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Bridging the Gap Between Local Acts and Global Effects

The Importance of Global Understanding for Sustainable Living

By Benno Werlen, International Year of Global Understanding

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Dealing successfully with social and climate changes on a worldwide level requires people to understand their own lives in a global context.

With globalization, everyday actions operate within and generate new geographic conditions in which things that are spatially distant are no longer temporally isolated but are instead very close. Communication technologies allow information to be transmitted and exchanged in real time. Because of this, everyone is directly or indirectly part of a globalized geographic reality.

This new *conditio humana*, or human condition, requires people to have a more wide-reaching awareness of their own lives. It necessitates bridging the gap between local acts and global effects—because thinking globally and acting appropriately on a local level presuppose global understanding.

The [International Year of Global Understanding](#) (IYGU), which was launched at the beginning of February and runs through the remainder of 2016, centers on the idea that the local and the global are intertwined in manifold ways. For a year, IYGU will foster research, education, and debate about both local and global processes, with the goal of developing a blueprint for a new geographic view of a radically changing world.

But what defines this new geographic view?

New Conditions Demand Change

Humans can't keep trying to solve twenty-first-century ecological problems using strategies derived from nineteenth-century issues. The digital revolution has set in motion a process of globalization that is radically transforming spatial and natural relations.

One basic, core assumption of most environmental approaches, for example, is that living spaces exist prior to human action. This conceptualization began with biology and was then applied to countless spatial formations—especially the social ones typical of nineteenth-century nation-states and their distinct boundaries.

For many aspects of everyday life in the twenty-first century, however, this notion is more historical than anything else. Globalization is demonstrating that actions can precede spaces. In other words, spaces are constituted by actions, not the other way around.

Humans experience daily how globalization is bringing far-flung places and people into ever-closer contact. New kinds of supranational communities—such as the European Union and the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM)—are emerging at an accelerated pace. Even globally shared lifestyles that revolve around music, sports, or nutrition, for example, are growing in importance.

That is not to say, however, that these supranational trends efface the local. Globalization also accentuates places and regions as distinctive forums of human action. All human actions remain, in one way or another, regionally and locally contextualized.

Thus spatial information—which is a particularly accurate precondition for carrying out analyses and making decisions—is still crucial. But with ongoing digitalization and the continued individualization of lifestyle choices, sustainability research needs to advance from a space-centered focus to an emphasis on spatially



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contextualized day-to-day conduct.

This research should provide insight into the logic of everyday actions and their global consequences. By helping researchers understand how humans act, it should also assist people in understanding the repercussions of their actions. Thus information is needed about spatially and globally contextualized conduct—especially the intended, unintended, and condoned negative consequences of all kinds of actions in the social, economic, biological, and physical worlds.

Only Understanding Can Transform Habits

Research on global climate change has produced unambiguous scientific insight into complex terrestrial processes. But so far, these revelations are too rarely translated into effective policies.

Knowledge alone about the existence and severity of a problem too rarely results in changes in actions—especially with regard to everyday activities that, more often than not, represent deeply ingrained habitual routines. Awareness does not change habits or routines. Only understanding can.

Understanding enables improved social and cultural acceptance of scientific knowledge and helps establish culturally distinct paths to global sustainability. To think globally and act locally, the local and the global have to become one. For this to occur, people need to better understand how their local, daily activities have global impacts.

How the Local Shapes the Global

Humans' future on earth depends on being able to establish sustainable everyday actions that are backed by scientific insight. Societies and cultures need widespread awareness of how their daily endeavors have created—and continue to shape—the challenges that humanity now faces. Seemingly disconnected actions and thoughts need to be unified across time and space.

If current ecological problems are indeed caused by human actions, the reasons for changing habits and implementing new routines lie outside the realm of natural science. Although, increasingly, people understand that some practices are not sustainable they still have a hard time changing their behavior. Defining a healthy relationship between nature and society remains challenging—principally when it comes to designing environmental policies that are informed by sound science.

For people to attain global understanding, they must first comprehend the circumstances of their own sociocultural living conditions—and grasp the consequences. In what is now being called the Anthropocene age, people have to understand that the most vital parts of the lifeworld (the subjective world that people experience in their everyday lives) are man-made. That means they are humans' responsibility.

Additionally, people must realize that their corporeal, biophysical way of existence is part of nature, just as the human body is, in itself, nature. Thus nature is not the environment; nature is the contemporary world.

Instituting Global Awareness

Although it is clear that local and global issues are intimately related, fostering an understanding of the cumulative global effects of individual local actions remains a challenging task.

People need to open up to a new geographic worldview that takes into account, above all, four things:

- The diversity of sociocultural ways of interpreting natural conditions
- The creativity of different ways of living
- The plurality of pathways to global sustainability
- The local and regional particularities of globalized living conditions

Only then can humans establish the necessary setting for this bridge-building exercise.

A New Geographic Imagination

A precondition of global sustainability is achieving sustainable, ordinary practices. Citizens need to change their actions, habits, and routines so that they become more enduring in culturally and regionally specific ways that keep global conditions top of mind. This entails not just knowing about sustainability but also living it.

In the long run, sustainable living depends on global understanding. This means that people's habit modifications need to be based on a new geographic imagination of the world—one that puts their everyday actions at its core. That way, people transform not only their day-to-day practices but also their living spaces and the earth's environment. And that is exactly what IYGU seeks to do.

About the Author

Benno Werlen, a professor of social geography at the Friedrich Schiller University of Jena in Germany, is also the executive director of the 2016 International Year of Global Understanding. The initiative is supported by the International Council for Science, the International Social Science Council, and the International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences.

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