Businesses exist to provide value to their shareholders. This is a simple, accepted truth. But the context in which businesses operate – and therefore, their ability to provide value to their shareholders in the trusted, accepted ways of the past – is changing rapidly.

I’ll name a few trends that I believe are significantly altering your businesses now and, increasingly so, into the future.

1. **Climate change** - Take recent cyclone Idai on the south-east coast of Africa. Not only has this had devastating impact on human life, but for businesses it has led to disruption in infrastructure, loss of soil, flooding, and displacement of small-holder farmers that are critical to the support of global food systems.

2. **Youth activism** - On March 15, tens of thousands of students worldwide cut class and took to the streets to demand climate action. This was a coordinated global school walkout including 1,700 towns and cities in over 100 different countries. These are your consumers of tomorrow.

3. **Farmers on the move and on the march** - For example, we have hundreds of farmers fleeing north from Central America’s “Dry Corridor,” spurred by longer and more frequent droughts. As well, tens of thousands of workers at farms in Mexico who supply the berry company Driscoll have unionized creating the Families United for Justice.

4. **Impact investing** - Concurrent with increased interest in food system growth is the rapidly growing industry of impact investing. According to the World Economic Forum, “The impact market expanded fivefold between 2013 and 2017, reaching $228 billion globally last year.” The invest / divest movement so far has commitments from over 1,000 organisations.
including churches, universities, and foundations and almost 60,000 high net-worth individuals with combined assets of $8 Trillion.

5. **Food systems connections** - The global community is making stronger and stronger connections between food systems and critical global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, migration, urban uprisings, ocean acidification, poverty, and health. Take, for example, the USA 2050 Plan for Deep Decarbonization, the IPCC 1.5-degree report, the recent EAT Lancet Report, and our own reports at the Global Alliance: TEEBAgriFood on the economics of the food systems, our Food-Health Nexus report, and our upcoming Beacons of Hope transitions framework.

So, what does this mean? It means essentially that your businesses are in the crosshairs. You have, or soon will have, become the centre of focus for global pressure to act quickly and boldly on climate change and the nature agenda.

I have the fortunate position – doing what I do – of an eagle’s eye view of global trends, stakeholder perspectives, and a sense of this moment’s zeitgeist. The word on the street is that the food agri-business community has rested in the shadows up until now. The climate community, for example, has not been fixated on you since its sights have been on oil, gas, and coal.

But now, given the centrality of food systems – and therefore food systems businesses – to the urgent climate and nature agenda, sights are turning to you to ensure that your businesses are “planetary boundary” compatible. This means potential litigation, activists campaigns, divestment decisions, and youth protests getting at the heart of business risk and reputation. This is what I hear and see as I talk to key global stakeholders around the world.

So back to providing value to your shareholders … what now? How do you do this in such a challenging context?

I have 3 proposals:

1. **Undertake and publish transparent and comprehensive systemic analysis of your business policies and practices**
   This can be done through true cost accounting – the subject of a session I moderated earlier today. True Cost Accounting allows us to acknowledge, measure, value, and manage the huge externalities along food value chains – positive and negative. Our evaluations of food systems have to-date mostly used the narrow lens of “productivity per hectare” which reinforces business-as-usual.
The Global Alliance, along with UN Environment and the European Commission, developed TEEBAgriFood which is a cutting-edge systems thinking framework that allows us to: a) better understand the impacts and externalities of agriculture and food value chains; b) evaluate these ‘eco-agri-food systems’ in a holistic, comprehensive, and inclusive way; and c) manage the impacts by identifying key actor groups – such as policymakers, farmers, and the business sector – to explore different solution pathways and generate new thinking and strategies for effecting system transformation. In short, TEEBAgriFood gives us better information to make better choices.

I joke that I see powerful TEEBAgriFood valuation studies everywhere I look – from my grandfather’s farm to Canada’s new dietary guidelines to the recently launched EAT Lancet Report. I encourage you to take up TCA, and possibly TEEBAgriFood itself, in your organizations to incite meaningful analysis and, based on that, bold action.

I encourage you not to just take up TCA but to publish the TCA valuations studies that come out of this process. Publishing these studies is critical so that we can build collective understanding, work through tough decisions and trade-offs, and co-create innovative solutions together as an invested global community. These are collective challenges that require collective solutions.

