

Adapt to Survive: Business transformation in a time of uncertainty



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Key Messages

1. The scale of global environmental challenges is unprecedented

Business leaders know that economic activity depends on healthy people, resilient and equal societies, productive ecosystems and a stable climate, but business and society today face mounting challenges, including:

- Climate change resulting in droughts, floods and devastating fires impacting commerce and daily life;
- Environmentally unsustainable food production contributing to 70 per cent of global biodiversity loss;
- Mounting urban waste with 7-10 billion tons generated globally each year and many cities lacking safe and environmentally-sound waste management systems;
- Emerging zoonotic diseases like COVID-19 show the vulnerabilities of these systems and the need for strengthened global resilience and reduced inequalities including gender inequality.

2. Business transformation is critical and possible

Because of the scale of the challenge, time is of the essence, and business is fundamental to the solution. But business planning needs to align with a nature positive and gender equality mission that uses only renewable energy, restores biodiversity, aims for gender equal employment practices and moves towards a fully circular economy. Given the environmental challenges we face, these are the expected transformations that will need to happen in the next 30 years:

- Half of all greenhouse gas emissions need to be eliminated globally by 2030 with near zero emissions achieved by 2050. This implies at least an 80 per cent reduction in fossil fuel use by 2050.
- To end global hunger by 2050, we must produce 50 per cent more food. Meanwhile, the environmental impact and biodiversity loss of that food production must decrease by two-thirds to protect human and planetary health.
- Waste streams like single-use plastics will need to be eliminated to restore the world's oceans. Other pollution will need to be drastically reduced to protect nature and human health. This implies the creation of a near-fully-circular economy by 2050.
- To support gender equality in the circular economy and environmental governance, so as to fulfill by 2030 the goal of achieving full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities.

3. Shifting towards a Nature Positive approach is the best way for business to transform

Nature Positive Economic business models that are transformative and regenerative while remaining profitable will require:

- **Disruption from within:** Business leaders must transform themselves to align to this new reality. This means setting transformational goals to achieve success that includes the health and well-being of people and nature.
- **Setting a nature positive purpose and strategy:** Business leaders need to change their core business assumptions to align with a nature positive approach. This includes asking whether the natural and social systems businesses depend on are healthy and resilient, while defining the business role in the broader global transformation.
- **Collective Action:** Businesses can drive transformation from within, but it is easier when their neighbors and colleagues do so as well. This means engaging with policymakers, leaders from other business sectors and consumers.
- **Coherence of business targets and goals:** Targets and goals must be aligned to the ambitious environmental goals we need to achieve, and they must be based on scientific evidence and indicators.
- **There is no incentive like survival:** Smart businesses will profit from this transformative change by proactively changing the way they conduct business.
- **The journey is as important as the destination:** Transformational change will not happen overnight, but commitment, long-term vision, entrepreneurship and innovation will be key.
- **You are not alone:** Transformation towards a Nature Positive Economy is already underway, through new technologies like solar and wind power, bio-based materials and electric mobility. These technologies are now mature and have pushed the global conversation from cleaning up environmental pollution to addressing the systemic risks of continuing on the path we are on and creating profit through transformative change.

About GEO for Business

Welcome to the first edition of the GEO for Business briefs. The United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP] and its [global partners](#) are proud to offer this series of stimulating briefs about the environmental challenges and business opportunities that demand transformational change at a global scale. New installments of GEO for Business will appear every few months to provide guidance on a range of issues relevant to the future of business in a changing world. Future briefs will explain:

- how to adapt to deep decarbonization,*
- how to transform global food systems,
- how to build environmentally sustainable and resilient infrastructure,
- how business can help build circular economies, and
- the role finance needs to take in a transforming world.

UNEP is also proud to have convened a broad group of expert authors with business-relevant voices to communicate these extremely timely and important messages. These authors are supported by a broad coalition of business and environmental organizations[†] [1] on the GEO for Business journey.

