



IYGU Report: Steering Committee Meeting

Weimar, March 4-5,
2011

Report to IYGU
Network

Benno Werlen

International Year of Global Understanding planning under way.

Report of the Weimar Meeting

The first meeting of the Steering Committee of the International Year of Global Understanding (IYGU) took place in the UNESCO World Heritage City of Weimar (Germany) on 4-5 March 2011. The opening session of the meeting was held at the Goethe National Museum.

The UN-IYGU is to be a comprehensive, transdisciplinary program aimed at mobilizing the world's sciences and humanities in a united effort to raise citizen awareness of local people's capacities to affect natural and social systems on a global scale. Simultaneously, the program is aimed at increasing local and regional pressure on policy makers to adopt global mitigation targets.

This first Steering Committee meeting was opened with a welcoming address by the president of IYGU, Ron Abler. The IYGU's director, Benno Werlen, gave a general introduction to the aims and goals program of the IYGU program. Thereafter, representatives of the ISSC (International Social Science Council), CIPSH (International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies), IHDP (the ISSC co-sponsored International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change), and IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) articulated their expectations regarding contributions to and results expected from the IYGU, as well their potential deliverables to achieve the IYGU's aims and goals.

In an extended intervention via Skype from South Africa, Heide Hackmann, Executive Director of the International Social Science Council (ISSC) first described what underlies the ISSC's support for the IYGU and then expressed the ISSC's expectations of the IYGU. In general, the IYGU is seen as one of the ISSC's key projects in the Council's new strategic focus on global environmental change (GEC) issues. According to the Executive Director, the IYGU fits perfectly into the ISSC's GEC working program and more general programmatic principles. She identified the following as major parts of this program: a) mobilizing the social sciences to research global change (in the framework of international initiatives of the new Alliance between ICSU, the ISSC and the Belmont Forum); b) broadening the social scientist network to keep pace with social scientific knowledge's growing importance in global change research; c) overcoming the global lack of substantial social scientific research funding by working on a funding proposal to be submitted to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA); and d) establishing a social knowledge agenda for global change issues on a global scale. All this effort will contribute to consolidating social scientific efforts with regard to global environmental change research on a broad and global scale. According to the Executive Director, the ISSC regards the IYGU in this light and expects the IYGU to become an important vehicle for delivering on these ambitions.

The IYGU's substantial focus on everyday activities as a possibility to highlight global change research anew, is regarded as its most important, and perhaps most attractive, aspect. A specific attraction of the ISSC's perspective is its focus on human agency, responsibilities, beliefs, and interests as they emerge across space and time. Focusing on the global consequences of local action should be a core issue not only for the IYGU but also for the social sciences as a whole, specifically in the context of global environmental change. Beyond this, the ISSC views the IYGU as an important strategic vehicle to deliver a core set of four imperatives:

- Taking mainstream social sciences to the heart of global change research. The IYGU stresses that global change research is a core part of social sciences and not something peripheral, that social scientific knowledge is central to this issue, and will therefore help the social sciences to use their voice in that crucial scientific endeavor.
- Fully integrating the research of the social sciences' different parts and disciplines, as well as integrating social and natural scientific perspectives to achieve a cross-disciplinary approach to global change research.
- Attaining a truly global perspective in order to tackle a global problem from a multiple of socio-geographical and cultural perspectives, thus avoiding the imposition of one part of the world's models, rules, and concepts on the others. With this effort, the IYGU is expected to mobilize and foster such a global social scientific effort that it will build capacity for real international knowledge production.
- Bringing together stakeholders, users, and decision makers to co-design and co-produce knowledge on global change issues. The IYGU can therefore be regarded as a substantial contribution to implementing the paradigm shift to true trans-disciplinary, a shift from "Science for Society" to "Science with Society."

Adama Samassekou, President of the International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies (CIPSH), not only guaranteed its full support for the IGU's initiative for an International Year of Global Understanding, but also its active involvement in the realization of this Year. The President emphasized the crucial importance of preserving cultural diversity in the globalization process and the need for a historical perspective when investigating this process. "We know that cultural and linguistic diversity is to the human society what biodiversity is to nature: the ferment, the linchpin of what I call our humanity," the president remarked. From this point of view, one of the IYGU's most relevant aspects in this respect could and should be seen in its contribution to the required paradigmatic shift from a Eurocentric approach to sustainability research and socio-cultural research in general to a polycentric vision of the world. In keeping with this thought, the CIPSH, together with UNESCO, is organizing a global Conference on the Humanities in the 21st century in 2012, which could support the IYGU's ambitions.

In respect of the IYGU ambition to support the ICSU's and the ISSC's Grand Challenge Program, the president of CIPSH stressed the centrality of understanding people's situations by respecting cultural diversities and the attitudes and behaviors regulated by specific rules in given societies and cultures. Man as a social being with a conscience shapes himself and his environment through his actions. Consequently, man's actions are also central in the damage done to the general biosphere balance. From the CIPSH's perspective, human actions, being socially and (especially) culturally embedded, should be seen as the center of all environmental problems – and therefore fully in line with the IYGU – as the focus of sustainability research. But – and this must be stressed at all levels of the IYGU design – understanding people's situation requires emphasizing their different traditions and the differences in their capacity for self-determination.

