

Ten Theses on IGU Strategy and Actions¹
A Working Paper
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The future is in our hands

Why this paper?

In recent months, discussions of the role of IGU have expanded. Comments and suggestions received during the Glasgow General Assembly in August 2004 with those harvested from around the world after the event (particularly from younger geographers) lead me to believe that the time has come to discuss the role of the IGU not only in the scientific arena and society, but also in terms of its organisation and strategies. Discussions are essential to determining how the IGU could enhance its participation in the scientific international arena with respect to research and education, and in particular how it could contribute to dealing with climate change, globalisation, assisting geographers at the local scale, and disseminating geographical knowledge to public.

This paper is a contribution to these thoughts and discussions. It consists of a *diagnosis* of the current situation and presentation of *ten theses* concerned with strategies and operational criteria. It was presented and discussed at the recent meeting of the IGU Executive Committee (Venice, Italy, 23-27 April, 2005). I am now circulating it to the IGU family for wider discussion. Geographers are warmly invited to consider it critically, and to offer comments, suggestions, and proposals. Contributions should be addressed to <a.vallega@iol.it>. They will be assembled into a dossier that will be circulated for further consideration, and will be used by the IGU Executive Committee as a basis for formulating initiatives.

Diagnosis

A Threefold Turning Phase

As in many sciences in recent times, geography has entered a turning phase, which is due to a threefold impulse:

The Primacy of Space against Time in Scientific Speculation — Since the 1970s, the production of meta-narratives of the evolution and destiny of modern society and the world system has shifted from approaches based on the primacy of time *vis-à-vis* space towards approaches based on primacy of space. The collapse of ideologies rooted on stage-based visions of modern society, and the concurrent rise of the climatic change- and environmental-referenced issues, together with questions pertinent to the interaction between local systems and globalisation processes, may be regarded as significant manifestations of the growing relevance of space, which, since the

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late 1960s, has been conceptualised in numerous philosophical streams of thought. This fundamental change in perspectives attributes increased importance to space and spatial relationships in the scientific arena, though not necessarily to geography per se.

The Role of Places in Social Perception — The social perception of the role of places in the human existence has strengthened, therefore bringing about increasing sensitivity to the need to safeguard the biological diversity and cultural identities of places. This change in social imagination and behaviour has led to the consideration of place from a twofold perspective: as a heritage to transmit to future generations, and as a key referent for designing and implementing human development strategies. These trends yield an increasing social need for geographical representations tailored to integrate the natural and cultural features of places.

The Revolution in Representation Techniques — Improvements in mapping, jointly with advances in information and communication technologies, have created the opportunities for expanding the role and content of geographical representations and for disseminating them in many scientific and social contexts, including education. These changes constitute a revolution in geographical representation techniques, whereby remotely sensed images, data banks, and digital mapping have been integrated and circulated via the internet.

As a result of these three concurrent processes, the IGU's mission should be reconsidered in discussions that involve as many geographical milieus and individual geographers as possible. The view of the IGU as an organization consisting of National Committees, Commissions, and Task Forces is obsolete. A new phase, marked by progressive integration of this conventional perception with new scientific realities should be promoted.

A Threefold Global Change

Three global processes, deeply concerned with geography and specifically the IGU, have arisen and solidified in recent years:

Global *processes* in society have expanded, bringing about increased interaction between local and global systems. This is a geography-relevant the *ontological* dimension of global change.

Global *networks* have developed in research and education, giving impetus to global visions and representations of the Earth and the world, and disseminating those visions and representations throughout the human community. This is the *cultural* dimension of global change.

Global *information and communication techniques* have improved markedly, creating a global village and tracing a plurality of dividing lines within it. This is the *technical* dimension of global change.

As a result of these three concurrent changes, the IGU must become more sensitive to the world's rapidly changing scientific, social, and technical frameworks. That increased sensitivity should focus on three dualities: *strategy and action, decisions and operations, and effectiveness and efficiency*. The following sections elaborate first duality by means of ten theses.

Strategy

Thesis 1 — *Redress the Imbalance between Technique- and Episteme-Building*

The elaboration of scientific knowledge and representations of the interactions between social and spatial processes have entered a paradoxical phase. Representation techniques have improved much more rapidly than the underlying epistemological discourse upon which they are based, particularly the discourses on the epistemological role of geography in bridging the human and natural sciences, on integrating structuralist and non-structuralist visions, and on strengthening holistic visions of the world. Hence, the IGU is intrinsically encouraged to promote synchronization of representation techniques and concept building, namely *techné* and *logos*.

Thesis 2 — *Trigger Effective Discussions of Interdisciplinarity*

The cardinal focus of future geographical discussions should be the development of an episteme that meets the need for the interdisciplinary approaches specified by the 1999 World Conference on Science. Interdisciplinarity is increasingly essential to dealing effectively with global change and globalisation. Hence, the IGU should now contribute to changing concepts of interdisciplinarity from the mere assembling of disciplines and perspectives to interdisciplinarity defined as creating isomorphisms that integrate the natural and social components of spaces and places.

