

A black and white portrait of Marilyn Mehlmann, an older woman with long, curly, light-colored hair, wearing glasses and a dark jacket. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is slightly out of focus, showing a banner with the text 'DIE ENERGIEREBELLION' and other partially visible text like 'verband' and 'SOL'.

# Marilyn Mehlmann

GENERAL SECRETARY OF GLOBAL ACTION PLAN INTERNATIONAL



The international community has not yet made substantial breakthroughs in sustainable development. With all their limitations, the United Nations and other organizations have laid the foundations for a partial and slow progress that is taking place in many fields.

## “Universal common good is a concept that has been very slowly gaining ground”

**You have been awarded the Rachel Carson Prize 2011–2012 for your long-term efforts to involve individuals, companies and NGOs in sustainable actions. In your experience, what are the main obstacles hindering individuals and organizations’ greater commitment to sustainable development?**

**MM.** Fear, I think, is a major obstacle. A child and I were once talking about fear. “What do you think people are afraid of?” I asked. He promptly replied: “People are afraid of facts. Because if something is a ‘fact’, they don’t think they can do anything about it.”

To quote a much older gentleman, “Change happens when there is a reasonable balance between dissatisfaction and hope.” But where do we look to find such a balance today? The very word ‘dissatisfaction’ implies a possibility for action. Fear mongering is big business today, trying – and often succeeding – to convince us that we have no choices, that there is only ‘one way’.

**To what extent are such obstacles removable?**

**MM.** In one sense it’s very easy. In any human situation, there is always some choice. By supporting people so that they can explore the choices open to them, however small, we can open up a window for change, letting in a breeze of dissatisfaction and letting out some of the fear. Thus hope is born, and a positive spiral can begin.

The difficult part is that it seems that mass media, large-scale business and political elites are – with some honourable exceptions – conspiring (though doubtless unconsciously) to slam shut all such windows.

**Many global conferences often end in disappointment, with sovereign states always putting their national interests before global interests.**

**How useful would it be to create a brand new concept of the universal common good in order to overcome national interest?**

**MM.** There you go, you see: peddling a ‘fact’. Neither sovereign states (politicians) nor business people nor individuals are invariably egoistic. It has something to do with the level of fear and a lot to do with greed, which is also an expression of fear. Poor people (and nations) are often more generous than the rich. What is striking, but not surprising, about the failure of climate conferences is the intransigence of the richest countries.

‘The universal common good’: yes indeed, it’s a concept that has been very slowly gaining ground since the Covenant of the League of Nations in 1919 (which was strongly promoted by Henri La Fontaine, one of the founders of the UIA and Nobel Peace prize winner). The Declaration of Human Rights was another milestone. And the latest, the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), takes the concept to a new level.

The interesting question is what will tip the balance and what will transform the concept into real change. >

**How could such a concept transcend – not only ideological – but civilization barriers which have started to seem stronger than ever? (China, for instance, demands the right to keep its own way of development even if it is clearly unsustainable.)**

**MM.** The Sustainable Development Goals are particularly interesting because they avoid the trap of defining ‘development’ as something needed by the poor countries, to be paid for by the rich. With the SDGs – as with the Human Rights – we all have something to hope for and something to be dissatisfied with. If they can escape excessive bureaucratization, perhaps they can indeed trigger real change.

**What role does Global Action Plan International play in progressing toward sustainable development? How does this organization work in order to meet its targets?**

**MM.** We were founded in 1989, and early defined our role as being to ‘empower people to live and work increasingly sustainably’. So we have a narrow focus, and have indeed become a global leader in the practice of sustainable behavior change. We also treat every project as action research, so we are constantly learning.

The work on the ground is done by our member organizations and partners, with support from us. It’s a painstaking business, empowering people. Slow, but an essential component of ‘creating a reasonable balance between dissatisfaction and hope’. Several million people have taken part in our programs. And we know from research that each participant engages more people, with one study suggesting 7-8.

The programs take many forms; for example, employee engagement (e.g. Netherlands, UK, Belgium, Spain...), adult education (almost all of our 25+ member organizations), youth empowerment, school lessons for sustainable development (Ukraine, UK, Ireland, India, Vietnam...). Working with them, we have garnered a priceless treasure of knowledge about behavior change, empowerment, cultural adaptation, and community development. And last but not least, we have also gleaned knowledge on how we learn, and how we can learn more quickly from experience.

**GAP International has been granted consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, ECOSOC. How important is this status for implementing your views?**

**MM.** In one sense, not at all. There is little direct relevance either to our members’ day-to-day work or to our action research. But in another sense it’s hugely important. Partly it gives us insight into the ideas emerging within the UN community; partly it enables us to make our voice heard.