For nearly 50 years, UNEP has been working to improve the environment for current and future generations. As part of this work, UNEP periodically asks the expert community to assess the current state of the environment, how effective the policy response has been and what the future holds if humanity stays on the current path or if it shifts to one that is more environmentally sustainable. The sixth and most recent edition of The Global Environment Outlook, subtitled *Healthy Planet, Healthy People*, presents a very daunting picture but also many reasons for hope.

Global Environmental Outlooks assess broad trends and propose sustainable pathways. They do not generally anticipate or examine potential global shocks, like COVID-19. That is because while major global shocks occur and have certainly happened in the past, the broad trends of increasing resource extraction, environmental degradation and pollution have always tended to persist.

However, the scale and depth of COVID-19's impacts are unprecedented, and that allows us all to take stock and rethink how nature and humanity interact. Will the world continue to try to dominate nature, or will it work hand-in-hand to build a planet that sustains humanity? In crafting this first GEO for Business brief, it was important to look at these two possible futures to explain how humanity might choose one path over the other and the role business could play in achieving the more positive future.

These business briefs are meant to inform a broad business audience, including companies in the supply chains of major multinationals, multinationals themselves as well as small to medium-sized enterprises. The scale of the environmental challenge the world faces means that everyone must contribute to the transformational change discussed in this brief. Smart businesses will learn how to take advantage of this transformation, while the others, as Mark Carney says, will be left behind.

“Companies that ignore climate change and don’t adapt will go bankrupt without question.”

Mark Carney
UN special envoy for climate action
and finance,
31 July 2019

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A full list of acknowledgments can be found [here](#).

1. Business at a time of transformation

The world is witnessing dramatic changes in the environment, in technology, in the economy and in society. 'Business as usual' is no longer acceptable, and the question is how long the world can continue pursuing consumption and growth predicated on ever-increasing efficiency. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified concerns about the highly interconnected and vulnerable state of the global economy, the relationship with nature and the prospects for each living being on this planet, including people, to survive and to thrive.

This concern is not new. For decades, science has pointed out the problems associated with material, linear, fossil-fuel-based economic growth. The overwhelming evidence from the GEO-6 report, published in 2019, ^[2] is that human beings are already putting people's survival at risk. Not only are we driving catastrophic climate change and increasing pollution, but we are also driving an unprecedented loss of biodiversity, the rich variety of life that is essential for the stability and resilience of all ecosystems. This scientific consensus has also been translated into high level political commitments, including the [Paris Agreement](#), leading up to a [Global Deal for Nature](#) and the [Business Ambition for 1.5°C](#).

Despite recent progress and growing momentum, the global community, including business and governments, has failed to take the transformative actions necessary for human survival. Dominant responses remain focused on the pursuit of short term financial and economic recovery, and growth as a driver for progress, even if this growth comes at the expense of the planet's natural resources and long-term well-being. With this well-being now

dramatically and perhaps irreversibly undermined, there is need to question the thinking and systems that got the world to this point. It is clear that a resilient economy must be one that prioritizes and supports the well-being of nature and people.

The brief will show later how communities, countries and businesses around the world have been exploring and developing nature positive models in energy, food, transport and resources.

This emerging movement is a source of hope and inspiration, as it might help guide business toward a new type of economy. But for businesses stuck in conventional economic thinking and locked into linear, fossil-fuel-based practices, this transformative change towards a positive relationship with nature poses existential challenges.

To navigate and survive the coming decades of transformative change, every business will need to harness all the ingenuity, creativity and imagination they can muster. We will need CEOs and entrepreneurs to steer the economy and their businesses away from relying on the exploitation of nature and people and towards a new model of prosperity, based on green and regenerative principles. It is time for leaders in business to overhaul their purpose, plans and strategies for this new context and explore different futures, engage with new partners and create space for experimentation. With so much at stake, clinging to business-as-usual is not just risky, but a narrow and irresponsible approach. The only way to prepare for the future is to explore how companies can take on a nature positive approach, starting today.

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