

Creating Integrated Value: From Systems Thinking to Sustainable Transformation in Business and Society

Inauguration Lecture of the
Chair in Sustainable Transformation

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Executive Summary

After more than 30 years of sustainable development, the world is still struggling to address many social and environmental challenges – now most notably through the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Given the laudable efforts by governments, businesses and civil society over the past few decades, we have to ask why so many of these challenges – from climate and biodiversity loss to income inequality and forced migration – are still getting worse, not better.

I believe the answer lies in a failure to apply systems thinking – to see and to act on the interconnectedness of our economic, technological, human, social and ecological systems. Put another way, we are still often treating symptoms and not causes. And one of the most fundamental causes of our present unsustainability is the flawed design of our economic system, which is based on outdated assumptions, fragmented thinking and perverse incentives.

I grew up experiencing an unsustainable socio-political system in South Africa called *apartheid*, which was fundamentally exclusive, exploitative and extractive. Today, we are living under a global apartheid system. The only difference is that South Africa's apartheid was fuelled by nationalism and our global apartheid is fuelled by neoliberalism. The real challenge of sustainable development, therefore, is to redesign our global economic and business systems to be inclusive, empowering and restorative.

There are three key insights from systems thinking that can help us to achieve this new industrial revolution. The first is to clearly recognise the areas of breakdown in society – what I call the five forces of fragmentation, which are: disruption, disconnection, disparity, destruction and discontent – and to work on direct solutions to each of these. The second is to look for ways to reverse these using the five counter-forces of integration, which are to find secure, smart, shared, sustainable and satisfying solutions.

And the third key is to create integrated value by finding the synergies between these counter-forces. *Integrated value* is a term I coined in 2014. It builds on previous concepts like stakeholder value, blended value, sustainable value and shared value, and is similarly about rethinking how we conceive of and measure value in our societies, economies and businesses. But it places more emphasises on the innovation opportunities that exist at the nexus of the resilience, exponential, access, circular and wellbeing economies.

Integrated value, therefore, is one of the key pillars of sustainable transformation and it works together with meaningful innovation, the second pillar. However, there are two other critical ingredients needed if we are to transform what the World Economic Forum has called our “fractured world”. We also need to nurture purposeful leadership and we need to envision positive futures, the third and fourth pillars of sustainable transformation.

There is an African proverb that says: *if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together*. Sustainable transformation will fail unless we go together. So we need to become better storytellers, to weave a new sustainability story that is so compelling that everyone will want to join the sustainability revolution. And we need to become better collaborators. This should be the hallmark of my Chair in Sustainable Transformation, working with many and diverse partners - including my Chair partners BASF, Port of Antwerp and Randstand - to create sustainable mindsets among future leaders and to support sustainable transformation among leading companies.

Sustainable Development: A Story of Progress and Failures

Sustainable development entered our global lexicon in 1987, through the publication of the Brundtland Report of the United Nations, called *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987). Today, more than 30 years later, the world is still struggling to address many serious and urgent social and environmental challenges, as the World Economic Forum's (WEF, 2018) latest Global Risks Report shows (Table 1).

Table 1: Top 10 perceived global risks over the past 5 years (2014-2018)

Global risks	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Extreme weather events					
Failure of climate change mitigation and adaption					
Weapons of mass destruction					
Water crises					
Major natural disasters or catastrophes					
Data theft or fraud					
Cyber-attacks					
Large-scale involuntary migration					
Inter-state conflict with regional consequences					
High structural unemployment or underemployment					

Source: WEF (2018)

The current global response is the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, adopted in 2015 (Sachs, 2015), following remarkable progress by governments towards the UN Millennium Development Goals (UN, 2015), most notably with extreme poverty in developing countries dropping from 47% in 1990 to 14% in 2015. Big business also demonstrated widespread engagement with sustainability, tracked and encouraged by the likes of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the UN Global Compact and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI, UNGC and WBCSD, 2015).

Even civil society appears to have been more active than ever, with Hawken (2007) calling it “the largest movement in the world”, comprising more than 2 million non-governmental organizations working on sustainable development. Meetings like the World Social Forum, convened most years since 2001, continue to give a voice to this critical non-profit sector (WSF, 2016). And academia has joined the fray too, through initiatives like the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education (UN PRME), which nearly 700 business schools have signed to date .

