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Note on Business Sustainability as Systems Change: Market Transformation

The focus of business sustainability for the past three decades has been to fit the issue within the existing models of business management. While this translation strategy is both expedient and critical to gain buy-in from corporate leaders, in the long run it is not enough. By framing sustainability strictly as a continuing shift in ordinary strategic concerns from existing stakeholder demands, the full scope of the issue cannot be realized. Responses will not be dictated by ecosystem constraints or biophysical realities, but rather by internal and external strategic norms which yield routinized responses. These responses are generally grounded in strategies for eco-efficiency, which do not challenge the fundamental underlying models of business that are actually causing the problems in the first place. These models treat the environment as a limitless source of materials and a limitless repository for waste, and are built on a belief system that sees perpetual economic growth based on continued consumption as desirable and possible. So, while fitting sustainability within existing market logics are important for slowing the velocity at which we are approaching a system collapse, they do not fully address the roots of the problem.¹

For the long term, corporate sustainability strategies must move beyond reducing unsustainability, and move towards creating sustainability.² For example, most companies are setting greenhouse gas reduction goals to address climate change. This is helpful in the short term. But a true solution to the issue requires that they go carbon neutral or even carbon negative.³ This requires a fundamentally new approach and way of thinking to address both the problems and the solutions.

To fully capture the urgent scope of the problem, we must come to terms with the notion that we are now living in the Anthropocene, a new geologic epoch in which we cannot talk about the Earth's ecosystems without recognizing the human role in altering them.⁴ As a species, we have grown to such numbers and our technology has grown to such power that we are altering the ecosystem on a planetary scale. In this frame, scientists have conceptualized nine "planetary boundaries"⁵ that represent "thresholds below which humanity can safely operate and beyond which the stability of planetary-scale systems cannot be relied upon."⁶ Shown in **Figure 1**, they include: climate change, ocean acidification, ozone depletion, atmospheric

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This conceptual note can be used in conjunction with "Note on Business Sustainability as a Market Shift: Enterprise Integration," WDI Publishing #2501315.