

# International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change

Human activity lies at the core of global environmental change, so it is vitally important that we understand the social and cultural drivers of human behaviour in order to bring about more sustainable societies. **Dr Anantha Duraiappah**, Executive Director of IHDP, explains the programme's work

**Firstly, could you give an overview of the International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change (IHDP) and how your mission is linked with other organisations?**

IHDP is an international, interdisciplinary science programme. Our mission is to provide international leadership in framing, developing and integrating social science research on global environmental change. The research revolves around the human dimensions of global change, ie. how human activity affects and contributes to it and what strategies can be applied to mitigate and adapt to the changes.

We share with our partner global change programmes the goal to promote the application of key scientific findings towards understanding, addressing and responding effectively to the environmental challenges we face today.

IHDP is a joint programme of the International Council for Science (ICSU), the International Social Science Council (ISSC) and the United Nations University (UNU). The Secretariat is based at the UN Campus in Bonn, Germany; the research projects are located worldwide.

**Biodiversity is critically linked to human wellbeing and life, given that it underpins and is the foundation of ecosystems from which human societies derive essential products for living. However, the unprecedented loss of biodiversity (ie. species extinction, loss of genetic variation, etc.) is up to 1,000 times more than the 'background' or natural rate. How is IHDP involved with assessing these issues and helping to address the rate of biodiversity loss?**

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) identified climate change, pollution, over-exploitation, land use change and invasive species as the key direct drivers causing the rapid loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services. But direct drivers tend to be enforced and aggravated by indirect factors, eg. economic activity, population change, sociopolitical factors, cultural-religious influences and science and technology. Thus it is equally important to reach a better understanding of the major indirect drivers.

Per se, indirect drivers are highly complex and even though the MA was a large-scale undertaking, it did not engage in a detailed analysis of these issues. IHDP holds the position that we cannot successfully attempt to mitigate or adapt to global change without a deeper understanding of the underlying human behaviour. Human behaviour is a key component of the social sciences and humanities disciplines. To help reduce biodiversity and ecosystem services loss, among other issues, IHDP intends to undertake a global assessment of drivers of, and responses to, global change. We aim to provide new insights and to deliver policy relevant findings on the key indirect drivers with the ultimate objective to influence and change human behaviour.

**These declines – due to habitat destruction, climate change, pollution, the spread of invasive species and a host of other threats – reveal that the natural world cannot support the pressure that humanity is placing on it; what can we do? Is it too late?**

It is never too late. However, we as a society will need to make some hard choices. The constant demand for economic growth needs to be revisited. The way we evaluate progress needs to be re-evaluated. We all live on a single planet with finite resources and a finite sink for our waste products. Therefore, the notion of a sovereign state only looking after its own benefits will no longer work. What one country does in its front yard affects another country's backyard. The ever-increasing impacts of global 'wrongs', such as climate change and biodiversity loss, make clear that we need global responsibility in order to achieve global sustainability.

**Why has IHDP's involvement in addressing the climate change issue proved significantly important?**

IHDP brought to the attention of policy makers that climate change should not be viewed purely as an environmental problem but as a human security issue. In the short term, climate change will affect the lives of marginalised and vulnerable individuals. In the long term, it will affect all. By linking human security with climate change and thus treating it not as an environmental problem, but as a human development and security issue, the global community is taking action to effectively mitigate and adapt to climate change.

**What role will the social sciences play in curving the worrying trends we are witnessing? What input is needed for people to respond effectively?**

Social sciences are critical in shaping the public discourse on changing environmental conditions today and in the future. Social scientists will have to fundamentally question the manner in which societies and cultures around the globe understand and react to the multiplicity of environmental and social problems. The public as well as policy makers need to realise that social and environmental problems are not mutually exclusive but intrinsically linked.

**What is IHDP's current relation to the natural science research community on global environmental change? In your opinion, will this relationship have to change in the future and if so, how?**

IHDP collaborates with the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP) through joint research projects. We also work with the broader natural sciences global change community within the framework of the Earth System Science Partnership (ESSP) and in multilateral bodies, eg. the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).



## ANALYSIS

However, the global environmental change agenda is, to a large extent, still driven by natural sciences. We believe this must be changed. The framing of the problem and the key research questions should be developed through a truly transdisciplinary process where both natural and social sciences are equally involved from the beginning. Furthermore, we need to make sure that we achieve a broad inclusion of the different social sciences and humanities disciplines.

### **What strategy is IHDP implementing to facilitate original research that addresses the pressing global problems?**

We recently conducted a global survey in collaboration with ISSC and UNESCO, where social scientists and humanities scholars provided their input to what they perceive are the most critical research questions for the social sciences with regard to global change and global sustainability. Next, based on the survey feedback, we plan to initiate a global social science assessment looking at drivers of, and responses to, global environmental change. It will identify some key findings on global change from the social sciences perspective and also key research gaps that need to be addressed. Eventually, this will provide the basis for a new social sciences research programme on global change and global sustainability.

### **What role do international, multidisciplinary and geographically balanced teams play in conducting innovative science? To what extent does this stimulate scientists to further develop their research?**

It is critically important – especially for the social sciences – to have a multinational, geographically diverse and gender-balanced team undertaking research on global change. Besides their identity as scholars, scientists can bring in multiple other identities based on, among others, culture, religion, gender, beliefs and values that provide broader insights to the research approach and findings. Also, different knowledge systems can result in new insights to global change problems and the type of solutions needed to address them effectively, efficiently and in an equitable manner.

### **With such a broad remit, how do you maintain zeal and focus?**

The development of a results-based implementation strategy keeps us focused as we have to deliver on the stated outputs listed in the implementation plan. However, it has been increasingly difficult to ensure the same level of effectiveness as in the past with budget cuts and with the growing number of problems to address. But the need for social sciences research to address global environmental change problems has never been greater and the increasing number of opportunities to provide knowledge drives us.

### **What activities do you conduct to foster the dialogue between science and policy? What role does this play in your programme's overall scope of work?**

Strengthening the science-policy interface is a central element of IHDP's programme of work and will make up an increasing part of activities.

When talking about policy making, producing good science is a crucial step but not the end point. To actually contribute to solving the problems we face today, it is equally relevant to engage with decision makers at multiple levels. IHDP is currently involved on the global and regional scale, eg. through intergovernmental mechanisms such as IPCC, IPBES and MOST. These processes are meant to help guide policy making at the global, regional and indirectly at the national level. Scientific findings also need to be 'translated' into policy-relevant messages and practical implications. Our contributions to this are publications, namely Summaries for Decision Makers and Policy Briefs, that provide a comprehensive overview of cutting-edge IHDP research results.

### **In what direction do you hope to see IHDP moving in the future – how do you see it evolving?**

There is now acknowledgement by the natural sciences and the policy-maker community that more social sciences are needed to address and solve global change problems. This implies an increasingly important role for IHDP. Three key outcomes we expect to achieve over the next few years are: first, IHDP is recognised by the various social science communities as the leading organisation to which they can turn to for help to support new, innovative research ideas on global change and have their voice heard in the policy making forum; second, IHDP is acknowledged by other scientific communities as both the actor that offers a common voice of the social science global change research platform, and as the gateway to social science networks and knowledge; third, IHDP is perceived by the policy community as the authoritative voice for the social science academic community, as well as the gateway to social science networks and knowledge.

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