Given these laudable efforts by governments, businesses and civil society over the past few decades, we have to ask why so many of these challenges – from climate change and biodiversity loss to income inequality, forced migration and corruption – are still getting worse, not better. A few facts and figures taken from key reports suffice to give an indicative picture of major areas of failure in sustainable development over the past 30 years, despite other areas of progress (Table 2). These and other failures are eloquently summarised in Raworth's (2017) book, *Doughnut Economics*.

1. <http://www.unprme.org/>

Table 2: Top five failures after 30 years of sustainable development

Area of failure	Indicative facts and figures	Source
Climate change	Human influence on the climate system is clear, caused by greenhouse gas levels unprecedented in the last 800,000 years	IPCC (2014) Fifth Assessment Report
Biodiversity loss	Global populations of fish, birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles declined by 58% between 1970 and 2012	WWF (2016) Living Planet Report (WWF)
Income inequality	The top 1% of the population captured twice as much global income growth as the bottom 50% since 1980, causing rising inequality	WIL (2018) World Inequality Report
Forced migration	An unprecedented 65.6 million people around the world have been forced from home, among them 22.5 million refugees	UNHCR (2017) Statistical Yearbook
Corruption	Around the world nearly 1 in 4 said that they paid a bribe when accessing public services in the last 12 months	TI (2017) Global Corruption Barometer

Systems Thinking: The Missing Ingredient

The reason for these sustainable development blind spots, or intractable problems, lies in a failure to apply systems thinking – which Capra and Luisi (2015) define as “thinking in terms of relationships, patterns and context.” Systems thinking – grounded in the theories of holism (Smuts, 1926), general systems (Von Bertalanffy, 1968) and chaos or complexity (Gleick, 1997) – is intuitively obvious, but practically difficult to apply, although there have been various attempts (Capra, 1982; Senge, 1990; Visser, 1995; MEA, 2005; Rockström et al, 2009).

The result is a failure to see clearly and to act on the interconnectedness of our economic, technological, human, social and ecological systems. Put another way, we are still often treating symptoms and not causes. The dangerous consequence is that we may be moving towards what systems scientist Laszlo (2010) calls a ‘chaos point’ – a critical tipping point beyond which we either evolve to a safer, more sustainable world, or the social, economic, and ecological systems that frame our life become overstressed and break down.

Unfortunately, when we look at the way the modern capitalist economy works, the same characteristics apply, which means that we are effectively living under a global apartheid system (Table 3). The only difference is that South Africa’s apartheid was a political system fuelled by nationalism and our global apartheid is an economic system fuelled by neoliberalism. The real challenge of sustainable development, therefore, is to redesign our global economic and business systems to be inclusive, empowering and restorative.

Table 3: Characteristics of global economic apartheid

Characteristic	Description	Illustrative evidence	Must change to
Exclusive	Benefiting the minority in power	The top 0.7% of the world’s population earns 45.9% of global wealth, while the bottom 70.1% earns only 2.7% (Credit Suisse, 2017)	Inclusive
Exploitative	Abusing labour and human rights	There are around 260 million underage workers (child labour) and 40 million slave workers (forced labour) fuelling our global economy (ILO, 2013; 2016)	Empowering
Extractive	Using natural resources unsustainably	Materials extracted, harvested and consumed worldwide increased by 60% since 1980, an 8-fold increase since the early 1900s (OECD, 2015)	Restorative

There are three key insights from systems thinking that can help us to achieve this new industrial revolution: recognise systemic breakdown, design systemic solutions and create integrated value. These will each be explored in turn.

Personal Vignette 1: Lessons from Apartheid

Growing up in South Africa, under the divisive socio-political system called apartheid, I got to see first-hand how a lack of systems thinking can result in societal breakdown. When I entered the University of Cape Town to study a Business Science degree in 1988, student protests against apartheid were commonplace, as were heated and sometimes violent confrontations between democracy activists and the state police.

