

# Doing academic conferences differently: enhancing ecological and social sustainability

Tourism Research Centre Symposium: Innovative Practice in Business Events  
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**LINCOLN**  
UNIVERSITY  
TE WHARE WĀNAKA O AORAKI



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# Pepeha

Tēnā koutou katoa

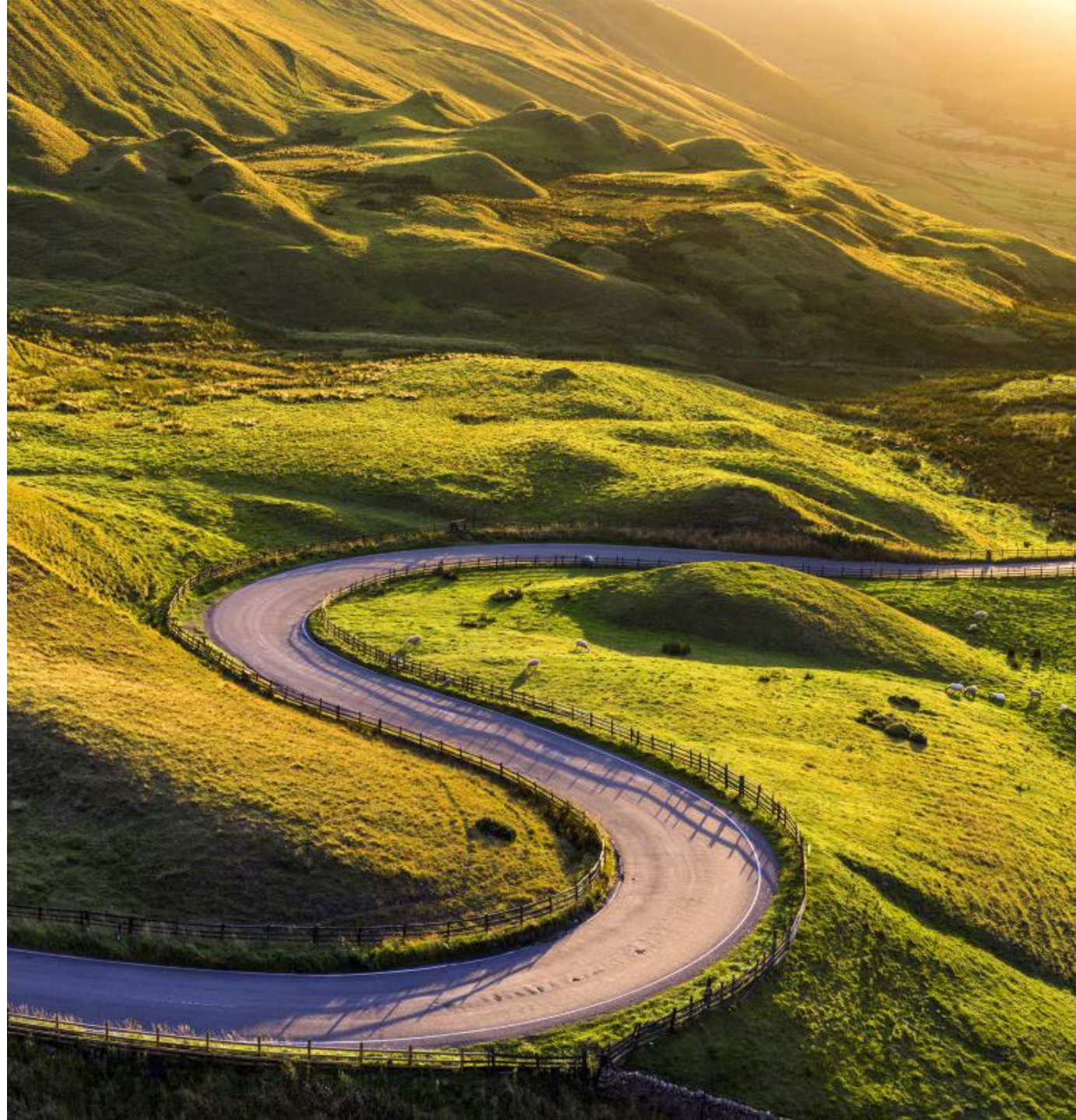
Ko Kōtirana te whakapaparanga mai

Ko Paewhenua te whenua tupu

Ko Ōtepoti te kāinga

Kei Waikirikiri au e noho ana

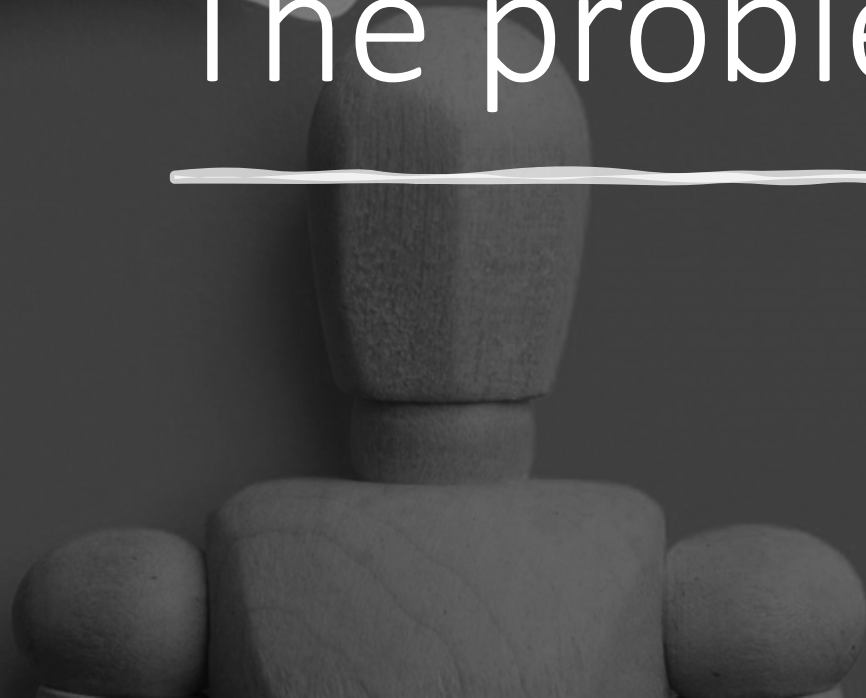
Ko Trudie Walters ahau





The problem

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# Academic conferences...

- Important for career progression
- Traditional in-person conferences = both ecologically and socially unsustainable
- To address this we need to start 'doing conferences differently'
- Fully online vs hybrid vs decentralised multi-hub approaches

