses. However, there are also hidden costs such as *staff time* (lost productivity during travel), *environmental costs* and hundreds of thousands of dollars that are spent in *purchasing offsets* for journeys that must be undertaken. Those organisations that do not offset also risk the potential *reputation cost* if they are not seen to be behaving in an environmentally responsible manner. Finally, the impact on *work-life balance* of long days, nights and work on weekends can lead to stress, less work satisfaction, and ultimately less motivated and less productive staff.

How can more sustainable travel be achieved?

Travel less: E.g. replace missions with on-line communication, reduce the number of staff travelling for the same meeting, use local staff and allow staff to stay at the destination in between meetings.
Travel more efficiently: E.g. use more efficient modes of travel (e.g. go by train instead of flying), travel in economy instead of business class and give preference to airlines with modern aircrafts and direct routes.

How can the need for travel be reduced?

Establishing travel reduction targets helps to ensure effective screening and approval processes are used before a decision to travel is made. Training and incentives for staff to communicate the need to reduce travel will help ensure targets are met. Other ways to reduce the need for travel include:
- Reducing the number of participants in the same meeting
- Making use of local staff
- Bundling travel
- Replacing travel with e-communication
- Using awareness raising to encourage staff to travel less
- Removing incentives to travel

How can travel be more efficient?

When travel is unavoidable there are often ways in which travel can be made more efficient by:
- Travelling by train instead of air.
- Travelling in economy class instead of business class.
- Allowing staff travelling economy class, when entitled to business class travel, to stay one extra day with full daily subsistence allowance (DSA) for rest purposes.

- Providing staff with access to business lounges at the airport.
- Providing staff healthcare incentives e.g. free or discounted access to health clubs or gyms.
- Recognising staff who have voluntarily and consistently travelled in economy class when entitled to business class.
- Giving preference to airlines with modern aircraft fleets.
- Giving preference to the most direct route
- Informing travellers of the climate footprint of their travel.
- Setting emissions reductions targets for travel agents, and
- Maintaining efficient ground transport through proper maintenance of vehicles, responsible driver behaviour, using quality fuels, installing emission control technologies and making use of advanced vehicles and fuels.

What role can offsets play?

Climate neutral travel means that there is no climate footprint from travel. This is virtually impossible to achieve since almost all modes of transport will generate some greenhouse gas emissions. The UN Climate Neutral Strategy requires all UN organizations to consider purchasing offsets.

For organizations which have decided to become climate neutral, the easiest approach is to keep track of the accumulated greenhouse gas emissions of all travel over a year and then purchase offsets in one go. This could also include purchasing offsets for emissions from other sources e.g. electricity use.

What should a Sustainable Travel Strategy include?

1. A policy statement on the mission of the organization to reduce the environmental impact from travel.
2. Decisions on how reduced travel / more efficient travel will be achieved.
3. Information on how decisions will be implemented. This may refer directly to the travel planning and approval process, or to associated areas, e.g. upgrade ICT to provide alternatives to travel.
4. Someone should be named responsible for implementing the strategy; they should be given a budget, deadlines and support by other staff.
5. Monitoring and reporting is important in tracking how travel patterns evolve as a result of the strategy. Reporting should be done both internally and externally. Internally to allow staff to take pride in the success, and externally to show stakeholders that the organization is walking the talk.

How should emissions be monitored?

Owing to the different type of activities undertaken by each UN organisation and the changing size and operation of each organisation from year to year, an organisation should only measure themselves against their previous year's performance, and not against other organisations. Each organisation should monitor its climate footprint by measuring:
1. Total greenhouse gas emissions. This provides the total climate footprint without any consideration of the volume of activities in the organization.
2. Greenhouse gas emission per kilometer travelled (as an average for all travel undertaken). This provides an indication of the efficiency of travel undertaken, no matter how many tickets have been issued.
3. Number of tickets issued per staff. This provides an indication of to what extent the relative volume of travel has been reduced, regardless of how (i.e. less missions, missions replaced by e-communication, etc.)

To carry out these measurements the following information will need to be collected:
1. The total amount of greenhouse gas emissions from travel (t CO_2 eqv),
2. The total distance travelled (km), and
3. The number of staff in the organization (persons).

For further information please read the full report: Sustainable travel in the United Nations.