

## The Ethics of Ethics Conferences: Enhancing Further Transparency

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## The Ethics of Ethics Conferences: Enhancing Further Transparency

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We appreciate that the theme “ethics of ethics conferences” that we introduced in 2023 (Van der Graaf et al. 2023) was echoed by the previous and current presidents of the International Association of Bioethics and by some of its board members. What we did in our paper, from the perspective of the ethics of ethics conferences, was questioning, not “antagonizing” (Jecker et al. 2024), the choice for Qatar as a congress location. Since we wrote our commentary in *Bioethics* six papers have been published on this topic (Jecker et al. 2023, 2024; Richie 2023; Schuklenk 2023; Jecker and Ravitsky 2023; Ghaly, Akoum and Afdal 2023), including a series of principles for organizing and hosting ethics conferences as presented in the target article (Jecker et al. 2024).

At the same time, the initiative for debate has come primarily from current and past members of the board of the International Association of Bioethics (IAB) as well as from the current hosts of the upcoming World Congress of Bioethics (WCB) in Qatar. The debate has also gone into difficult directions, including associations with islamophobia, double standards and epistemic injustice. We dissociate ourselves completely from these directions in the debate. If the ethics of

ethics conferences is a topic that deserves widespread academic debate and progress, it needs broader endorsement among bioethicists and further reflection without speculations on “underlying factors” that allegedly motivated the debate on the ethics of ethics conferencing (Jecker et al. 2024). The peer commentary format of the *AJOB* hopefully expands the debate with new open-minded insights from a broader circle of bioethicists. In our contribution, we hope to clear some misunderstandings and to propose further directions for the discussion.

Some have asked why we have questioned site selection right now and not in relation to previous congress locations (Jecker et al. 2024, Jecker and Ravitsky 2023). However, sometimes personal, or societal change is essential to see blind spots and implicit biases. A debate on the ethics of ethics conferences is not unique for the upcoming WCB in Qatar. Inspired by our own academic work (Van der Graaf and De Vries 2022) as well as by increased societal debate on issues of justice and equity in health care and research over the past few years, early in 2022 we realized that conference ethics had been a neglected topic in the field of bioethics. For example, new policies in our

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institutes on reduction of carbon emissions required us to rethink our way of long-distance traveling (UU 2024). For the first time, most colleagues in our departments came to the WCB in Basel by train and not by plane. We witnessed visa ineligibility firsthand when a participant in one of the panel sessions that we organized was unable to obtain a visa and could not physically attend the WCB (Pai 2022). Moreover, although the Institute for Biomedical Ethics at the University of Basel generously offered to host the WCB, the congress was again in a high-income country. The fact that issues of justice and equity in relation to site selection have not been openly and explicitly addressed before in the bioethical community or may lead to feelings of unease is not a reason to not discuss them now (Van der Graaf et al. 2023).

The three issues that we highlighted in our original paper (Van der Graaf et al. 2023), respect for human rights, promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and minimizing climate impact, are not unique to ethics conferences nor to Qatar. However, at the announcement in Basel in July 2022 of Qatar as the next country for the WCB (Organizers Schweiz GmbH 2022), these issues were only glimpsed over, while simultaneously they were part of an intensive international and societal debate in relation to Qatar. Moreover, they are all ethical in nature (Van der Graaf et al. 2023). During the announcement, it became clear that intensive debate between the bidding institution and the IAB board itself had taken place about the choice of congress location (Organizers Schweiz GmbH 2022). Only after members increasingly voiced concerns, some more clarity was provided for the choice of Qatar at the IAB website (IAB website 2024).

As far as we have been informed, bids to host a WCB are usually very limited. Although there has been a longstanding wish within the IAB to organize a WCB in the Middle East, and the 2024 WCB has been announced as “first ever in the Arab region, a Muslim country, or the Middle East” (Jecker et al. 2023a), it is currently the bids that determine the choice of the congress location and not vice versa. The means to host a WCB may vary per institution. Thus far, institutes in high-income countries have hosted most WCBs. Moreover, the most recent WCBs have been held or are planned in richest countries in the world: Qatar (2024), Switzerland (2022), and the United States (2020) (IMF 2024).

How to proceed with the discussion on the ethics of ethics conferences? The formulation of principles for organizing and hosting ethics conferences in the target article was an important first step (Jecker et al. 2023a). In addition, we also need attention for fair

processes in academic (ethics) conferences. In line with Daniels’ and Sabin’s Accountability for Reasonableness (Daniels N, Sabin J.1997, Daniels 2000), a next step could be to ensure a fair bidding process, which implies that transparency and publicity are essential to clarify the decisions about site selection. As Daniels states: “key elements of fair process will involve transparency about the grounds for decisions; appeals to rationales that all can accept as relevant...and procedures for revising decisions in light of challenges to them” (Daniels 2000). To promote a fair bidding process, members could be engaged from the start. Especially when controversial sites are among the bidding institutions, members can voice their concerns upfront and find ways to mitigate them. It may be right, as Jecker et al. argue, that “the best way to address human rights abuses is not to shun places where they occur, but, where possible, to engage with local people, recognizing and supporting their capacity to determine for themselves how to better their society” (Jecker et al. 2024). But such decisions require upfront discussion with the members, especially when the conference attendees are expected to bring about societal change. Societal change will also require long-term strategic partnerships and involvement of international organizations with the expertise to effectively address human rights issues (UNDP 2024).