One of the classes I took was on labour economics and I remember experiencing a eureka moment – like a lightbulb turning on in the darkness – as our professor showed how South Africa's migrant labour system and institutionalised discrimination was not only morally reprehensible, but also socially disastrous and economically insane. For the first time, I was able to see clearly the interconnections between different areas of breakdown in society. What's more, my social conscience now had hard facts and figures to support it.

The evidence showed that apartheid was a brutal system of governance that had three fundamental characteristics: it was exclusive (benefiting the minority in power), exploitative (abusing labour and human rights) and extractive ('cashing in' natural resources for short-term enrichment). Value was being created but only for the few, at the expense of the many and the environment. The beneficiaries of apartheid were a self-proclaimed elite that acted like a cancer cell, enriching themselves, while undermining the very living system on which they were ultimately dependent.

Key Insight 1: Recognising Systemic Breakdown

My own application of systems thinking to our global challenges, following a 30-year career working on sustainable development, resulted in the Five Forces of Fragmentation Framework (Figure 1), echoing the World Economic Forum's 2018 motto: *creating a shared future in a fractured world*. According to my analysis, the most critical areas of systemic breakdown in society are related to: disruption, disconnection, disparity, destruction and discontent. Each is described briefly below.

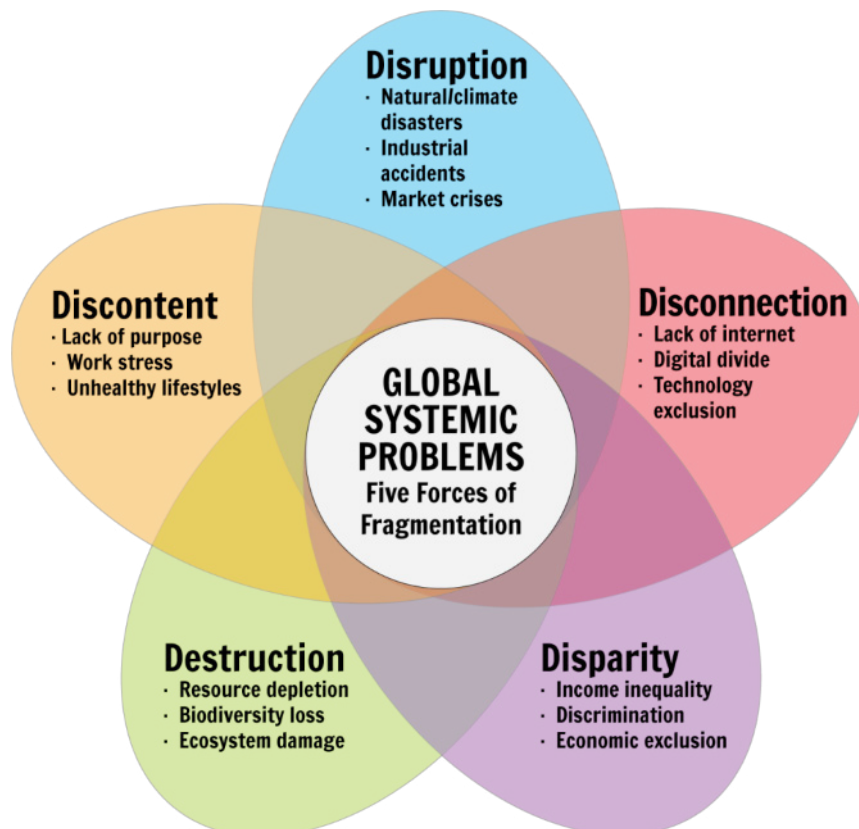


Figure 1: Global Systemic Problems: The Five Forces of Fragmentation

Disruption – This refers to any instability that threatens human life, safety and security, and is most often associated with political conflicts, acts of terrorism, demographic disruption, industrial accidents and natural disasters. For instance, according to the Global Peace Index 2016, only 10 countries in the world can be classified as conflict free (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2016). And according to Munich Re, natural disasters (climatological, hydrological and meteorological) increased from around 200 per year in 1980 to around 700 per year in 2016 (The Economist, 2017).

Disconnection – This refers to any form of isolation that prevents human communication and effective data sharing, and is most often associated with a lack of access to knowledge and smart technologies, including the internet-of-things, big data and artificial intelligence. For instance, 4 billion people still lack access to the internet and nearly 6 billion people do not have high-speed internet (World Bank, 2016). Nearly 2 billion do not use a mobile phone, and almost half a billion live outside areas with a mobile signal (World Bank, 2016).

