



IHDP Open Meeting 2009

7th International
Science Conference on the
Human Dimensions of
Global Environmental Change

26-30 April 2009
World Conference Center Bonn
UN Campus
Bonn, Germany

The Social Challenges of Global Change

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Press Release

Bonn, 11 February 2009. – More than 1000 scientists and decision-makers from all over the world are planning to take part of the 7th Open Meeting of the International Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change, “Social Challenges of Global Change”, which will take place at the World Conference Center in Bonn on 26-30 April, 2009.

The organizer, UNU – IHDP, is a joint programme of the International Council for Science (ICSU), UNESCO’s International Social Science Council (ISSC), and the United Nations University (UNU) and has its Secretariat at the UN Campus in Bonn.

Four Major Social Challenges

Four major social challenges of global environmental change will be addressed by world top scientists, politicians and even businessmen during the conference:

1. How do we deal with demographic challenges?

The almost exponential increase of the world population in the last century is part and parcel of the global changes we are experiencing, but is generally hardly discussed as such. Yet the demographic explosion poses several major challenges. From an economic perspective (“Who will pay for increasingly expensive health care of growing societies and, in many parts of the world, aging population?”), to that of food security (“How many more people can we feed and at which level of food consumption?”), to that of urbanization (“How do we manage the grow-

ing number of cities with over 20 million inhabitants?”), etc. We urgently need to posit such difficult questions as “How real is the predicted reduction in population growth rate after the middle of this century?”, “What will its effect be on total consumption if, as is predicted, the reduction in population growth is mainly dependent on increase in per capita wealth (and consumption)?”, “What is the impact of improved health and increased aging?”

2. How do we deal with limitations of resources and ecosystem services?

The relationship between society and its environment has thus far been the main emphasis of IHDP: resource depletion and replacement, reduction of consumption of energy, water and other resources, reduction of waste production, preservation of ecosystem services, etc. But we now need to include the core challenges to be overcome to avoid an environmental disaster of unequalled proportions. We need to ask such questions as: “Can we achieve sustainability through technological innovation, or do we need to make more profound changes?”, “How do we transform the economic basis of our society into a sustainable one?”, or “How do we promote a different cultural and social attitude to the environment in general?” In order to answer this new generation of questions in the realm that explores society-environment relationships, we need to place the social sciences in the drivers’ seat, as well as improve environmental communication and education.

3. How do we establish social cohesion while increasing equity at various levels?

Finding creative ways to ensure a fair and equitable distribution of the benefits and vulnerabilities associated with the social challenges of global change is pivotal. Some underlying principles of the world's societies are based on a strong notion of equity, while others are based on economic competition or kinds of inequities. Such fundamental cultural bases for social cohesion are difficult to change. Yet current processes that sharpen social contrasts within many societies, as well as between different parts of the world, will in the long run inevitably lead to increasing social tensions. Furthermore, as the risk of environmental challenges increases, we must find ways to transition to more social sustainability, based on a reduction of inequity and concomitant tensions. Thus, "What are fair allocations of shrinking resources, increased costs, e.g. for adaptation?"; "And how do we do that without jeopardizing current achievements?"

4. How do we adapt institutions to address global change?

Such questions pose profound challenge to contemporary forms of governance. At some level, this challenge has been recognized in the effort to create indicators of sustainable development, quantitative measures that enable decision makers to factor in elements of sustainability into decisions that might otherwise have relied solely on economic criteria. But the challenge to governance goes deeper than just creating new indicators. New governance processes are required that can facilitate the inclusion of new kinds of information, new values, and new voices into decision-making. This, in return, requires new institutional settings and, prior to that, adaptability of current institutions. New kinds of arrangements must be made to rebalance the relationship between formal and informal institutions, consequently between citizens and experts, acknowledging that citizens hold valuable knowledge that is key to creating sustainable communities at all levels of society from the village to the globe. And, just as importantly, new avenues of decision making must be opened up to enable scrutiny and reflection in the design, creation, and management of managerial and technological as well as scientific systems to ensure

the achievement of sustainable societal and ecological outcomes.

Open to the Public

Several free events, open to the general public, will also take place at the conference, such as the Deutsche Welle sponsored media table, "Catastrophe Sells", the business table "Governing the Global Financial Crisis" and the high panel level on the effects of Climate Change on small-island states.

The extended programme of the Open Meeting 2009 is now online at the conference's page (www.openmeeting2009.org) for viewing, and includes the most up-to date schedule information, as well as information about keynote speakers, and special sessions of the IHDP Open Meeting 2009. Please keep in mind that the information is tentative and thus subject to change.

IHDP has compiled statistics about the accepted presentations of the first and second call, providing a good overview about the scope of participants at the IHDP Open Meeting 2009. Please find them in the attached Annex.

Media Coverage and Accreditations

If you would like to participate of the conference, interview some of our keynote speakers and/or cover the presentations and special events, please contact Mrs Gabriela Litre at litre@ihdp.unu.edu.

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