

Report of the constitutive Rome Meeting, Rome 2008

After the Executive Committee had decided at its April 2007 meeting in Tokyo that the initiative would be supported and appointed Prof. Benno Werlen as new general coordinator of its initiative for a UNIY, several steps were undertaken for the development of this project.

The first step was to consider the criticisms by the former presidents of IGU, Bruno Messerli and Anne Buttimer, regarding the development of the IGU initiative in the run-up to the Toyo meeting. The main points can be summarized as follows: The IGU title of the UN International Year initiated should not only focus on geography's competencies, but should also address all parts of geography – physical geography, as well as human geography – not just one area. The second important change concerned the “logic of action,” meaning that a bottom-up logic is preferable to the existent top-down organization structure. Since the last UNIYs supported by the IGU, “UNIY on Global Change” and “UNIY on Planet Earth,” had very strong natural scientific leanings, it is obvious that, thirdly, this new initiative needs a stronger cultural and social focus. The fourth, and very crucial, point in the reformulation of the UNIY addresses the need to gain support from the very best capacities that geography, social sciences, and the humanities have to offer.

In this context, it was logical to first gather a scientific task force of a kind to search for and formulate the most promising topic to which the above-mentioned criteria would apply. With this intention in mind, the project director Benno Werlen invited a selected number of geographers - representing different language groups, fields of geography, and geography teachers - to meet in Rome for a first round of the scientific search process. Unfortunately, not all the invited persons could attend, and therefore not all fields of geography were equally represented. We hope that this gap can be closed in the next round.

From June 20 to 21, the following group of geographers met at the Home of Geography, Villa Celimontana in Rome:

Ron Abler (Vice-President of IGU)
Giuliano Belezza (Director of the Home of Geography)
Anne Buttimer (Past President of the IGU)
Karl Donert (Herodote)
Vladimir Kolossov (Vice-President of IGU)
Jacques Lévy (Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne)
John Pickles (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)
Ola Söderström (Universtié de Neuchâtel)

Benno Werlen (IGU Initiative for an UNIY).

After a brief introduction to the ‘pre-history’ of the initiative and the upcoming activities, the implications of the last UNIY regarding setting a scientific agenda and geographical research activities were intensely discussed. Thereafter, all the participants were given time to express their ideas for a potentially successful geography-initiated inter- and trans-disciplinary UNIY with a stronger cultural focus than those of the previous International years. All the projected ideas, however, emphasized that a certain degree of political activities is needed to support research activities focused on the cultural dimension of geographical living conditions in the age of globalization, including the cultural aspects of natural living conditions’ transformation. The general coordinator emphasized the need to focus on the common central concepts of the social sciences and humanities such as “understanding” or “practice.”

The discussion concluded with the formulation of a tentative title for a geography-initiated UNIY likely to be supported by other important science unions and councils. This tentative title will be the topic of discussion at the 31st International Geographical Congress from August 12 to 15 in Tunis. The group suggests “UN International Year of Global Understanding” as the title of the IGU initiative.

At the International Geographical Congress in Tunis, two special sessions will address the question of the UNIY’s general orientation, the different research topics on which the UNIY should focus, and the different forms of outreach these core dimensions should have. These two sessions will, first of all, include the presentation and discussion of the core elements of this initiative: on Wednesday, August 13, from 14.00-15.30, the presentation of the “IGU Initiative for an International UN Year”; on Thursday, August 14, from 14.00-15.30, a panel discussion on the “IGU Initiative for an International UN Year” with participation by representatives from the IGU Commissions, including human and physical geography, the presidents/ members of National Committees, and, we hope, members of the Executive Committee.