2. My second proposal is to invest in bold action now

What does this look like? We know there is no singular action. Solutions must be many, widespread, and context specific. But there are key principles that need to guide action. The Global alliance has 6 that guide all we do – renewability, resilience, equity, diversity, health, and interconnectedness. Public participation and democratic control is also emerging as an important distinct principle. Let me briefly touch on each of these with an example or two largely drawn from a meeting the Global Alliance co-hosted with IUCN at its World Conservation Congress on how to bring together food and nature.

Renewability. What does renewability look like? It means ensuring your operations are protecting the intrinsic value and integrity of natural resources, biodiversity, and important ecosystem services in the land, forests, and seas. It also means, for example, minimizing reliance on non-renewable inputs. And, as Jeff Seabright from Unilever in an event we co-hosted with IUCN suggested, it means urgently doubling down on commitments to deforestation-free supply chains.

Resilience. What does resilience look like? It means embracing nature-based solutions such as soil carbon sequestration to ensure supply chains don’t contribute to increasing climate challenges, but rather act as a tool for mitigating climate-changing emissions. It
means, for example, developing circular economy models that involve recycling, reuse, and combining resources to reduce dependency on external inputs. It means new finance and risk management tools for smallholder farmers; minimizing food waste throughout the system; and, as Jeff Sachs has recommended, effectively linking food production, processing, and consumption to the carbon budget to keep global warming within the 1.5-degree limit.

**Equity.** Pavan Sukhdev, study lead of TEEB, argues that we must ensure our food systems continue to provide jobs to the 1.6 billion small-holder farmers in need of fair employment. It means, ensuring those involved in food production have some control over the means of production such as opportunities to land, to production subsidies, and to capital. It means, eliminating food production-related environmental contamination such as air and water pollution and pesticide contamination. As well, it means being particularly cognizant of the role of women, small-holders, and marginalized communities in food systems; and mainstreaming the diversity and staff representation on boards and in leadership.

Speaking of **diversity**, Braulio Ferreira de Souza Dias, head of the Convention on Biological Diversity recommends, for example, radical consideration of the genetic diversity of crops and livestock, including their wild relatives as the foundation of our food systems. As well it means not just protecting and conserving agricultural biodiversity but diversity in healthy diets, market diversity, farm diversity, and diversity in local knowledge processes, traditions, and food expressions.

**Health.** This is a simple notion but deeply challenging in practice. Essentially we need to ensure food options are healthy, safe, nutritious, and affordable, as well as tasty and enjoyable. The recent Eat Lancet report argues that “Transformation to healthy diets by 2050 will require substantial dietary shifts, including a greater than 50% reduction in global consumption of unhealthy foods, such as red meat and sugar, and a greater than 100% increase in consumption of healthy foods, such as nuts, fruits, vegetables, and legumes.”

**Interconnectedness.** This is the systems-principle, recognizing the complex web of dynamics and interactions across the food system. This includes connecting through communication and cooperation across regions; urban-rural connections; connections from the local to the global; connections between issues and movements; and connections between system actors.
Public participation. What does this look like? Your own Peter Bakker suggested at IUCN bringing together fragmented organizations and initiatives that aim to address the global food system promoting collaborative sectoral approaches to transformational change. Amongst those organizations and initiatives, and the various ways to do this, public participation means, for example, ensuring participation of small-scale food producers and the constituencies most affected by hunger and malnutrition in decision-making. Again, easy notionally, difficult in practice.

This is all part of the Food and Nature imperative. We do not need a computer models to tell us that these principles are right and good: that we must not destroy the natural system upon which our food systems depend; that poverty is wrong and preventable; that deep resilience is needed from the seed to the corn field if we are going to survive the climate threat; that genuine engagement and inclusion of all actors is necessary for true systemic change.

If we do not embrace these principles and live by them, our system cannot survive, and yet too often we don’t live by these principles. I’ve provided a long list of examples – of course it will require this and more. The principles guiding this list are “a set not a menu.” You can’t pick and choose the ones you like, or the ones that come more easily to you, because we know from the transition literature that this is the way to true transformation. The fall of the Berlin Wall, HIV/AIDS, civil rights victories, the end of colonialism – there was no three-point plan for these massive transformative movements, but instead a loosely coordinated uptake of multiple actions that led to a tipping point.

Are there a few bold actions with more “bang for the buck” so to speak? Maybe. Let me try one out on you.

