

2016 to be the International Year of Global Understanding (IYGU)

“Building bridges between global thinking and local action”

The International Council for Science (ICSU), the International Social Science Council (ISSC) and International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences (CIPSH) jointly announced today that 2016 would be the International Year of Global Understanding (IYGU). The aim of IYGU is to promote better understanding of how the local impacts the global in order to foster smart policies to tackle critical global challenges such as climate change, food security and migration.

“We want to build bridges between global thinking and local action,” said Prof. Benno Werlen of the Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany. “Only when we truly understand the effects of our personal choices – for example in eating, drinking and producing – on the planet, can we make appropriate and effective changes,” said Werlen, who initiated this project of the International Geographical Union (IGU).

How to translate scientific insight into more sustainable lifestyles will be the main focus of activities – research projects, educational programmes and information campaigns – for 2016. The project seeks to go beyond a narrow focus on environmental protection and climate policy and explore quality of life issues and the sustainable, long-term use of local resources.

“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,” said Lord Anthony Giddens, former Director of the London School of Economics, UK. “Finding a positive balance will demand fundamental intellectual rethinking and new forms of collaboration of the sort the IGYU offers” he added.

“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,” said former ICSU President and Nobel Laureate Yuan-Tseh Lee.

For example, 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. Primers on everyday life which take cultural diversity and local practice into account will be compiled and distributed. “Now more than ever it is vital that we find the strength to understand and relate to the positions, thoughts, and expectations of others and seek dialogue instead of confrontation,” said Professor Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director of the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS).

It is hoped that this focus on tangible, local action will generate ideas for research programmes and school curricula, as well as highlight best practice examples. Wherever possible, activities will be communicated in several languages. Using this bottom-up approach, the IYGU hopes to support and extend the work of initiatives such as Future Earth, the UN’s Post-2015 Development Agenda, and the UN Decade

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of Education for Sustainable Development.

“In Rwanda, environmental pollution through plastic litter was a widespread and intractable problem. Ultimately, the insight that plastic is harmful to ruminant animals, in particular cows, turned the tide in favor of environmental legislation. This led to a ban on plastic items that could cause litter. Today you’d be hard pressed to find plastic polluting public areas in Rwanda,” said Werlen.

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.

In 2016, the IYGU program will be coordinated by about 50 Regional Action Centers. This network is currently being established and cities such as Tokyo . Washington, Sao Paulo, Tunis, Moscow, and Rome, while Beijing, Mexico City, Maçao/Coimbra, Nijmegen, Hamilton, Bamako and Kigali are confirmed as hoists of such Centers with their regional to continental reach. The IYGU General Secretariat in Jena, Germany coordinates these Regional Action Centers.

Further information on the International Year of Global Understanding is available at www.global-understanding.info. Prof. Werlen is available for further interviews upon request.

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About Prof. Benno Werlen:

Prof. Benno Werlen was born in Switzerland in 1952. After studying Geography, Ethnology, Sociology, and Economics, he received his Ph.D. and served as a research assistant at the universities of Kiel, Fribourg, and Zurich. Having completed his habilitation in the natural sciences, Werlen taught at the ETH Zurich and at the universities of Salzburg, Geneva, and Nijmegen. As a visiting fellow, he spent time at Cambridge University, the UCLA, and the London School of Economics. Werlen has been professor of Social Geography at the Friedrich Schiller University Jena since 1998; he has been a member of the European Research Council since 2008.