Disparity – This refers to any inequities that increase social friction or inefficient resource utilization, and is most often associated with income inequality, discrimination and economic exclusion. For instance, from 1960 to today, the absolute gap between the average incomes of people in the richest and poorest countries has grown by 135% (Bolt and van Zanden, 2014) and average CEO to worker pay in the U.S. has gone from 20 to 1 in 1965 to around 300 to 1 today, with income shares of the top 1% and top 0.1% of U.S. households doubling from 1979 to 2007 (Mishel and Davis, 2015).

Destruction – This refers to any production and consumption that leads to the decline of resources and disruption of ecosystems, and is most often associated with economic growth, over-consumption, land-use change and industrial pollution. For instance, according to the Living Planet Index, populations of vertebrate species will have declined 67% from 1970 to 2020 if current trends continue (WWF, 2016). And unabated climate change, resulting in 2.5 degrees Celsius warming, will devastate ecosystems, increase poverty and cost the global economy \$12 trillion by 2050 (UNDP, 2016).

Discontent – This refers to all unhealthy lifestyles and toxic environments that impair human wellbeing, and is most often associated with lack of purpose, work stress, poor diets and insufficient exercise. For instance, more than 40% of deaths from non-communicable diseases (which account for 70% of all deaths, an increase since 2000) are premature or preventable, notably from cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, cancers and diabetes (WHO, 2017). And depression and anxiety disorders affect 10% of people, cost the global economy \$1 trillion each year and have increased 50% from 1990 and 2013 (WHO and World Bank, 2016).

Personal Vignette 2: Lessons in Letting Go

Since graduating in 1991, I have spent most of my career working with business on responding to these forces of breakdown in society, including six years setting up and running KPMG's Sustainability Services. After I left, I completed my PhD in corporate social responsibility and set up CSR International. At the launch event for CSR International in March 2000, I held a mock funeral service for CSR, who I declared "passed away peacefully in his sleep, another unfortunate victim of the global financial crisis."

*Why the amateur dramatics? Because I had become convinced that our old model of corporate responsibility and sustainability was failing. A baby was also born at that surreal ceremony, who I christened CSR 2.0, or transformative CSR. My contention, elaborated at length in my books *The Age of Responsibility* (2011) and *CSR 2.0* (2014a), was that defensive, charitable, promotional and strategic approaches to CSR, which I dubbed CSR 1.0, were all lacking impact, because they were incremental, peripheral and uneconomic.*

CSR 2.0, by contrast, is like Web 2.0 – it is all about innovation, co-creation and going to scale. Rather than a channel for one-way broadcasting, it is an enabling platform based on the principles of creativity, scalability, responsiveness, glocality and circularity. CSR 2.0 seeks to transform the old industrial system into one which is inherently sustainable and responsible. And I am pleased to say that this new vision for CSR has enjoyed considerable support over the past 10 years.

Key Insight 2: Designing Systemic Solutions

I think one of the reasons CSR 2.0 has resonated strongly around the world is that it links to my second insight, and a key pillar of sustainable transformation, which is around the need for meaningful innovation, in other words, new technologies and business models that bring us solutions to our biggest social and environmental problems. Research by the global technology firm Philips (2013) on meaningful innovation shows that there is a huge appetite for innovations that will make a real difference in people's everyday lives. And given that only 54% of those surveyed worldwide were satisfied with existing innovations in the areas they considered to be the most important to their lives, this represents a significant market opportunity.

Countering the forces of fragmentation means designing solutions that systemically address each problem area: secure solutions that reduce disruption, smart solutions that tackle disconnection, shared solutions that reduce disparity, sustainable solutions that reverse destruction and satisfying solutions that address discontent (Figure 2). Many of these counter-trends were anticipated by pioneering systems thinkers decades earlier (e.g. Boulding, 1966; Capra, 1982; Russell, 1991; Henderson, 1997; Harman, 1998; Hawken, Lovins and Lovins, 1999; Meadows, 2008). Each counterforce of integration is briefly described below.