Furthermore, if the wish to hold future WCBs in thus far underrepresented regions is sincere, a funding model could be chosen that is less dependent on the financial means of the host institution(s) which are currently primarily to be found in resource rich countries. Long-term funding may secure bursaries for junior scholars and scholars from Low- and Middle-income countries, reimbursement for (dedicated) organizing personnel and the means to assist with visa applications or special travel needs for people with disabilities. Long-term funding also comes with long-term planning. A dedicated planning committee with fair representation of IAB members and fair representation of board members could help to determine the conference topic and the region where the WCB should take place for more than just a couple of years ahead.

Transparency is also essential regarding the actual diversity of attendance at the conference. Jecker et al. propose the principle of “leaving no one behind” to prevent nonattendance from people who do not feel safe to attend (Jecker et al. 2023). Although for some WCBs limited data are available (Voo, Wangmo, and Elger 2024), detailed information about country representation, levels of expertise or gender balance remains

absent, nor who participated online or in person. More data about the background of congress attendees can help us to gain more insight in fair representation over time. According to its constitution the IAB “fosters free, open and reasoned discussion of issues in bioethics” (IAB 2022). At the same time, freedom of expression may not be experienced in practice. People may self-censor their abstracts or withhold submissions if they do not feel free or safe to attend a conference (Clark et al. 2023). Online participation cannot prevent self-censoring because abstracts are still shared, and presentations recorded. Self-censoring is subtle and difficult to measure, especially in countries and regions where freedom of expression is under pressure. When we take open discussion seriously, attention should be given to the phenomenon of self-censoring.

Some international (ethics) conferences are already working with long-term funding and planning and they publish meeting reports with details about the countries of origin of the congress attendees (GFBR 2024). Nonetheless, transparency remains a delicate topic and currently takes place primarily at the discretion of the organizers.

## CONCLUSION

The ethics of ethics conferences has now entered the bioethical realm. We hope that this topic will find its way into a broad academic debate and reflection, not only for the choice of WCBs but also for other international academic ethics conferences. A transparent and public bidding process and transparent data about the backgrounds of congress attendees are among the necessary first steps to render site selection equitable.

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## Green Conferencing, Justice and the “Global South”

Sabine Salloch

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The IAB’s selection of the Qatar-based Research Center for Islamic Legislation & Ethics (CILE) for hosting the 2024 World Congress of Bioethics does not leave the international bioethics community untouched and is fueling an intensified process of criticism and self-reflection. Against the backdrop of the global character of bioethics discourses and in light of the political, cultural and socioeconomic diversity of healthcare contexts (and of bioethicists themselves) such a broad debate is strongly needed. It reaches far beyond issues pertaining to the “ethics of conferencing” but directly impacts on how we are academically approaching ethical challenges in healthcare. Jecker et al.’s (2024) “Proposed Principles for International Bioethics Conferencing” can be seen as another valuable input, hopefully prompting intensified international debates.

Whereas I agree with much of what the authors say, especially with the need for engaging more intensively with Muslim and Arab voices in bioethics, I see certain weaknesses in their arguments that need correction or—at least—addition. I would like to comment on two main aspects relevant to the Target Article, namely the depiction of Qatar being a country of the “Global South” and on the country’s emission of greenhouse gases. As we all know, a country’s degree of industrialization and its contribution to climate change are closely interrelated, so that I feel

justified to treat both issues as one topic. On the other side, I think that it is hard or impossible to weigh issues of global climate justice against the benefits of getting in touch with Islamic bioethics. My commentary therefore does not aim at a full judgment about the selection of Qatar as conference site but will focus on some isolated aspects. The final decision whether (and in which form) to participate in the conference must be left to individual bioethicists and to their professional judgment.

I do not want to hide that I was highly astonished reading: “Since 80% (11 of 16) of past World Congresses were in the Global North, selecting Qatar, a country in the Global South, helps correct this imbalance” (Jecker et al. 2024, 21). The concept of “Global South” attempts to group countries along the lines of socio-economic and political characteristics. It is not a geographic term. The concept was introduced approximately 30 years ago, is not least as a replacement for speaking of the “Third World” or the “Developing World.” Research in global studies, however, makes us aware that “Global South” is not just a term, but that it has a political weight. It is increasingly considered as a practice (than as a concept) that restructures global networks of power. “Global South” then appears as a “process that reflects, highlights, and potentially transforms dominant and subalternized positionalities” (Kloß 2017, 8).