



International Year of Global Understanding. An Interview with Benno Werlen

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Abstract

The interview with Benno Werlen, Executive Director of the International Year of Global Understanding (IYGU), was conducted by the Italian Association of Geography Teachers (AIIG), focussing this initiative of the International Geographical Union (IGU) and highlighting relevant aspects from the educational and didactical point of view. The initiative recognizes that global social and climate changes require a global level of understanding. It aims to bridge the gap in awareness between local actions and global effects and it will provide information on culturally differentiated ways to reach global sustainability. The International Year of Global Understanding develops a blueprint for a new geographical view of a radically changing world. It is relating to global warming and sustainability debates, disparities of power, sustainable production and consumption of “less developed countries”.

Keywords: Global Warming Debate, Globalization Process, Inequality-Poverty-Struggle, Problem Solving Strategies, Sustainability Debate

As stated in the press release “the involvement of the ISSC, ICSU and CIPSH in IYGU underwrites broad collaboration across the natural and social sciences and the humanities, from across disciplinary boundaries and from all around the world”. Considering that IYGU project has been initiated and promoted by IGU, which is the role of Geography in such a collaboration?

Let me first give a short overview of the geographical approach behind this initiative and how I see geography’s role in the current developments. I would say we now have many topics on the global politics agenda that are

essentially geographic ones. The whole global warming debate, the sustainability debate, the global integration process etc., all these debates are in fact about interactions with nature – I would prefer the formulation, the transformation of nature by human action. All these issues are action-related geographical topics, asking for alternative ways of geography-making on the everyday level.

The potential of geography to have something to say about the key questions of the global situation is tremendous, especially as a critical science suggesting new solutions for new problems emerging from the tremendous

changes in the geographical conditions by the ongoing process of digitalization and subsequent globalization. However, at the same time, the institutional set-up of geography is rather weak. I believe we have three sections of geography that are diverting from one another due to an accelerated specialization. In this situation, the centrifugal forces become the dominant ones. Departments are increasingly splitting into units with only loose cooperation. I would say that there has been a growth in competence over the last thirty years, but simultaneously there is also a marked increase in specialization and separation. There has not been much growth in competence regarding integrated views of different realities of life and their scientific investigation.

If you contemplate the outlook for geography in the current political situation, I think that the split into divisions is problematic or at least deplorable. Geography's strength used to be to focus on the interconnections between the human and physical parts and geographical methods. I am not saying that these interconnections were based on scientifically acceptable methodologies. From that point of view, the ongoing specialization even has its merits. But we don't need to throw the baby out with the bath water! We should regard our position as that of a cross-faculty discipline. In addition geography has a high potential for transdisciplinary competence. This is documented by the fact that geography is simultaneously a member of the International Social Science Council and of the International Council for (Natural) Sciences for many many years, and now thanks to IYGU, since early December 2015 it is also a member of the International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences (CIPSH). This is a quite unique position that no other discipline has reached so far. This opens the possibility to work on integrated approaches in new ways. Finding *new forms and new ways of integration* could be a major contribution to the scientific community.

From the origins of ecological research geography has played a key role in developing theoretical frameworks and in empirical investigation. The theoretical foundations of ecological research and sustainability policies were developed at the end of the nineteenth century largely on the basis of biological and

geographical investigations into living spaces and into the evolution and differentiation of varied life forms. Both disciplinary perspectives are embedded in the practical and theoretical European problem situations of their time. Both scientific projects – one about life in general the other about human life on our planet – were linked to the social and spatial formations that we currently regard as historical. Given the current problem constellations, we need to rethink these concepts. The interim transformation of the spatial, as well as natural relations is based on the globalization process. This process is so radical that we can't go on trying to solve ecological problems of the 21 century with problem solving strategies deriving from theories designed for problems of the 19th century.