Secure – This refers to innovation in the resilience economy (Buheji, 2018), which is about lowering risk, aiding recovery and ensuring continuity, i.e. finding solutions that help us prepare for and respond to emergencies and catastrophes, allowing us to survive and thrive through periods of breakdown, uncertainty and volatility. This helps us to address problems like the \$330 billion in losses (\$49 billion uninsured) from world-wide natural catastrophes in 2017, up from \$184 billion in 2016 (Munich Re, 2018).

Smart – This refers to innovation in the exponential economy (Carlson and Wilmot, 2006), which is about connecting people and things, using big data and artificial intelligence (AI), i.e. finding solutions that use technology to better connect us to each other and allow us to share what we value most, and facilitate more democratic governance by allowing us (as customers or citizens) to give direct, immediate feedback. The increased use of exponential technologies could add \$1.36 trillion to total global economic output in 2020, according to a study by Accenture (2015).

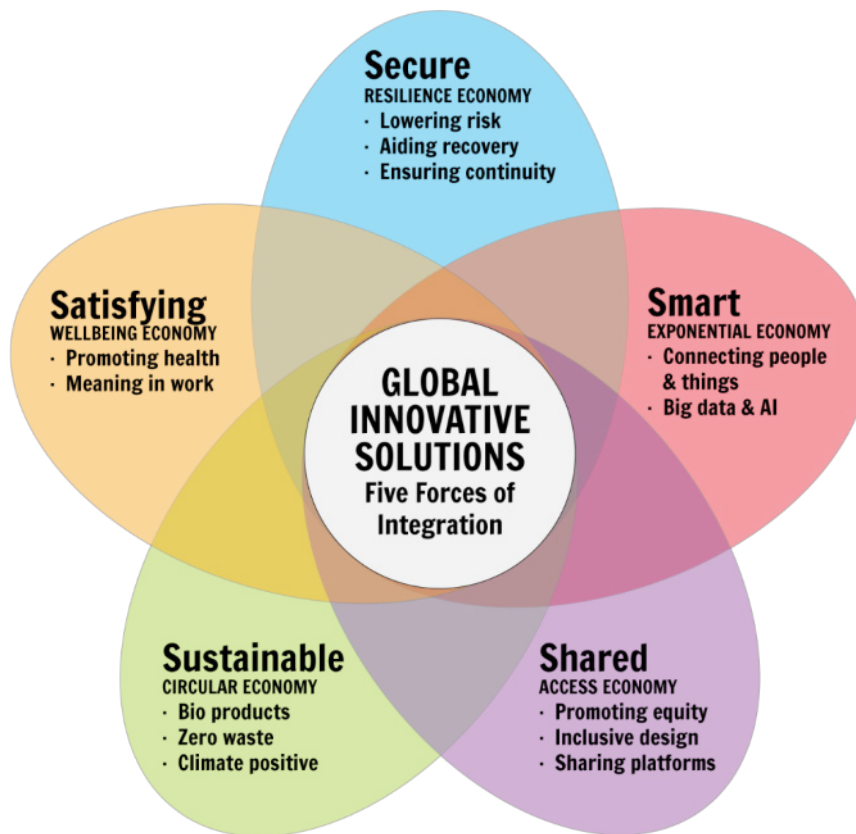


Figure 2: Global Innovative Solutions: Five Forces of Integration

Shared – This refers to innovation in the access economy (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2015), also sometimes referred to as the sharing economy (Botsman and Rogers, 2010), which is about equity, inclusive design and sharing platforms, i.e. finding solutions that address issues of inequality and access by being transparent about the distribution of value in society and working to ensure that benefits are fairly shared, and diversity is respected. PwC (2015) estimates the access economy may be worth \$335 billion by 2025.

Sustainable – This refers to innovation in the circular economy (Webster, 2017), which is about bio products (biological/organic, bio-based, biodegradable and biomimicry-inspired), zero waste design and being climate positive through carbon productivity (Lakha, 2017), i.e. finding solutions that help us to operate within the limits of the planet by radically changing resource consumption and ecosystem impacts, with a shift to renewable energy and resources, closing the loop on production and moving to a low carbon society. Lacy and Rutqvist (2015) estimate the circular economy opportunity to be worth \$4.5 trillion by 2030.

