

International Year of Global Understanding in the age of global change

Initiative for an International UN-Year in the Making

On the weekend of 12-14 May 2011, the Steering Committee, the Scientific Committee and the Outreach Committee held a meeting chaired by the Executive Director Benno Werlen in Jena, the City of Science. In his brief welcome address, the Executive Director emphasised that the horrible events in Japan not only demonstrate how crucial global understanding has become under the current conditions, but clarify that a great deal of work remains to be done. **Natural and social scientists**, as well as scholars from the humanities have to make people understand that most such events are social rather than natural disasters. First and foremost, they are the outcome of inadequate knowledge and actions, and the consequences of actions. According to the Executive Director, these events demonstrate that we need to better integrate natural and social-scientific research, as well as insights from cultural sciences and the humanities. This is one of the main goals of the IGU Initiative for an International Year of Global Understanding in the age of global change.

The President of the International Geographical Union (IGU), Ron Abler, emphasised geography's historical legacy regarding global understanding through its important, if not crucial, contributions to the process of defining the time zones around the globe in the nineteenth century. Today, geography's high relevance is especially reflected by its competent integrated research, which is demonstrated by the IGU's membership of both the International Council of Sciences (ICSU) and the International Social Sciences Council (ISSC). According to Prof. Abler, with its social and natural scientific tradition, Geography is perfectly prepared to initiate an International Year with a strong focus on integrated research on sustainability.

Christoph Matschie, the State's Minister of Education, Science and Culture, welcomed the scientists who hailed from all five continents. He particularly emphasised the initiative's importance for intercultural understanding in a world in which we are all dependent on mutual cooperation and learning. He especially emphasised the number of challenges, such as hunger, climate change, sustainability and illiteracy, that can only be tackled globally. Global exchange and scientific collaboration are especially important in this context. The "International Year of Global Understanding" is extraordinarily important, because the sciences in the various countries are given a new platform within the United Nations that extends beyond their fields. This is a great opportunity:

Scientists will come together to discuss the great questions that humanity currently faces and find answers. That is why he truly welcomed the trans-disciplinary approach behind the 'International Year of Global Understanding'.

The participants at the meeting identified another key IYGU point and satisfied another requirement: A binding scientific programme was completed that is based on the guidelines for the 2014 UN theme year drafted in Weimar at the beginning of March. Both the Outreach Programme draft and the brochure draft have been completed, which will facilitate the application process towards the final UNESCO decision.

Decisive stimuli were received for the drafting of the scientific and outreach programmes – based on critical reflection of the guidelines drafted at the Weimar meeting –, particularly from the conference reports received from diverse fields such as national economy, geodesy and geophysics, sociology, solid state chemistry, nutritional sciences, social and cultural geography, physical geography, educational science, geology, linguistics, philosophy, archaeology and environmental sciences. These contributions and the subsequent substantial discussions offered the points of departure for the drafting of the programme brochure. The members responsible for the respective main subjects were identified, as was the constitution of the task forces. These members and task forces will submit their first results by the end of June 2011.

On the basis of these presentations, the catalogue of the IYGU scientific programme's central topics was critically revisited. The participants firstly agreed to have no more than five to seven programmatic topics. Secondly, it was decided to use commodity flows and flows of resources, as well as the geological/seismic aspects and the produced CO₂ emissions as cross-cutting topics to be integrated into the selected key topics. Thirdly, after a discussion with the representative of the International Cartographic Association, Georg Gartner, the meeting decided to integrate 'mapping'/'orienting'/'representing' as a cross-cutting topic. Fourthly, a similar decision was taken regarding the economic dimension 'investing'/'bargaining'/'earning' after a consultation with Reinhard Mechler, the IPCC expert on economic questions. After a longer and quite detailed discussion with Adama Samassekou, Luiz Oosterbeek and John Pickles – the chairpersons of the humanities' cultural aspects and topical fields –

, the meeting agreed to treat the cultural dimension ('believing'/'imagining'/'interpreting') similarly. The program's first development steps should therefore encompass the following topical fields and responsible principal scientists and members of the working groups:

'Eating'/'Drinking'/'Surviving':	Walter Spiess, Peter Jackson, Farhana Sultana, hydrologist and soil scientist to be determined.
'Moving'/'Staying'/'Belonging':	Mathis Stock, John Urry, John Beaverstock
'Working'/'Housing'/'Urbanizing':	Allen Scott, Saskia Sassen, Peter Taylor, John Beaverstock, Jacques Levy
'Communicating'/'Networking'/'Interacting:	Margaret Robertson, Karl Donert, Eric Tsang
Outreach	Margaret Robertson, Karl Donert, Eric Tsang, Rupert Maclean.

The meeting developed the guidelines for the description of these key topics.

Three axes should be taken in consideration:

- Local actions and their global consequences;
- Identification of the integration of socio-cultural and bio-physical aspects mentioned in the Grand Challenges;
- Sustainable vs. unsustainable forms of everyday action.

The meeting ended with two important decisions.

First: To add a subtitle to 'International Year of Global Understanding': 'In the Age of Global Change'. This addition should clarify that the IYGU does not just focus on mutual understanding, but aims at a more encompassing achievement: sustainability, including the mitigation of the consequences of global climate change.

Second: The IGU Initiative for IYGU should be celebrated in 2014, commemorating the 300th anniversary of the death of Hans Georg Carlowitz, who created the 'sustainability' concept as used in the UN environmental policies.

Besides the official support of the International Social Science Council (ISSC) – the social sciences' global umbrella association the support of the CIPSH – the International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies – was also pledged at the end of the meeting.