I therefore regard the IGU Initiative for an "International Year of Global Understanding" (IYGU) as a bridge builder under new, globalized conditions and beyond the imperialistic and racist evil spirits of the past, also for geography. It should help bring the social and natural sciences and the humanities together to jointly work on this because it is a very important matter to raise awareness or understanding of the global embeddedness of everybody's life, physically, socially and culturally. It is a new potential for geography but also a new potential for science itself in a highly politicized field of action. This view is confirmed by IYGU as a geographical project having – as you stated it in your question – engaged the three major scientific global umbrella organizations – the natural sciences (ICSU), the social sciences (ISSC), as well as philosophy and the humanities (CIPSH) – for the first time in history.

The potential of geography would be tremendous if we had a more adapted geographical view of the way people live in the world today. This specifically includes the elaboration of new geographical imaginations for new, unprecedented geographical conditions. Geography has gained enormous potential through economic geography having learned from Economics, social geography having learned from Sociology, and physical geography from the natural sciences. We shouldn't turn these gains in scientific competence into a reason to split the discipline. We can and should build on it to find new ways of integration

without the old problems of reducing the meaningful to the biological (racism) or the material (vulgar geo-determinism), the reification and hierarchization of cultures (imperialism), etc. We should use this integrative capacity of geography. Geography could – not in a traditional way, but in new ways – be a solid bridge builder. I hope that this can become geography's true and strongest potential. I believe this is worth working for.

IYGU project has three main pillars: research projects, educational programmes and information campaigns. J-Reading born as a scientific journal to promote research project in geographical education field. Can be the 2016 a key year to plan, imagine and create new way to teach Geography in the future? If yes, how?

Today, we need a global perspective for geographical imaginations. “Global understanding” becomes a new human condition, for the field of sustainability as well as for most parts of the political agenda. We need to think about *global* sustainability as well as transnational, global political perspectives.

Global sustainability requires global understanding. To think globally and act locally, we require a better understanding of how our local, daily activities impact global levels. Achieving a true global understanding requires achieving a more sustainable planet through local actions. Our common future on earth depends on successfully establishing sustainable everyday actions. This is where the local and global become one – where scientific insights have always been applied. We need a widespread awareness of how everyday actions create the challenges that impact humanity. This includes our capacity to connect actions and thoughts that may seem disconnected across time and space. This basis has to be implemented in all three pillars of IYGU, all three main fields of action: research, education and information.

Before I come back to them in more detail, let me please elaborate a bit more on the basis perspective of IYGU and the basic guidelines for the three pillars in some more detail. The IGU initiative for an International Year of Global Understanding recognizes that dealing successfully with global social and climate changes requires a global level of understanding. The

IYGU aims to bridge the gap in the awareness between local actions and global effects and will develop a blueprint for a new geographical view of a radically changing world.

Globalization has brought far-flung places and people into ever-closer contact. New kinds of supra-national communities are emerging at an accelerating pace. At the same time, these trends do not efface the local. On the contrary, globalization is also associated with a marked re-affirmation of cities and regions as distinctive forums of human action. The IYGU's overarching objective is to develop a blueprint for a new geographical view of the world that is fully open to these realities. It seeks to work creatively with their inner tensions and potentialities in the search for widened horizons of peace, democracy, environmental sustainability, and conviviality in the modern world.

The principal method to achieve these goals is to work toward a new map of the world. In the sense of an imaginative cartography, this will literally reveal the many forms of interdependence and conflict in the new world order. In the sense of an intellectual program of research and discussion, this will figuratively lay the conceptual foundations for an understanding of the new geography of globalization and its political implications.

In short: The IYGU adopts *a practice-centered perspective of the current geographical living conditions*.

More specifically, the IYGU initiative aims to raise awareness of the global embeddedness of everyday life; that is, awareness of the inextricable links between local action and global phenomena. The IYGU hopes to stimulate people to take responsibility for their actions and to consider the challenges of global social and climate changes by taking sustainability into account when making decisions. The IYGU will:

- empower bottom-up movements that relate to these aims,
- promote global sustainability to reduce the potential for violent territorial conflicts, and
- highlight that territorial conflicts are not an adequate solution for global challenges.