3. Be a leader in creating a transformational new breed of business

Despite efforts by an increasing number of companies to reduce their negative ecological and health impacts, changes are not yet meeting the need for the necessary transformation required for Paris, Sustainable Development Goals, Convention on Biological Diversity, and other global treaties and conventions.

What would be truly transformational? Many analyses point to the constraints of a singular bottom-line. A vast majority of public companies, especially in the U.S., still operate under strong pressure to maximize short-term profits as their ultimate bottom-line. There is some analysis now that even choosing a triple bottom-line approach is deficient.
What about pursuing alternative bottom-lines? Thirty U.S. states have passed laws that allow the formation of “Benefit Corporations,” companies that are not required to maximize profits and can decide to reinvest in community and the environment without the risks of being opposed or slowed down by shareholders. Coro Strandberg, a leading Canadian corporate sustainability consultant, argues that these are transformational companies, a new breed of business that recognizes that global forces such as escalating climate change, rising inequality, growing resource scarcity, and changing customer expectations affect the context in which they can succeed and thrive. He argues that “the transformational company future-proofs its operations and supply chains by tackling social problems through its core business model. They ‘do good’ as part of their profit-making strategy. They adopt bold, visionary goals even where the solutions don’t yet exist and unleash capital, innovation, and human ingenuity to get ahead of the curve and set the world on a positive course.”

I once heard Peter Bakker say that what we need is nothing short of a transformation of capitalism and the very paradigm underpinning our systems of today. Could this be one of the directions he’s pointing?

Serious, knowledgeable, empirically-oriented, and sober-minded experts from around the world conclude that by mid-century, this century, the upheavals of people brought on by climate change portend the possibility that by 2050, 20 countries could be gone, 60 major cities underwater, and 1.5 billion people displaced. Climate change will lead to massive violence on a global scale. Children are especially vulnerable. Our children. Our grandchildren.

That’s why this is such a contested moment. And such a pivotal moment. It’s a moment in which the most successful companies will be those who won’t only manage to navigate through growing uncertainty, but the ones who will open the doors to innovative models and turn today’s daunting challenges into economic opportunities that work with nature, and work with those most central to the system – women and small-holder farmers. We are the last generation that can prevent irreparable damage to our planet.

I worked at Unilever Canada for 8 years as Manager of Environmental and Corporate Affairs. I know what it’s like to feel like a cog in a machine – I’m not putting this on Unilever but on myself as one employee in a sea of policies, projections, targets, executives, marketing managers, and quarterly reporting not sure how to assert my agency as a young, female professional.

But we aren’t cogs in a machine. Each of us, personally, has incredible agency to transform ourselves, our families, our communities, and our businesses. So, it’s not only a contested moment and a pivotal moment. It’s also a deeply personal moment.
So how will you act? I was asked to challenge you, which I would like to do, but you know this, we all know it. So, I’m challenging all of us to:

1. Evaluate and publish holistic valuations of our policies and practices
2. Immediately move into bold action now based on, and even before, the results
3. Reimagine and redesign our businesses and organizations to work deeply with nature and those our food future depends upon

In conclusion, I often quote Donella Meadows, a deep systems thinker and brilliant communicator. She asked: “Is this really possible? Can the world actually ease down below the limits and avoid collapse?” – because we have about 10 years.

She outlines 3 scenarios based, of course, on mental models. The first mental model is that “this world, for all practical purposes, has no limits. Choosing that mental model will encourage extractive business-as-usual and take the human economy even farther beyond the limits. The result will be collapse.” I think – I hope! – most of us have gone beyond this.

The second mental model is that “the limits are real and close, and that there is not enough time, and that people cannot be moderate or responsible or compassionate. At least not in time. That model is self-fulfilling. If the world’s people choose to believe it, they will be proven right. The result will be collapse.” I think there are many still in this headspace.

The third mental model is that “the limits are real and close. But there is just enough time, with no time to waste. There is just enough energy, enough material, enough money, enough environmental resilience, and enough human virtue to bring about a planned reduction in the ecological footprint of humankind: a sustainability revolution to a much better world for the vast majority.”

She finishes by positing that the “third scenario might very well be wrong. But the evidence we have seen, from world data to global computer models, suggests that it could conceivably be made right. There is no way of knowing for sure, other than to try it.”