More importantly: maintaining our status is an expression of our support. Nothing human is perfect. But we believe in the idea of a universal common good, and the United Nations is so far the best option we humans have created for progressing in that direction.

**The transition towards more sustainable societies has started in different places and is moving at different paces. Do you think it will have become widespread enough and moved quickly enough before a serious world crisis breaks out? (By crisis I don’t mean in the strictly financial or economic sense, but a truly systemic crisis linked to resources depletion.)**

**MM.** I wish I had a crystal ball! The only realistic answer is that no one knows. It may already be ‘too late’ to salvage what we think of as human civilization. Or it may not. In the meantime, we switch to low-energy light-bulbs and buy organic food.

This highlights a dilemma of sustainable development. In many languages there’s an expression meaning that ‘the best’ can become an enemy of ‘the good’: by striving only for the best, we may disastrously ignore all the small opportunities for improvement. Which, taken together, could make the essential difference.



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We sometimes speak of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ sustainability. They are hardly precise terms, but my personal interpretation is that weak sustainability is about those small steps that make things less bad; whereas strong sustainability is about the steps – big or small – that actually restore damage already done. In other words, we need transitions and we need transformations: completely new ways of looking at the world, of combining changes that will develop momentum of their own.

You may have heard of the ‘ecological footprint’, which in essence measures how bad things are and indeed how much worse they are getting, in many areas. One of our member organizations, in India, has developed the concept of an ‘ecological handprint’: a measure of what each of us does to contribute to solutions.

The challenge for all of us working with sustainable development is to make the most of even the weakest steps, without losing sight of the strong vision. An example of this is praising businesses for taking ‘weak sustainability’ steps due to their actual contribution, while simultaneously reminding them of the need and opportunity to find ‘strong’ solutions. Or, as in our example from Ukraine, encouraging school children to take action each within their own sphere of influence, and thus to experience their own power as they weigh dissatisfaction and hope.

So, is it too late? I don’t know. But I do know that if I choose to be an optimist and believe there is still time, then I will continue to make a contribution. If we all choose to be pessimists, and do nothing, then it certainly will soon be too late.

**You have been Vice-President of the Union of International Associations, a research institute and documentation center, since 2005. One of its great virtues is that it covers many different topics and collects information of great value in many fields. How is this great organization helping to raise awareness on sustainable development issues (especially in decision-makers)?**

**MM.** The UIA was founded as a contribution to world peace, ironically at the start of one of the most war-torn half-centuries in human history. My own opinion is that the present-day equivalent of a focus on world peace is a focus on sustainable development. We have indeed come a long way on the path away from war, despite the fear mongering headlines. The new refugee streams are engendered at least as much by climate change as by hostilities.

The UIA founders saw civil society’s potential to contribute to a positive future for humankind. International civil society, as chronicled by the UIA, has grown explosively and is in many instances indeed making a significant contribution: think of Amnesty, Red Cross/Crescent, Save the Children, to name some of the best known. Such big organizations have little need of support from the UIA. For smaller organizations, especially in countries where civil society is regarded with suspicion by authorities, attention from the UIA can be very important. The simple act of publishing, world-wide, the existence and activities of a small CSO can help them to survive and work. >

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Beyond that, my own belief is that the UIA could do even more to support international organizations focused on different aspects of sustainable development, including, of course, the original emphasis on peace-building. Few human activities are as unsustainable as war.

Will the change that allows us to treat sustainability in the right way come from a revolution of the mind (i.e. in thoughts and values) or will it come from a techno-scientific revolution (such as in the case of cold fusion in the field of energy)? New techno-optimism for change is emerging from many digital world users, as you know.

If we so choose, the accelerating technical developments can give every human on Earth a comfortable quality of life in return for a modest contribution of working hours. Or we can choose to use those same technical developments to intensify human poverty and misery, and destroy our life support systems. What will we choose? My belief is that it depends on an opening of the minds and hearts of many, many people. ✕



**Marilyn Mehlmann** is General Secretary of Global Action Plan (GAP) International, a network of NGOs that teach individuals, businesses and organizations a sustainable lifestyle and sustainable manners of operating. Global Action Plan International aims at empowering people to live and work in a more sustainable way. She is a partner and senior consultant with the Fenix Group (Sweden), focusing on sustainability, leadership and social change processes. She is also a founding and board member of the Swedish Community of Learners. Her experience combines backgrounds in psychosynthesis, enspiriting, and empowerment to create new fora for personal and professional development, including a coaching 'master class' currently offered in four countries. Since 2005, Mehlmann has also been Vice-President of the Union of International Associations. She received the Rachel Carson Prize 2011-2012 for her long term efforts to involve individuals, companies and NGOs in acting sustainably.



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