All three main pillars will be dealt with in the perspective of the three focal interfaces:

- Local || Global
The local with global impact;
- Social || Natural
Culturally adapted, ecologically, and socially sustainable ways of living;
- Everyday || Science
Sustainable actions patterns and technologies for local use.

The IYGU will demonstrate to a wide range of world citizens – as global citizens with global responsibilities – that most everyday activities share a two-fold embeddedness: in a natural and socio-cultural regard; and the link between the local and the global scale is embodied in both of them. In addition, the IYGU will advance science and technology for sustainable development and contribute to the achievement of the UN Post-2015 Development Agenda.

Research will bring together social and natural scientists and humanities scholars to gain an understanding of the global impacts of everyday local activities. *Teaching* will use these research results at all levels in classrooms throughout the world. *Information* will be provided in co-operation with strong partners from the private and public sector as well as NGOs to increase global understanding in public awareness. The IYGU will complement the Future Earth initiative by mobilizing the social and natural sciences and the humanities to engage in sustainability research.

Overall, the *research* field should bring together social and natural sciences and the humanities to gain an understanding of the global impacts of everyday local activities. In this context, the linkages with bottom-up movements will be of particular importance.

The *education* field's main aim should be to educate global citizens in global responsibility. In close cooperation with the scientific panel and the outreach panel the Regional Action Centers will – together with the outreach panel of IYGU – help develop teaching material adapted to national education systems and curricula. This material will be targeted at a variety of educational levels, from primary school up to

Ph.D. programs. One of the RACs' key tasks in this field will be to organize working groups to design these materials and adapt them to the needs and requirements of their national and regional contexts. In short, these teaching materials will be prepared for use in classrooms throughout the world at all educational levels.

Information will be provided in cooperation with strong partners from the private and public sector as well as NGOs to increase public awareness by means of, for example, regional/national print media, computer games, global social networks, Internet platforms (www.global-understanding.info), and TV programs. In this respect, the Regional Action Centers will assume the role of mediator between the whole IYGU network and the local/national/regional living contexts.

Unfortunately, when people listen to ideas like “individuals [have] to understand and change their everyday habits”, too often their mind goes to the “Middle Age”, an imaginary world without progress and technology. How can IYGU change this prejudice?

This attitude may be connected to an understanding of ecology and sustainability linked to its traditional roots in the 19th century, as I mentioned before. The theoretical foundations of ecological research as developed by Ernst Haeckel in the 19th century depart from pre-given living spaces, very much in the way traditional geography does. Given the fact that the founder of human geography, Friedrich Ratzel was a student of Ernst Haeckel, this shared perspective is certainly not accidental, just as its common implications are not either. The pre-given spaces are seen as crucial elements in the evolution and differentiation of varied life forms, in the geography of cultures too. Today the “natural” and “spatial” (including their ecological components) are still the starting points of ecological investigations, preceding all human actions. According to the “World Commission on Environment and Development” report on subsequent current strategies, this methodological approach is still the basis of international ecological policies. The pre-given status of nature and space implies normative standards that undermine cultural and social differences. It therefore also undermines the

required worldwide acceptance of the suggested ecological policies that depart from these premises.

If current ecological problems are indeed caused by human actions, the reasons for these actions lie largely outside the competence of the realms of natural science. The nature of and the human reasons for non-sustainable practices are increasingly understood, but gaining knowledge of how to change individual and social practices in respect of sustainability remains a major challenge for healthy nature-society relationships, as well as regarding designing environmental policies informed by sound science.

On the other hand, social and cultural scientists excluded the natural world from the beginning. This double blindness led to the nearly total absence of social science and humanities insights into sustainability research and into such global change issues as the politics of climate change. This constitutes the second challenge for the nature-society and science-policy interfaces. In short: the natural sciences don't have a differentiated view of the causes of and reasons

for human-induced ecological problems, and most social scientific approaches suffer from a near absence of bio-physical world expertise.