Satisfying – This refers to innovation in the wellbeing economy (Fioramonti, 2017), which is about promoting human health and improving meaning in work, i.e. finding solutions that produce high-quality services that satisfy our human needs, as well as enabling a lifestyle and culture that values quality of life, health, happiness and other indicators of wellbeing. According to the Global Wellness Institute, the wellbeing economy, incorporating solutions like stress-relief practices, life coaching, plant-based diets and treating mental illness, was worth \$3.72 trillion in 2015 (GWI, 2016).

Today, the challenge is not so much the lack of innovation in these areas, but the sharing and scaling up of those innovations so that they can help to turn around the sustainability crises we face. This need was echoed in the findings of an international research project I conducted for the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) on eco-innovation and technology transfer in developing countries (Visser, 2014). Unless we can find more effective ways to share innovation around the world, we will be in danger of creating pockets of plenty amidst deserts of deprivation.

Personal Vignette 3: Lessons in Circularity

It was this conclusion that inspired me travel around the world over the past 2 years, working with an Emmy Award winning filmmaker to produce a documentary on the circular economy, called Closing the Loop. We spoke to experts at the World Economic Forum and the University of Cambridge and we filmed pioneering companies and community projects in Europe, Latin America and Africa: companies like Dutch Awearness, which is making circular work-wear and suits that can be 100% recycled eight times and Interface, which is pursuing its Mission Zero strategy for no negative environmental impacts by 2020.

In Italy, we visited chemicals company Novamont, which is making bio-based and biodegradable plastics, such as the compostable coffee capsules they have designed for Lavazza. And in the UK, we filmed Biogen, which turns food waste into renewable bio-gas energy and organic fertiliser. In South Africa, we went to the second-largest re-manufacturing plant in the world, where Barloworld repairs and refurbishes Caterpillar's heavy machinery, saving thousands of tons of iron ore and saving customers 20% to 60% of the costs of replacing broken or worn components with new parts.

In Ecuador, we looked at how a city can embrace the circular economy, including the surrounding communities that live among the cloud forests. That is one of the stories that sticks with me from filming. A man from the village of Yungilla told me how they used to cut trees and hunt bears when he was young. But one day, there was a baby bear with its mother. He was moved and asked his father to spare its life. Today, that man is a conservationist, who protects the forest and all its wildlife, including the bears, which have made a comeback. His village has gone from cutting down tropical forests for cattle ranching to restoring forests and embracing eco-tourism.

Key Insight 3: Creating Integrated Value

The kinds of innovations we filmed in Closing the Loop, aligned with the five counterforces of integration, will already go a long way toward addressing the forces of systemic breakdown and creating, rather than destroying, value. However, as already noted, the global sustainability challenges we face are large, complex and urgent. The best way to increase the speed, scale and effectiveness of our response is to look for synergies between the counterforces. In this way, we can create integrated value, another pillar of sustainable transformation, which goes beyond previous conceptions of value creation (Table 4).

Table 4: The evolution of value creation

Value type	Focus	Chief exponent
Shareholder value	Financial return to shareholders; “the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits”	Friedman (1970)
Stakeholder value	Distribution of benefits to interested and affected parties; groups with a stake in the business	Freeman (1984)
Four capitals	Extending capital include financial, manufactured, human and natural capital	Ekins (1992)
Triple bottom line	Balanced social, environmental and economic performance; people, planet, profit	Elkington (1994)
Blended value	Simultaneously maximising social and financial returns; impact investing	Emerson (2000)
Bottom of the pyramid	Serving inclusive markets at the bottom of the economic pyramid, i.e. low-income markets	Prahalad and Hart (2002)
Sustainable value	Combining product stewardship, pollution prevention, clean technology and inclusive strategies	Hart and Milstein (2003)
Five capitals	Extends Ekins’ four capitals model to include a fifth, social capital	Porritt (2007)
Shared value	Finding business opportunities in social problems, through products, value chains and industry clusters	Porter and Kramer (2011)
Integrated value	Innovation synergies through solutions that are secure, smart, shared, sustainable and satisfying	Visser (2017a)

I first conceived of integrated value – and coined the term – in 2014 (Visser and Kymal, 2015) and have continued to evolve and refine the concept ever since. It builds on the expanded concepts of value summarised in Table 4, and shares some of their aspirations, especially the need to adopt a multi-capital perspective and to find better ways to measure value. This includes exciting new methodologies that are emerging, from KPMG’s True Value and PwC’s Total Impact Measurement & Management to B-Lab’s B Impact Assessment and Puma’s Environmental Profit & Loss (KPMG, 2014).