Vast rural populations' pauperization and the related precarious economies have to be taken into consideration in the demand for sustainable life forms. In other words, we need to clearly distinguish between the environmental situation in the northern (the gain for a few logic) and southern

hemispheres (the logic of the reproduction of exogenous models of environmental exploitation). Reference is needed to the International Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences' (UISSP) research activities to integrate a historical perspective, as is knowledge of the great historic transformations from the pre-Neolithic era to the present and the different forms of environmental adaptations. This knowledge is especially required to explain contemporary human/environment relations. On the whole, the CIPSH is highly interested in supporting what is seen as the core IYGU process: maintaining or even strengthening the diversity of societies, cultures, and languages reflected in a bottom-up approach and contributing to the process of globalization – by strengthening intercultural relations and maintaining cultural and linguistic pluralism – as a process of enrichment and not a process of standardization.

Anantha Duraiappah, the Director of the International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change (IHDP) emphasized the existing disconnections between sciences and policies. The IHDP's major potential contribution to the IYGU and that of the IYGU to the international community of scientists could be the potential to overcome this disconnection. Anantha Duraiappah identified assessing existing social scientific knowledge and making the dialogue accessible to (global) policy makers and other science and policy-related institutions beyond the ICSU and ISSC's reach as further key IHDP deliverables to the IYGU. The Director's critical review of the IYGU key features was a major contribution. In this respect, he insists on IYGU goals, deliverables, and outcomes being clearly formulated, especially so that the different policy makers can easily understand these. What has to be achieved by the end of the IYGU has to be clarified more effectively and transparently.

In addition, problems of equity in an inter- as well as intra-generational respect should to be placed right at the top of the IYGU agenda. This agenda should also focus on ways to achieve a better ecological footprint for humanity. Anantha Duraiappah stresses that talking about global understanding is fine, but that we need a stronger emphasis on key concepts such as freedom, choices, planetary boundaries, etc. to capture the relevant policy makers' attention. Furthermore, a clearer distinction should be made between global sustainability and global development. It should be clarified that both of them make a social transformation inevitable. Besides the clearer emphasis of these IYGU programmatic points, and the broadening of its program, the potentially major opportunity to improve the social sciences and the humanities' contributions to and impact on global change environmental research should be regarded as one of the IYGU's major expected contributions. The IYGU is – also in this respect - a great opportunity that should not be missed.

In the presentation given by Gordon McBean, Chair of the Science Committee for Integrated Research on Disaster Risk and a Convening Lead Author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on Climate Extremes, the central topic was how natural scientific findings and evidence can be integrated into the IYGU core issue: making the inter-connectivity between what people do locally and the implications globally understandable. Gordon McBean offered several examples of what the IYGU could draw upon to elaborate the different forms of inter-connections on the natural level, as well as at the intersection of the social and the natural, developing several very helpful guidelines for the elaboration of such case studies. He started out by approving of the basic IYGU idea to make the global understandable through local action, and transferred it to the principle of beginning to illustrate all types of socio-natural and local-global interconnectedness by means of a local and easily visible activity. He elaborated this idea, using the example of various forms of waste with examples from Canada. When garbage is left in a park, people locally are affected and the local community takes action. When the combustion of fossil fuels

is done, local-to-regional smog is created and more than 21,000 people die of respiratory diseases in Canada every year. Now actions need to be by regional and national governments. Responses to these actions can be quick and the benefits seen. However, that same combustion of fossil fuels creates greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, circle the globe in two to four years and becomes a global issue and affect the climate for decades to centuries. The emissions of greenhouse gases locally cause the enhancement of storms around the world and also by rising the sea level makes storm surges and tsunamis potentially more devastating. Thus, local actions create global issues for decades to come. Actions taken locally will have benefits locally and globally and now and into the future, but it is harder to see, as local citizens, the benefits and connectivity. There are interconnectedness between air pollution and climate change and between air pollution in general and respiratory diseases. By putting this regional constellation in a wider context, the importance of global understanding becomes apparent. Since the impacts of global climate change are dependent on community vulnerability there is a strong connectivity between social and natural issues.

Different types of vulnerability can be made better understandable as the consequence of human adaptation to natural conditions. We need to enable people to realize the kind of connectivity in space and time between these kinds of issues and to forge a true global understanding of their lives' embeddedness in bio-physical contexts. The same holds true for disasters, hazards, and related issues that can be objects of risk analysis and increasing capacity by showing ways of reducing vulnerability. For this reason, close cooperation with the social sciences and humanities is a high priority.

The Executive Director of the International Year of Planet Earth, Prof. Ed de Mulder, presented a stimulating overview of the IYPE planning strategies, implementation, and results, offering many useful insights for the ongoing process of formulating the IYU. Later, the project's gender issues, as well as its ethical and educational dimensions were also addressed prior to an extensive discussion of the scientific program's outline and core topics, with its outreach activities. The results of these discussions will be the object of further elaboration with the members of the scientific and outreach panel at the Jena meeting.

Altogether, this initial meeting successfully established the IYU's transdisciplinary nature: it explored ways of addressing the social sciences and the humanities' shortcomings in dealing with global change issues, as well as the need for natural scientists to understand that global climate change requires global social change. This very encouraging first step towards meeting one of the major challenges of humanity during the coming decades will be followed by a meeting of the Scientific Panel of the IYU in Jena, Germany, in mid-May.

Jena, April 2011