A third approach is based on a general systems theory, which integrates bio-physical and socio-economic systems on the same ontological level. The ways bio-physical and socio-economic facts exist differ: bio-physical facts can be characterized as existing in a realm of materiality and (causal) determination, whereas socio-economic facts reside in a realm of contextuality, meaning, and path-dependency. The two cannot be treated as if they were integrated in a single system governed by the same kinds of functional relationships; recognizing their distinctive logics is a prerequisite for successfully tackling socio-cultural realities and ecological challenges, or the dilemmas produced by human action. Understanding the impact of cultural interpretations is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development.

Prof. Anthony Giddens (UK) – Member of the House of Lords and former Director of the London School of Economics

"We live in the most interconnected world in history. Yet at the same time that world is riven by conflicts, dislocations and uncertainties – an unsettling and disturbing mixture of huge opportunities and existential risks. Finding a positive balance will demand fundamental intellectual rethinking and new forms of collaboration of the sort the IGYU offers".

Prof. Yuan Tseh-Lee (Taiwan) – Nobel Prize Laureate in Chemistry (1986)

"Sustainable development is a global challenge, but solving it requires transforming the local – the way each of us lives, consumes, and works. While global negotiations on climate attack the sustainability crisis from above, the IYGU complements them beautifully with coordinated solutions from below – by getting individuals to understand and change their everyday habits. This twin approach elevates our chance of success against this crisis, the gravest humanity has ever seen".

Dr. h.c. Eliezer Batista (Brazil) – Key Initiator of the Rio Summit 1992 and co-founder of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD)

"Knowledge is the factor that leads us to change our way of thinking. However, it is the understanding that leads to change attitudes. The IYGU puts emphasis on culturally different paths to global sustainability. And that only changing individual actions will lead to change of collective action whose result will be the improvement of the system in global scope".

That's probably why your question is certainly shared by many people. The 19th century thinking is rather nature-fixed and not interpretation oriented. But this is exactly not valid for the IYGU program. It is not starting out from pre-given spaces dominating or even determining the ecological requirements. It is not true because the IYGU program is starting out not from spaces and biological pre-conditions, but from everyday practices. These practices are socio-culturally differentiated and are the basis for the interpretation of nature, not the other way around. These everyday practices are also to be seen as the core elements of everyday geography-making, as the way the natural conditions are transformed to satisfy people's needs, the ways to the local and global become interconnected.

Today's living conditions are so very different from the ones of the 19th century. The differences are so radical that we can't go on trying to solve 21st century ecological problems with problem solving strategies derived from theories designed for 19th century problems. The geographies of economics are being reshaped by new production technologies; time-space compression occurs through innovations in transportation and communication, while resource and energy use is expanded. All these processes are interrelated, and transform daily life all over the globe. Besides all these changes, the recognition of the interrelatedness of global processes has also increased.

In addition, parochial discourses have become more forceful on the global stage, often in ways that seem to provoke discord rather than foster understanding. The current debate on refugees and immigrants is only one of the typical examples. It is important that we deepen our understanding of the new global realities to address these emerging interconnected challenges productively. Today, rather the exact opposite is often to be seen. Many of the discourses postulate a parochial interpretation of global processes instead of favoring interpretations based on global understanding as the guideline for local and regional action and measures.

Each everyday practice everywhere in the world can be characterized by a two-fold embeddedness in bio-physical (the body of the

persons, the natural and material contexts) conditions and socio-cultural processes at the global and local levels. So it is absolutely not about a backward orientated political program, but it is very much a forward orientated perspective on how to achieve healthy conditions and ways of living for as many of the people on this planet, and on how to achieve global sustainability. It is one of the important goals of the IYGU to highlight different ways of acting in that respect without preaching most of all renunciation, but showing attractive and joyful alternative ways of living, making the potential of the local living conditions useful. It's not about returning to the past, it's much more about creating a new future, overcoming the (social and natural) shortcomings the late-modern life-styles towards a life based on global understanding and responsibilities as cosmopolitan citizens.

