

# GIN2002: 10th International Conference of the Greening of Industry Network, June 23-26, 2002, Gothenburg, Sweden

Opening remarks by Kurt Fischer, GIN Co-founder and GIN-Americas Coordinator

## From Greening to Sustaining - Evolution of the GIN Debate

We arrive at the conference with multiple expectations. One of mine is the expectation and hope for learning through constructive debate on the issues raised in the conference program. When we describe GIN, we always talk about *the open forum, the platform for discussion and debate, and creating theaters of engagement*. Looking at our history, I would like to summarize what I see as three stages of the GIN debate since 1991.

Our first debate was a version of "technology vs. society." In some respects, this debate took over our first conference in 1991 at Hotel Orange, Noordwijk-ann-Zee, a football match of the technocrats vs. the humanists. But it occurs to me that it's really an old debate, something of a red herring. But we had a go at it anyway, just to get it out of our systems. I think of it as a practice debate, to get warmed up. We moved on quickly to our Middle Period, debating "eco-efficiency vs. system change" at GIN1994 in Copenhagen with some heat. We documented the elements of this debate in the [GIN Research Agenda](#) published in 1997, based on analysis of six years of GIN proceedings, surveys, interviews, and workshops. You could also call this debate "incremental change *versus* revolution." Or to paraphrase William McDonough in his keynote address at GIN1999/Chapel Hill, slowing down doesn't turn a system around.

What is the GIN debate in 2002? I want to focus on the last word of our conference title: sustainability, a word that many of us use freely, hoping to define it in use and discussion. Have we agreed that we're on the path to sustainability, that we know where we're going? The image I have is that we walk on the eggshells of sustainability, but sometimes the debate cracks open, fortunately. It opened up, again at GIN1999 in Chapel Hill, when C.K. Prahalad advocated opportunities for multinationals to market their products to the poor of the world, the bottom of the pyramid. "Is that serving the poor, or exploiting the poor?" raged the debate. Another GIN exploration of sustainability, and a very constructive debate, took place in our recent *Futures* project with General Motors R&D - in which we developed scenarios for sustainability in four different social-political futures. You can visit the [GIN Web Publications page](#) for the project reports authored by GIN Planning Board Member Jerry Rogers and colleagues.

When I look at sustainability schemes, I usually see a couple of things. When it comes to sustainability for business, I often see a collection of Best Practices: mostly best environmental practices and strategic environmental management, plus some stakeholder relations and reporting. And I wonder if we should expect anything more of "Sustainability"? The other thing I often see is sustainability as some kind Promised Land. You can take many texts and substitute the words "Promised Land" for "Sustainability," and they read just about the same. The word becomes an expectation at the last word (including in our own GIN mission). When we do that, I think we trivialize meaning. Do we connect these two approaches, with Best Practices leading us to a Promised Land? When we do that, we run the risk of becoming a Society of True Believers. And, like the Best Practices approach, that's been done before.

Rebecca West provided us with a good description of an un-sustainable society,

describing the England of her childhood as "black with industrialism, foul with poverty, iridescent with the scum of luxury." What's different today, 100 years later? How far have we come, and where have we developed in sustainable ways? And where else in the world might we have shifted un-sustainable development?

### Closing Comments at GIN2002

At the conference opening, I talked about the evolution of the GIN debate and discourse. I noticed at this conference that we have stopped drawing triangles to represent sustainable development and sustainability, triangles with economy-environment-equity inscribed on the three sides. I'm recalling that in Rome GIN1998 and Chapel Hill GIN1999 there was at least one triangle graphic visible at all times from all vantage points. Then at GIN2001 in Bangkok, the triangle population was really much diminished. And now in 2002, I believe we are seeing a real trend: notably with the social issues in sustainability emergent. To me, it means that we are going *beyond the metaphor* to think more clearly about "the thing" instead of the image, and to wrestle with what one actually does in the process of sustainable development, and in efforts to create sustainable industries. Metaphors often do mobilize, but can take us only so far, limiting our thinking and acting. So I'm gratified to see a significant rise in outside-the-triangle thinking at GIN2002, beyond the metaphor, to get closer to the thing.

### Postscripts 2003

To get beyond the metaphor, for [GIN2003](#) (11th GIN Conference, October 12-15, 2003, San Francisco), we stress the need for innovation in defining and creating sustainability. The main themes of *Innovating for Sustainability* are: collaborating to meet the needs of individuals and communities not well served by current institutions, policies and practices; designing and implementing new institutions, public policies, civil regulation strategies, technologies and business practices; creating new business models to meet basic human needs and serve the poorest segments of the global population; developing and delivering education for sustainability; and accelerating the adoption of frameworks and practices to achieve complex objectives.

[www.greeningofindustry.org/gin2003.htm](http://www.greeningofindustry.org/gin2003.htm)

A new book searches out the historic derivations of six strands of thinking that form the basis for sustainability concepts. One set of roots is described as: ecological/carrying capacity; natural resource/environment; biosphere; critique of technology; and ecodevelopment. Another as: sustainable biological resource use; sustainable agriculture; carrying capacity; sustainable energy; sustainable society and economy; and sustainable development. *Taking Sustainable Cities Seriously*, by Kent E. Portney, MIT Press, 2003.