However, integrated value goes beyond looking at new ways to measure value. Integrated value is much more focused on how value is being created from innovative solutions that are secure, smart, shared, sustainable and satisfying. Integrated value highlights the importance of synergy (Visser, 2017), a key systems thinking concept (Ackoff, 1999). Smuts (1926) even claimed that such creativity, which emerges from overlapping fields of distinct wholes (or sub-systems), is one of the driving forces in biological and human evolution.

Take the *smart+secure+sustainable* solution of Planet Labs, for example, which will analyse and index 1.4 million daily satellite photos of the surface of the earth to enable researchers to track physical changes over time, including the impacts of fires, floods, earthquakes, deforestation and urbanisation (Anzilotti, 2017). Or consider Tesla’s *secure+sustainable* utility-scale powerpack battery storage installations, which have been rapidly installed in Australia and Puerto Rico to increase their resilience in the aftermath of climate-storm damage (BBC, 2017), not to mention Tesla’s *smart+sustainable* electric cars and solar-tiles.

There is no shortage of examples. Garbage Clinical Insurance is offering a *shared+sustainable+satisfying* solution, through a scheme that aims to tackle poverty and waste in Indonesia by collecting rubbish from some of country’s poorest people and giving them health insurance in exchange (Balch, 2016). Timeless is a *smart+satisfying* app, developed by 14-year old Emma Yang, that uses face identification software to help Alzheimer’s patients to recognise their loved ones (Peters, 2018).

Provenance is a *smart+shared+sustainable* collaboration of fintech startups that are testing blockchain technology as a way to link financial incentives to verifiable sustainability claims and transparent supply chains (Sustainable Brands, 2017b). And Planetarians is creating a *sustainable+satisfying* innovation by using extrusion technology to transform food waste into nutritious food products, creating high-fiber, high-protein snacks that it says can tackle childhood obesity (Sustainable Brands, 2017a).

Personal Vignette 4: Lessons from Near Death

These examples of integrated value are all about making a positive impact, which is a goal that came into sharp focus for me a few years ago. During a beach vacation at Sodwana Bay along the South African coast of Kwa Zulu Natal, my wife and I were swimming in the ocean and we got caught by a rip-tide, which dragged us out to sea and we nearly drowned. That's the kind of experience that gets one reflecting on the fragility and meaning of life and how we can make a difference in the short years we have on this earth. In my case, that was a question I had been considering for many years, but it certainly renewed the urgency.

*I had for a long time been fascinated with transpersonal and existential psychology. One book in particular that made a big impression on me was *Man's Search for Meaning*, which is an autobiographical account by Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1968) of surviving four Nazi concentration camps. Not only did Frankl survive, but he gained unique insights into what helped others to survive even those most terrible of conditions. His conclusion was that having a clear purpose made all the difference. And crucially, it was not a selfish purpose, but something bigger than themselves.*

I ended up applying Frankl's existential psychology in my PhD research to understanding why people engage with sustainability. I wanted to know: what motivates us at a deep level to want to make a difference? I discovered four types of purpose-inspired leadership: experts, facilitators, catalysts and activists (Visser, 2012), which I have also referred to as our inner sustainability superheroes (Visser, 2013). The key lesson for me was that there is a great appetite and energy to make positive change happen, if we tap into the source of meaning in our lives.

Purposeful Leaders: Making Positive Futures

Integrated value, together with meaningful innovation are two key ways to make a positive change and they form the first two pillars of sustainable transformation. They are as much about hybrid business models (AMS and ING, 2017) as new products and services, especially those emerging from the resilience, exponential, access, circular and wellbeing economies (Visser, 2017b). However, there are two other critical ingredients needed if we are to achieve sustainable transformation, namely purposeful leadership and positive futures, which are the third and fourth pillars.