Our world is pervaded by inequality, poverty and struggle and wide disparities of power. A "negative" observer might consider the objectives of the project as mainly suitable for richer countries, and less to the poorest. Why is this not true?

Of course, not all everyday actions have the same potential of transformation, or power if you like. And it is certainly the case that the kind of actions with the most important resource consumption are the ones with the highest impact on our natural living conditions. Therefore it is important to have a first focus on that kind of action, most of all typical of western life styles. In that sense the guess underlying your question is certainly correct. But we shouldn't overlook the fact that all actions are transforming our living conditions in an indirect or direct way, very often with quite harmful implications for our health. And we can also say, that the biggest part of the world population doesn't belong to the richest part of humanity. Therefore the conclusion may be that we have to find ways of living – for the richer and the poor – that are less harmful for our living conditions. And of course it will be the biggest challenge to find solutions that at the same time imply a considerable improvement in the standard of living of the poor and less wealthy part of humanity having less negative consequences for everyone. Under globalized living conditions it

is simply impossible to externalize the negative consequences of our actions as was probably the case before the industrial revolution. Since then we have been experiencing a growing integration of all local contexts in global processes. There is more or less no possibility of escape. We are all sitting in the same boat. And we need to find solutions to how we can navigate the boat with all passengers successfully through a restless ocean, leading hopefully – at least in that respect – to calmer waters. And as nobody can really escape, it is important to find solutions in a common effort and in a way that everyone can contribute with their own means. And in this context it is – at least in my view – important to see, that everyday actions are fundamental for all changes. This is where the local and global become one without being the same, and where scientific insights should always be applied. Forging a global understanding includes our capacity to link actions and thoughts that may seem disconnected across time and space. Linking them opens up new choices, but also requires accepting new responsibilities. A better global understanding will enable us to master the biggest challenges of the present and will make sustainability real for the sake of the future generations

On each day in 2016, the IYGU will highlight a change to an everyday activity that has been scientifically proven to be more sustainable than current practice. Could you anticipate some of the most remarkable examples of that? Will some of these examples be taken from the lifestyle, way of production and consumption of the “less developed countries”?

As already mentioned, IYGU focuses on habitual day-to-day practices and seeks to shed light on their embeddedness in biophysical and socio-cultural contexts, as well as on the ways in which such everyday practices link the local and the global scale. In this way, the IYGU's actions will highlight the importance of culturally differentiated ways to address the needs of society. On the whole, the IYGU intends to support new geographical imaginations for new geographical realities in the globalized digital age.

If the emphasis is placed on culturally differentiated ways towards global sustainability

it is obvious that we can't suggest the same solution for all parts of the world. We need proposals that are adapted to the cultural context as well as to different social and economic contexts. Therefore it will be the main task of the regional action centers to make proposals for their regions, using the local potentials and local opportunities. In addition we will advertise the nominees of the Katerva prize – called by Reuters as the Nobel Prize for sustainability – for advances in sustainable technologies and institution innovations over the last years. But the selection of these innovations will remain in the hands of the regional action centers around the world.

The IYGU will offer the possibility to learn from each other and to stimulate local solutions to reach global sustainability. And by “learning from each other” I mean that this process can and should go in all directions, not only as a one-way communication. Of course all proposals will need contextualization. But first of all we need the openness and readiness to learn from others.

What kind and what strategy of communication do you think to apply in order to prevent digital divide to not allow less developed countries to get involved?

The main element of the communication of the IYGU will be the Regional Action Centers (RACs). The Regional Action Centers will give the IYGU a presence and identity at the regional and national level. The aim of the RACs is to organize IYGU-related activities (mainly dissemination/PR via publications and events) in the lead-up to, during, and within a year after completion of the IYGU in 2016. The RAC activities are to reflect on the bottom-up and integrative approach that characterizes the IYGU project overall; that is, the RACs should draw on the strengths of the social and natural sciences as well as the humanities when planning and implementing their activities. Every RAC will cooperate with scientific bodies, national academies, and/or ministries to plan IYGU-related activities in keeping with the Durban declaration (2015).