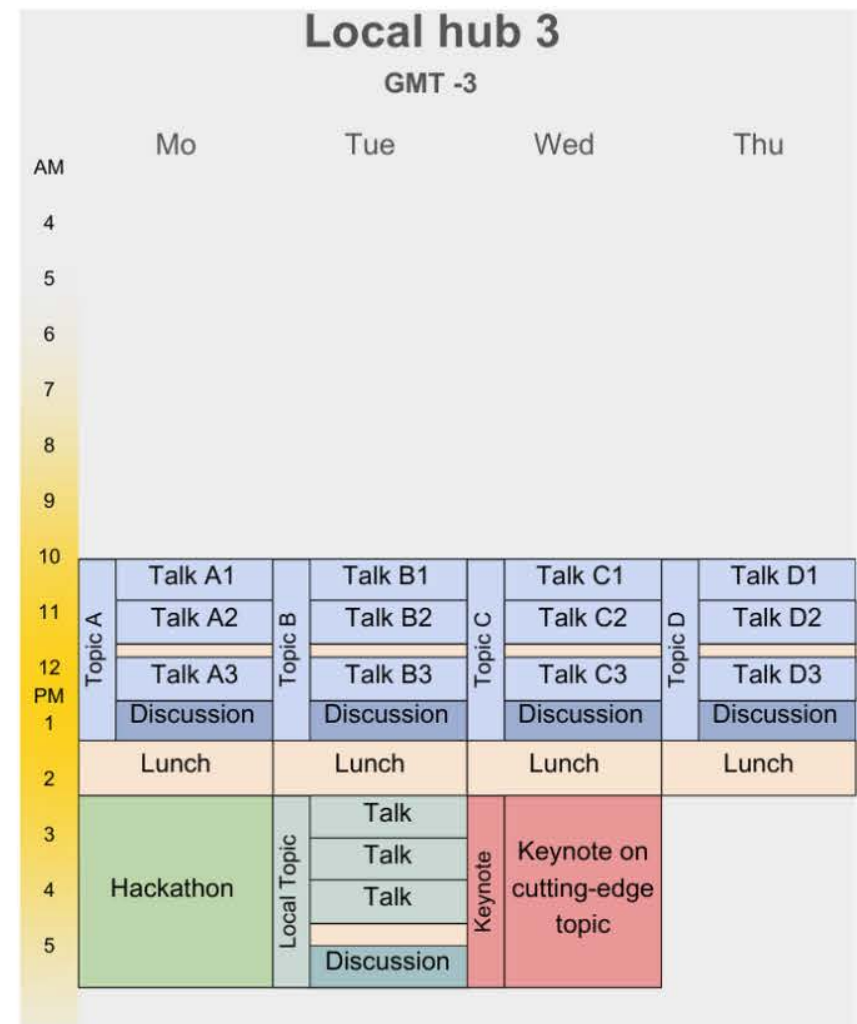
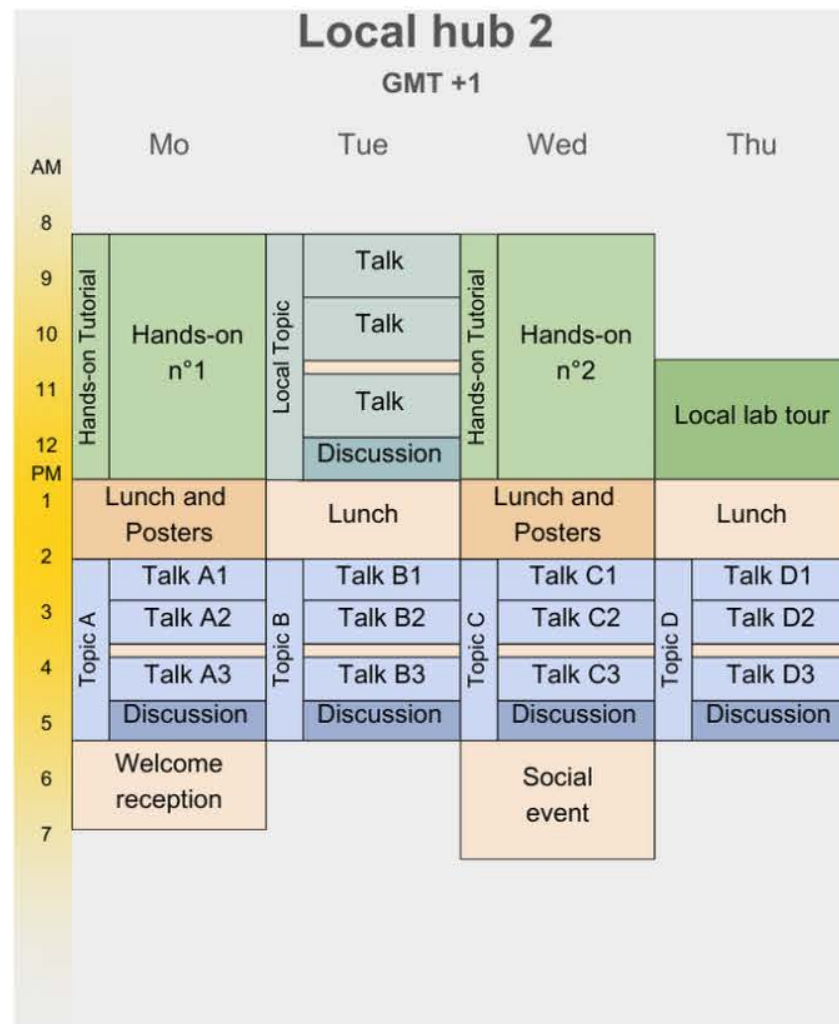
