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Comments

on the Wikimedia Affiliates Environmental Sustainability Covenant

Summary

Wikimedia Sverige appreciates this initiative, and wants to look into the possibilities of formally supporting it. This document contains comments and questions regarding the current content. It is produced by the staff, and includes general comments and questions. Potential issues might be raised at a later stage by the board, which needs to make any formal decision. Points are raised in order of priority, meaning that the first point under each headline is of the highest priority from the staff's end at Wikimedia Sverige.

On a general level, the document contains positive and uncontroversial recitals and commitments. We do, however, believe that environmental sustainability is a bit broader than what the document seems to suggest. We also think that the document could be streamlined and a bit more coherent.

We also wonder what the status of the document is, what an affiliate really commits to do, and how the covenant will, if at all, be updated. Furthermore, we wonder if there are any political motivations behind the covenant, or if it is meant to maintain the movement's political neutrality.

Comments

1. Environmental sustainability is more than carbon emissions

The covenant focuses on environmental sustainability. The recitals, however, only mention carbon emissions and carbon footprints. The action focuses on just a few areas, namely flight and energy consumption. Wikimedia Sverige initiated a large overhaul of environmental practices for Wikimania 2019 in Stockholm, wishing to organize a green event. We met with experts, and identified many areas where it would be possible to make the event more sustainable. This included food waste, limiting prints and handouts, reducing the use of

single-use plastics, prioritizing and promoting vegetarian food, etc. We believe such measures to be relatively low-hanging fruits, with a large impact on climate change but low impact on the events in themselves. The only mention of environmental sustainability around events is to promote remote events. We believe this to be a bit one-sided, not the least given that we – at times – need to meet.

2. The document goes into a lot of detail, in certain places

Parts of the document are very specific and descriptive. One example is the requirement that signatories only support the planting of native trees in uninhabited areas. It would make more sense to keep this level of detail in a best practices document, that can be evaluated regularly, based on best available research. Such a document should *not* exclude future technology.

Measure 1.1.4 ("travel policies that require compensation for the environmental cost of air travel") also seem to overlap with measure 1.4 (when engaging in carbon offset programs, supporting only the planting of native trees in uninhabited areas and not using offsets as an 'excuse' for their carbon emissions). To make the covenant more coherent, and not longer than needed, these points should arguably be merged into one.

3. There should be a point on evaluation and best practices

If the goal is to make it easy for affiliates who support the initiative, to promote and improve the work on environmental sustainability within the movement, it would be vital to develop documentation and best practices on what means are preferable. Such documentation could go into way more deal than what the covenant could and should in itself.

It would make sense to include, as a commitment in the covenant, that signatories pool resources to cover the cost of yearly evaluation and update of supporting material.

4. The covenant could preferably say something more on sustainable data centers

The second commitment mentions sustainable operation of the Wikimedia Foundation's data centers. We believe this to be a positive thing to include. Some important work has been done within the Wikimedia movement to reduce data usage by the consumers, and as such reducing the overall footprint. While we agree that affiliates should call for more sustainable operation of the WMF's data centers, we also believe that this work should be highlighted and strengthened, and that the WMF should take an external lead in the way towards a more sustainable data-driven world, while ensuring that the core educational mission is intact.

Questions

1. What is the status of this document?

It is currently unclear what kind of agreement this is. What is the timeframe of the covenant? Would an affiliate sign up for an indefinite term? What is the procedure for joining, and if – for whatever reason – an affiliate would want to leave, what is the procedure for leaving?

The covenant lists a series of commitments signatories agree to work according to, but what happens if an affiliate fails to follow up on its commitments? Are there any sanctions for failing to deliver? Or is it merely a symbolic act? If only symbolic, what are the ideas for how the document could be used?

2. Is the purpose of the document political alignment?

Most of the recitals and commitments are relatively uncontroversial, and do either entail commitment to reduce emissions, or commitments to support activities within the movement. The fourth recital, however, mentions a few concepts and notions, such as climate justice and "Most Affected People and Areas". These seem to be concepts and notions developed by political movements such as Friday for Future and Extinction Rebellion. Is this the purpose?

3. Who is most affected?

As touched upon in the previous question, the fourth recital mentions "Most Affected People and Areas". The final sentence of the first commitment states that "affiliates related to Most Affected People and Areas shall only have limited responsibilities in this regard, and shall receive support from other affiliates to meet them."

Who are "Most Affected People and Areas"? The Wikipedia article on climate justice mentions such groups as women, youth, older, poorer and racial minorities. Would that mean, for example, that an affiliate such as WikiWomen's User Group only has limited responsibilities? What would these limited responsibilities mean in that case? Would WikiWomen's User Group, to a higher extent, be allowed to take flights? Does recital 4, in turn, mean that an affiliate such as Wikimedia Sverige should carry the burden of WikiWomen's User Group, when it comes to reducing carbon emissions? While we do not believe this to be the idea of the authors of the covenant, it could be seen as a consequence of the way the document is formulated.

4. What does drastically limiting the number of flights mean?

The first point under the first commitment is relative. That caps should be put in place seem to suggest that a maximum number of flights should be introduced, somewhere below the current levels. But what difference does the "drastically" make? What is the benchmark affiliates should use? Is this up to the interpretation of the affiliate or someone else? How does, with wordings such as "drastically", the covenant ensure that all affiliates commit to the same level of engagement? Or is that not the purpose?

5. How will the document be updated?

If the need arose, what would be the procedure for updating the document? Is the wording in the document set in stone? Or what would otherwise the procedure be for changing parts of the provisions in the future? Will signatories make a common yearly overview, or will a signature be taken for future support no matter what happens with the document?

6. What do the affiliates commit to do on the platforms?

The third commitment is to support initiatives aimed at improving the coverage of the climate crisis on the Wikimedia projects. Would a signatory commit to supporting *any* initiative? Or when would an affiliate be able to refrain from giving support? Would affiliates need to give support to any initiator within the movement? Would Wikimedia Sverige need to support a South African initiative, to give an example? What would the ownership look like for this kind of support?

An alternative could be to state that “affiliates commit to invest in activities aimed at improving the coverage of the climate crisis”, or something along these lines.