The action plan of the Regional Action Centers is embedded in the following tenets.

1. Thinking globally and acting locally presupposes global understanding. In order to achieve global sustainability, we need to bridge the gap in awareness between local actions and global effects. Herein lies the ultimate significance of a program for the promotion of global understanding.
2. Humankind is confronted with unprecedented situations: the world's climate, ecosystems, biodiversity, economic system, and socio-cultural well-being are at stake. Those already most vulnerable will bear the brunt of the impacts.
3. Global environmental change research has produced scientific insights into earth system processes that are rarely translated into effective policies. We need to deepen our knowledge of socio-cultural contexts and to improve social and cultural acceptance of scientific knowledge.
4. Genuine transdisciplinary research is a first-order necessity. In order to achieve this, we need to overcome the established divide between the natural and social sciences. Natural and social scientific knowledge have to be integrated with non-scientific and non-Western forms of knowledge to develop a global competence framework.

It is imperative that the gap between global problems and national, regional, and local behavior and decision-making be bridged. Effective solutions must be based on bottom-up decisions and actions, and should be complemented by top-down measures when necessary.

The Regional Action Centers are the hubs to get face-to-face with local schools, with the community of scientists and policy makers, NGOs etc. by organizing meetings and conferences, bringing the private sector on board etc.

Based on signing a Memorandum of Understanding, RACs will work as independent units in terms of fundraising, staffing, accounting, event organization, research, PR, and publications. The responsibilities of an RAC will be to initiate and coordinate actions at the regional/national level. Actions will include

stimulating research activities in the context of the outreach program.

The RACs will act mainly as hubs for coordinating the IYGU communication networks and actions at the regional level. The hub concept is related to the bottom-up structure of the IYGU program. The activities encompass several thematic fields and types of action linked to the IYGU program's rationale and objectives. The RAC will also set up its own website in [official language(s) of the country/region], and maintain and update this website. The website will be linked to the main IYGU website (<http://www.global-understanding.info>).

Teachers can up- and download teaching materials to/from these websites.

A bottom-up approach like the one proposed by IYGU seems to need many years to be fully implemented. Has IYGU (and the organizations that promote it) just imagined some follow-up after 2016? Which is, in your personal opinion, the minimum goal that you expect to consider IYGU as a success story?

The IYGU is scheduled for 2016 and is preceded by a year of preparation (2015) and followed by a year of harvest/evaluation (2017). The harvest year will bring the sustainable achievements of 2016 in the form of operating networks on the level of the already mentioned three pillars of action. But these three years will mark just the beginning of coordinated work for global understanding between sciences, teaching and information. And geography has the opportunity to play a central role in this process.

Global understanding will support policy decisions that promote sustainability. Global sustainability cannot come about without local sustainability. Actions and thoughts that may seem disconnected in space and time are often fundamentally linked, and global understanding enables people to make such connections. Many people know about the need for sustainability, but few make the corresponding decisions. The IYGU's main goal is to promote global understanding so that actions and decisions yield sustainable outcomes, every day, all over the world.

The main goal of IYGU is therefore to build bridges between global thinking and local actions by developing an understanding for the embeddedness of our life in global processes. These developments require transdisciplinary thinking. The minimum goal so to speak would then be to foster this kind of thinking and developing sustainable networks for the cooperation of science, teaching and everyday policy making by changing people's behavior in favor of a more sustainable way of living.

The minimum goal would be to establish a network of regional action centers and institutional networks that will operate well beyond 2016 and strengthen the impact of bottom-up activities. For this the preparation of teaching materials on the respective subject for all levels of education and in the different languages will be one of the pre-conditions to reach this goal.

Could you please suggest 10-12 readings (possibly 5-6 "geographical" and other 5-6 "non-mainly-geographical") that are in the "spirit" of IYGU project?

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