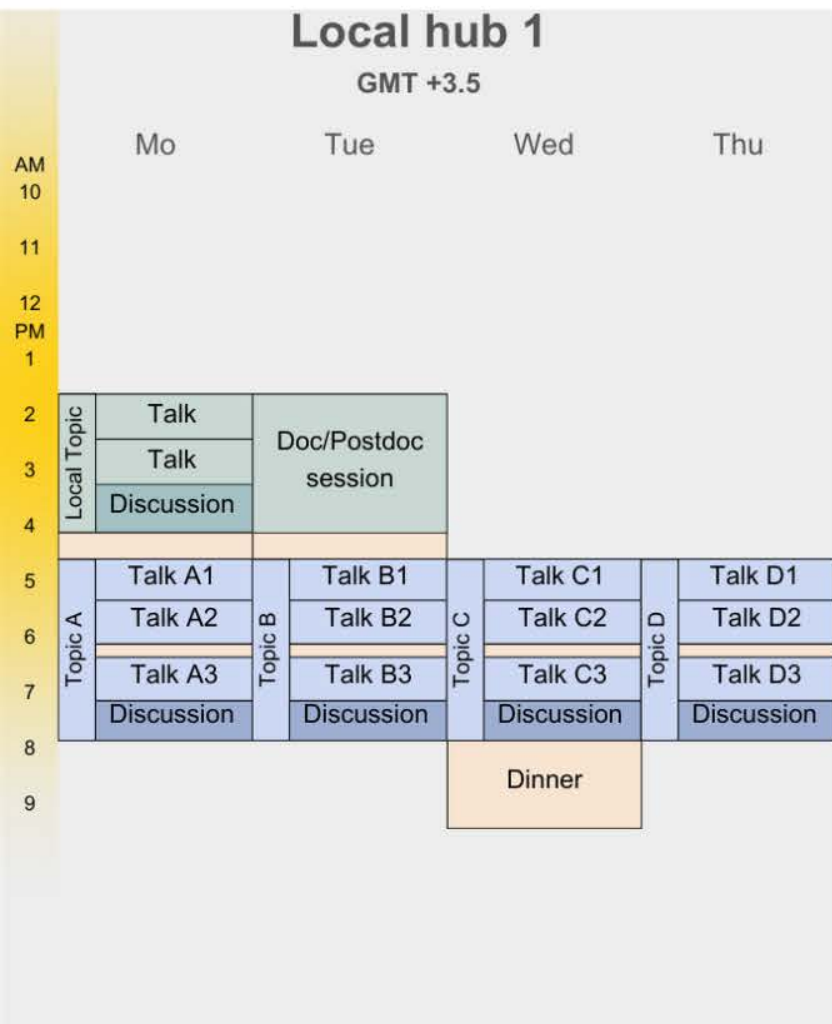