At the level of business, this is about challenging the misleading proposition that the purpose of business is to make profits or shareholder returns. That's like saying the purpose of living is breathing. Breathing is vital (as are profits), but it is not our purpose. As David Packard, co-founder of Hewlett Packard, put it: *"Why are we here? I think many people assume, wrongly, that a company exists solely to make money. Money is an important part of a company's existence, if the company is any good. But it is a result, not a cause. We have to go deeper and find the real reason for our being."*

Research I have conducted with Cambridge University's Institute for Sustainability Leadership shows that there are many distinctive characteristics of leaders who are driving positive change in society (Visser and Courtice, 2011). These are leaders who apply systemic, disruptive, inclusive, sustainable and ethical approaches to respond meaningfully to society's challenges – leaders like Paul Polman, with his ambitious Sustainable Living Plan for Unilever (Walt, 2017), and Hamdi Ulukaya, who has made his company Chobani a champion for the empowerment of refugees (Brunner, 2017).

One of the main tasks of purposeful leaders is to convince people that a sustainable future is indeed a better future, which, until now, we have failed to do. As I wrote in my book *Sustainable Frontiers*, most people see sustainability as some kind of *"geeky, pimply teenager who has come to our party, turned off the music and told us that we would really be much happier if we stopped having so much darn fun!"* (Visser, 2015). By contrast, if sustainability is going to succeed, it must be less about sacrifices and more about opportunities; less about constraints and more about abundance.

For those of us working for sustainable transformation, therefore, we are challenged to become better storytellers, to cultivate the skill of what Melissen and Moratis (2017) call *narrative intelligence* in sustainability. And the new sustainability myth – the meta-narrative that we must weave – can only work if we use the power of our convictions to lead purposefully; if we use inspiring innovations to show what is possible; and if we show how different success can look when focus on the synergies of creating integrated value.

In Conclusion: Go Far, Together

The key message of this inaugural lecture, then, is that we will only achieve sustainable transformation through the synergistic approach of integrated value. Beyond simply being a theory, this will be put into practice by the Corporate Leadership Groups that I am setting up under my Chair in Sustainable Transformation. For example, the leadership groups on the circular economy (including Chair partners BASF and Port of Antwerp) and the wellbeing economy (including Chair partner Randstad) will both look at the value being created at the interface with digital innovation in the exponential economy.

There is an African proverb that says: *if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together*. Sustainable transformation will fail unless we go together. So we need to become better storytellers, to weave a new sustainability story that is so compelling that everyone will want to join the sustainability revolution. And we need to become better collaborators. Let this be the hallmark of my Chair in Sustainable Transformation, working with many and diverse partners – including my team at the Sustainable Transformation Lab, my colleagues at AMS, my Chair partners, the University of Antwerp (through the Antwerp Centre for Sustainability) and many others – to create sustainable mindsets among future leaders and to support sustainable transformation among leading companies.

Personal Vignette 5: Lessons in Hope

To conclude, let me return to where I started – to me as a young business student, in the midst of a society in turmoil, teetering on the brink of a civil war, torn between an unjust, unsustainable past and an inclusive, democratic future. I had the great fortune to live through those dark days of conflict and uncertainty and to come out the other side – to stand in a queue for hours on the 27th of April 1994 and to cast a vote for a positive future, along with people of all races, many of whom were voting for the first time.

And then to watch along with millions around the world, as Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the first black president of a democratic South Africa. A potential catastrophe had turned into an unlikely miracle. But how, and why? There are many lessons for our sustainable transformation journey, as we are reaching an equally perilous point of transition, but the most important one for me is hope. Mandela provided hope to a whole generation, showing that the impossible is sometimes possible, if we persevere with a positive attitude and a spirit of collaboration.

That must be our gift to the next generation: to give them hope that we can avert the global crises that face us; to show them that sustainable transformation is not only possible, but it is happening already. I want to end with two quotes: 1) from Chico Mendez, a Brazilian rubber tapper, trade union leader and environmentalist, who said: “At first I thought I was fighting to save rubber trees, then I thought I was fighting to save the Amazon rainforest. Now I realize I am fighting for humanity” – that’s the urgency; and 2) from Mahatma Gandhi, who said: “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win” – that’s the hope.

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