Thesis 3 — *Promote Holism in the Geographical Sciences*

One of the major gaps to be bridged in the scientific approaches to the Earth's surface is the increasing inclination to attribute strong validity to nomothetic sciences and to discount idiographic research. The need for effective integration of these two components of knowledge has acquired increasing relevance. The IGU's mission here is to encourage discussions that bridge *logos*- focused and *graphia*-concerned disciplines in order to capitalize on the latent synergy between case studies and theoretical approaches.

Thesis 4 — *Accommodate All Theoretical Streams*

The expanding social need for sustainable and human development based on safeguarding the bio-cultural identity of places, the evolving framework of science, and finally the unprecedented improvement of geographical investigation techniques converge to suggest that, in geography, discussions rooted in diverse topical and theoretical streams is essential to progress in the discipline and prerequisite to expanding geography's role in the international scientific arena. Isolation and internal ideological conflicts must be foregone. The IGU must accommodate and encourage open and constructive discussion in a spirit of global scientific communication and interaction.

Thesis 5 — *Focus on New Concepts*

The entire scientific landscape has recently been marked by increased numbers of new concepts representing and explaining interactions between human communities and the Earth's surface, with special consideration to interactions between local and global systems. Consequently, the IGU has a double mission. It must collaborate closely with the disciplines that use and need geographical concepts and methods; at the same time it bears primary responsibility for improving the design and operationalization of new geographical concepts and for disseminating them in the broader scientific community.

Actions

Based on the foregoing strategic assumptions, the IGU should:

Thesis 6 — *Reorganize the Executive Committee*

International scientific unions such as the IGU face two options: 1) they can maintain the conventional organisation and serve as arenas for internal, self-referential communication and networking, or 2) they can redesign their goals and structures to accommodate the needs of science and society. The second choice implies increased etero-referential planning and action. In the conventional approach the president of a scientific union plays an essentially representative role, the secretary general serves as a reference person for the union's national committees and research bodies, and vice-presidents assume occasional responsibility for specific initiatives. In the reactive (second) approach the president attends also to the union's strategy and co-ordinates the role of vice-presidents in order to ensure consistency of actions with goals, the secretary general manages the organisation as a whole, and the vice-presidents assume responsibility for the union's operational fields. The faster the IGU shifts from the conventional stance to the second executive committee structure the sooner it will become more effective in representing the global geographical community in the international scientific arena.

Thesis 7 — *Harvest Research*

The changing role of science and increased interaction among disciplines demand that the scientific achievements of IGU Commissions and Task Forces be systematically used to improve the status of geography in the international arena and in national contexts. These efforts are to be carried out by systematically collecting the scientific outputs of individual research bodies consisting of concepts, methods, and lessons from case studies and by using these outcomes to enhance the roles of geography in international research programmes and in national geographical educational systems. Accordingly, the executive committee should move beyond monitoring of the work of commissions and task forces to interacting closely with such bodies with the aim of evaluating their products and disseminating them through global scientific networks. Intensive publicizing of the IGU's scientific resources will raise the visibility of geography in the international arena and within member countries.

Thesis 8 — *Involve the Entire Geographical Community*

The IGU has been primarily self-referential since its inception in that its role in the international arena has depended primarily on its national committees, commissions and task forces. The IGU should now become, *in addition*, etero-referential. The newly-elected executive committee is keen to establish increased communication with bodies and individuals operating outside the IGU. Global information and communication techniques should be more intensively used to increase such an involvement. Increased IGU willingness to host discussions and initiatives from the entire geographical community, will enable the IGU to be more effective in today's globalised scientific world.

Thesis 9 — *Expand Communication*

Communication will play a key role in validating the IGU as a full member of the globalised scientific community. Improved communication must be addressed systematically, open to all the

geographers from inside and outside the Union, flexible in using traditional and electronic tools, and be continuously modulated by the IGU's evolving strategies. In particular, IGU communications should be addressed, as appropriate, to both the scientific world and to the public in order to respond to the expanding social needs for geographical assessments, representations, and insights. The more quickly the IGU shifts from traditional internally-directed communications to a more flexible stance marked by a firm inclination to improve and expand dialogue, the sooner its ability to play an effective role in the globalised world will expand.

Thesis 10 — *Raise Visibility*

In recent years geography has enjoyed increasing social relevance as representations of the Earth and the world have aroused an expanded interest in such *traditional media* as book series, magazines and newspapers, in such *visual media* as television, CDROMs and DVDs, and finally in the *cyber media* of the Internet. These developments constitute an implicit stimulus to IGU to exploit these multifaceted and powerful media. The IGU need specific programs to build bridges to those who control access to the media and to those who create media content. The IGU and the global geography community will benefit greatly by employing these media as channels to disseminate the results of IGU research to the public.