# The methods

Case study:  
CuttingGardens 2023



4 day neuroscience conference with 21 hubs: 727 in-person attendees, 300 online



Plenary talk

Tutorial

Local talk

Local Posters

Keynote

Plenary Discussion

Live Demo

Local discussion

Local break and socials

Social  
Sustainability

Ecological  
sustainability

Semi-  
structured  
interviews

Transport-  
related  
CO<sub>2</sub> emissions

Multi-hub  
vs  
fully online  
vs  
traditional  
in-person

phases of analysis was inductive, and all of revolutionary futures were recorded. The second phase provided a more nuanced analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally in this iterative process, the material in each of the themes was assessed for internal consistency and coherence.

### *Limitations*

This is an exploratory case study and, as such, carries some limitations. The nature of the event meant that limited windows of opportunity were available to interact with attendees during breaks between activities and performances. This meant that just 17 in-the-moment interviews with event attendees were able to be carried out. However, this does not diminish the validity of the information gained through those interviews as data saturation was reached.

### **Findings and discussion**

The findings are presented in three sections reflecting key elements of “revolutionary futures”: determining new paths, making the future less fearful and allowing more positive outcomes. A conceptual framework for assessing the outcomes of events to creating “revolutionary futures” is then presented.

# The findings

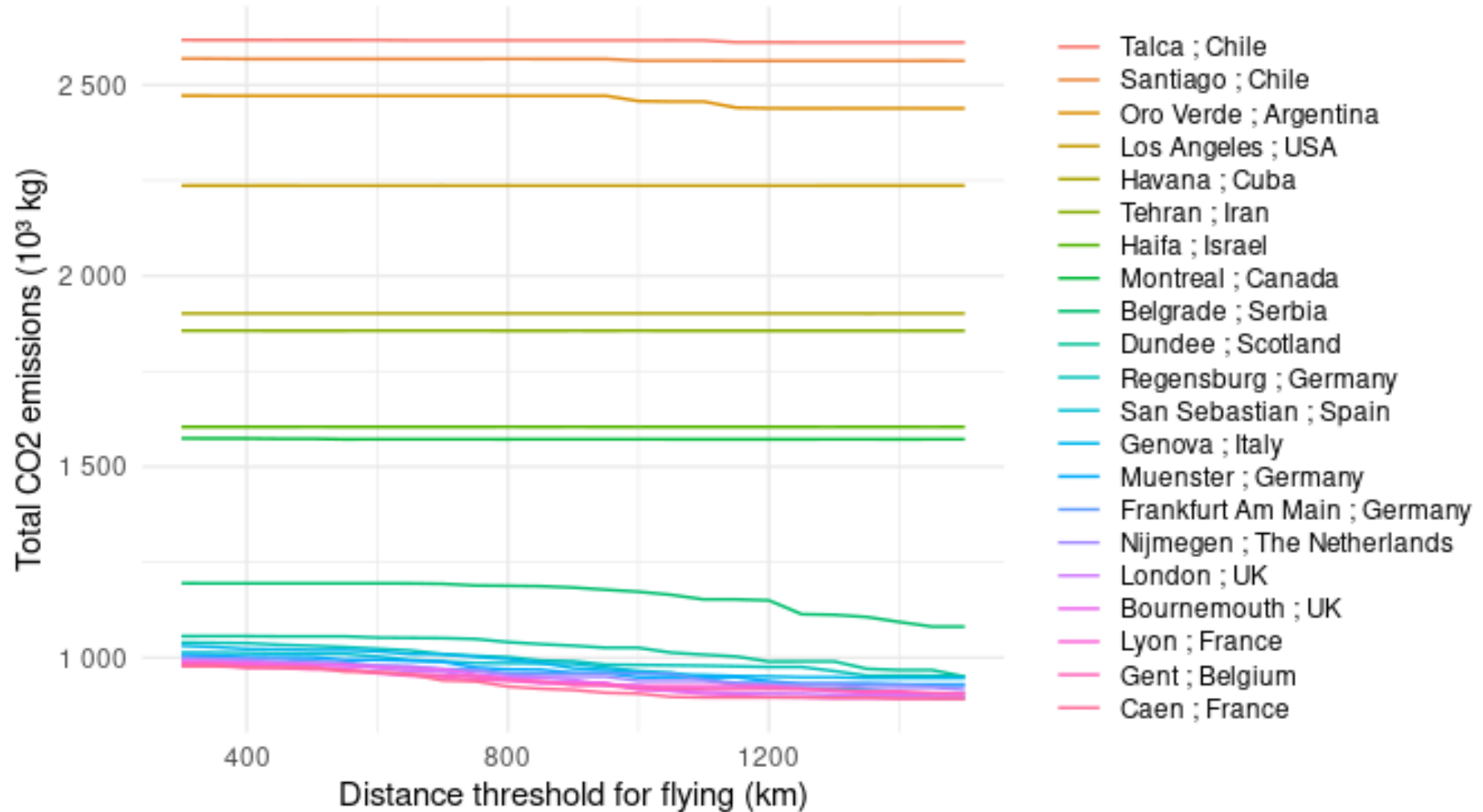
### *Determining new paths*

A broad interpretation of “new paths” was adopted, and applied to the empirical material. First, the event allowed participants to do things that had not been possible before. In this way, the event functioned as a facilitator for disabled participants to assert previously unattainable identity to others (Johnstone, 2004), as these two examples illustrate:

[This event] has provided Carrie with the opportunity to exhibit her photos for the first time, and she has been blown away by the positive feedback. (Carrie, disabled photographer, notes from in-the-moment interview)

Niina is performing in a drama as the lead role for her group, really looking forward to it but is a bit nervous as it's her first time performing in front of a big audience. (Niina, disabled actor, notes from in-the-moment interview)

# Ecological sustainability



Conference CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent emission simulations for the *Traditional In-Person* scenario.

# Ecological sustainability

Scenario	CO <sub>2</sub> emissions (10 <sup>3</sup> kg)	Standard deviation (10 <sup>3</sup> kg)
