



**Opening address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the conference
“Getting Ahead”
28th May 1999**

Distinguished participants
Honoured guests

Those of us who have been brought up in the Christian faith have been instilled with the philosophical and religious premise that creativity is a fixed process with defined boundaries, a clear beginning and an absolute end.

This is brought out most clearly in the opening of the Old Testament, in the description of how God created the world in six days. Then, according to the Bible, creation was complete and God decided to rest. The mountains, the valleys, the oceans, the islands were all in their appropriate places. It is a profound story, simple yet full of symbolic meaning, and for century after century, soon for 2000 years, this has been the firm foundation of the Western civilisation’s view of the creative universe.

The only problem with this familiar account is that the description is not entirely accurate. When the Almighty came to the creation of Iceland he – or she – became so fascinated with this challenging endeavour that he forgot to rest. Here the creation has continued, from one millennium to the next, in a never-ending process: Volcanic eruptions, geysers and lava fields; earthquakes and ever-widening rifts in the interior, new mountains and new islands in recent decades; then two years ago a volcanic eruption below Europe’s largest glacier, the first such creative happening in the annals of modern science; which melted a 600-metre thick block of ice and demonstrated beyond doubt who is the Master of the Universe. Despite the combined strength of our scientific and technical knowledge we, the bearers of modern civilisation, have not reached such a level of power.

Since Iceland has thus been the quintessential country of creation it is highly appropriate that an advanced discussion on how to harvest and enhance the creative faculties of the population, of scholars and scientists, of entrepreneurs and managers, should be hosted in our country.

In many ways the influence and the inspiration from being brought up in such direct contact with the creative forces of nature has, in Iceland, bred a culture dominated by considerable emphasis on the creative capabilities of every citizen. To the farmers as well as the fishermen it is natural to be an innovator, to produce verse and short poems on the spur of the moment, to voice profound philosophical views on matters of state and of global importance.

The European travellers who visited Iceland before the turn of this century became astounded to find, in the turf farmhouses, learned and original thinkers who could hold their own in wide-ranging discussions on the essential problems facing humanity and the civilised world.

It is one of the blessings of our modern economic development that the traditional aspects of Icelandic culture have become dominant features of our evolving economy, especially in the last ten years or so when high technology, software and scientific discoveries have been in the forefront of the economic evolution.

I have gradually reached the fundamental conclusion that the crucial force determining successful progress and evolution towards greater prosperity and growth in the economy of the 21st century will be creativity, the ability to formulate new ideas, approaches, solutions and designs. Financial strength, technological superiority, bureaucratic dominance or even strategic advantages in the marketplace will not by themselves bring guarantees of everlasting progress, if the elements of creativity are not among the chief ingredients.

Therefore small nations, small communities or small enterprises, richly endowed with creative faculties, will be able to maintain a challenging edge in the new global economy. They are endowed with the skills to develop new products and practices, from the creative stage through the process of design and production, and make them available to the consumer or buyers in different markets worldwide.

In this respect small nations like Iceland can serve global corporations with some important lessons in how to prevent bureaucratic or administrative boundaries, conflicting interests or formalities, from hindering the full blossoming of the workforce's creative talent. My country offers manifold examples of how, especially in software and

high-tech companies, interdisciplinary contacts, co-operation across boundaries, trust in personal relationships, have become crucial elements in bringing Icelandic companies to the forefront in global competitiveness.

We have furthermore always adhered to the premise that potentially everyone can contribute to the process of innovation and development, that no division of a company or segment of an industry should be excluded from the possibility of bringing change or new practices to the field of production and processing.

We have even instigated a competition among children as young as 7 and 8 years old, dedicated to creating new products with practical applications and marketable qualities. A few weeks ago I honoured the young winners, charming little girls and boys, with prizes for their brilliant ideas. If children can contribute in such an inspiring way, how can we define exactly where the process of innovation and product development can and cannot take place? Potentially everyone, young or old, endowed with formal qualifications or just their natural talent, can become a contributor to creative processes in the new global economy. There are neither clear boundaries nor defined territories where such creation should take place. The fundamental characteristic of the future is that potentially anyone can become a creator.

Our task is simply to make sure that the economy, the institutions, the enterprises, the financial services and the legal frameworks are constructed in such a way as to ensure the use of these inherited capabilities, because they will indeed be the most profound resource for progress in the 21st century.

I thank the initiators of the “Getting Ahead” conference for their brilliant idea of convening such a forum here in Iceland and I wish you all great benefit and delight from your deliberations.