CuttingGardens 2023	21.973	1.980
Traditional In-Person (maximum: Talca, Chile)	2,617.748	1.737
Traditional In-Person (minimum: Caen, France)	924.356	2.604
Fully Online	11.300	NA

Comparison of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions for each scenario. (Source: Authors)

# Social sustainability



*Well, this this was interesting for us because if it were fully online, we still wouldn't have that kind of sense of a community gathering... in having it in person had some additional charms to it on the local level, but still at the same time feeling that you're part of a global community and also enabling participants who presented their work at the local [hub] to be visible by the global [audience]. (Interviewee #12)*



*First, I like the inclusivity like because I think there was a there was a [local hub] in Havana. As far as I know, and in South America, and usually these are places where rarely researchers come from [to an in-person conference]. (Interviewee #9)*



*A small 'reading' group has been formed, meeting monthly to discuss our work – thus creating lasting networking legacy, creating a community in [country]...we are not in a big group with a lot of money so for us is very important to create a network. (Interviewee #3)*

# The conclusion(s)

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SO WHAT

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# Ecological sustainability is better/worse

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- Transport-related CO2 emissions considerably lower for decentralised multi-hub conference than traditional in-person conference (mostly due to reduction in long-haul travel)
- But...CO2 emissions still twice as high as if conference had been held fully online
- Other sustainability initiatives not included in calculations, but valued by interviewees

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## Social sustainability is better

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- Benefits centred on ability to meet in person – vital for creating sense of community (global and local), feeling of belonging
- Decentralised multi-hub format = more accessible and inclusive
- Increased diversity of attendees = new perspectives, more equitable distribution of benefits of conference attendance

# Call to action

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- Decentralised multi-hub conferences are a proven, viable alternative to traditional in-person conferences
- No more excuses – this works!
- We need to demand the fairer, more just academia that we want
- BUT DO WE REALLY WANT IT...?



The end!

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Kia ora/thank you...any pātai/questions?