



Between Two

Worlds

Sustainable Business in
the Turbulent Transition

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Another world
is not only
possible, she
is on her way.
On a quiet day,
I can hear her
breathing.

Arundhati Roy

About This Report

This report was co-authored by Jacob Park and Margot Brent with contributions from Giulio Berruti, Aron Cramer, Christine Diamente, Laura Dugardin, Deb Gallagher, David Korngold, Erin Leitheiser, Paloma Muñoz Quick, Verena Nüchter, Sophie Tripier, Lin Wang, Richard Wingfield, and Anna Zubets-Anderson.

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Executive Summary

In 2018, BSR published *Doing Business in 2030*, which shared our thoughts about the future of sustainable business. The report examined trends and emerging issues reshaping sustainable business and explored four hypothetical scenarios describing how it might evolve over the following ten years. We are now halfway through the ensuing “decisive decade” and it’s an opportune moment to look back at our original thinking, reflect on what has happened since then, and draw out implications for sustainable business.

Much has changed since we wrote our original report. The physical impacts of climate change have become more intense and palpable. A groundswell of activism catalyzed attention to issues of social justice and equity. Shocks including the COVID 19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the launch of ChatGPT abruptly reshaped the operating context for business. We moved from a patchwork of voluntary sustainability reporting standards to an increasingly mandatory and harmonized regulatory framework. Macroeconomic headwinds and an “anti-ESG backlash” slowed progress on meeting commitments.

In light of these and other developments, we offer the following insights for business:

We need to rapidly turn the ship on climate and nature even while preparing for the impacts underway. The energy transition has moved from aspiration to reality. Nevertheless, GHG emissions are at record levels, and we are rapidly approaching dangerous planetary tipping points. New climate regulations are an important step forward and must now be met with more urgent tangible action. We must accelerate progress on climate and nature while swiftly undertaking adaptation efforts to prepare for the disruption that’s already underway.

The transition is happening but will require perseverance and ongoing ambition. Although the transition to a more sustainable economy is underway, we should anticipate it will unfold during a period of prolonged turbulence. An “orderly transition” has become highly unlikely. Achieving the sustainability transformation that is required—and ensuring that it is just—will require us to marry vision and ambition with strategic foresight and agility.

We must develop and deploy technology more wisely. The world’s attention has been captured by artificial intelligence and the possibility that it could help solve some of our most pressing global challenges. There is also growing interest in carbon dioxide removal and geoengineering as potential solutions to the climate crisis. Yet a look back at previously hyped technologies like lab-grown meat, driverless cars, and blockchain reminds us that achieving positive impact at scale can be slow and uncertain. While these technologies hold important promise, we should be cautious about placing overly large bets on unproven and expensive technological solutions at the expense of underinvesting in messier but less speculative

approaches, such as policy reform, business model innovation, and behavior change. For those technologies that are developed and deployed, business has an important role in helping ensure that this is done responsibly.

We need to address the tensions between growth and environmental goals. The rate and scale of production and consumption perpetuated by our current economic system has clearly become unsustainable. We have already crossed six out of the nine planetary boundaries—described as the safe operating space for humanity. Improving efficiency and mitigating damage will be insufficient to restore humanity to safety. We need to consider approaches that more fully address the clear disconnect between our economic system and our sustainability objectives. A more fundamental rethink of our economic system and business models is urgently needed.

Companies have an important role to play in promoting truth, democracy, and cooperation. Democracy, cooperation, and consensus on what’s true have all been unraveling under the assaults of political polarization, populism, and misinformation supercharged by technology. These social and political dynamics are complex and resist easy solutions. Although business cannot solve these problems it has a unique role to play. Business remains broadly trusted in society and by its very nature must understand and engage with diverse stakeholders. While not stepping into every partisan fray companies can play a valuable role in promoting democratic participation, respect for institutions, and truth.

The agenda for boards and the C-Suite is more complex than ever, as they are called on to navigate a highly complex set of questions. Business leaders must navigate a large and fast-moving set of issues that were once outside their purview, from geopolitics to artificial intelligence to social equity. To complicate matters, these are also interacting in complex and volatile ways. In this context, business leaders will need to exercise agility as they take on new topics and skills while fostering long-term business value.

Strategic Foresight Will be Essential to Navigate What Comes Next. We’ve experienced an astonishing amount of change in the past half-decade and should expect at least as much over the next five years. Trends will continue to mature while unexpected shocks will create abrupt disruption. All these forces will interact in complicated and highly dynamic ways, heightening volatility and uncertainty and forcing business to adapt to new realities quickly. Strategic foresight and futures thinking are more necessary for sustainable business than ever before. Trends analysis should be a table-stakes exercise for sustainability teams, ensuring that these changes are baked into planning and strategy, while scenario planning is critical for ensuring strategic resilience in the face of future uncertainty. Finally, foresight frameworks like Three Horizons provide a means to envision the transformative change we wish to see and identify tangible pathways to get us there.

Introduction

In 2018, BSR published a report exploring how sustainable business might change over the decade to follow. *Doing Business in 2030* described key trends, emerging issues, and uncertainties related to the future of sustainable business, and presented four alternate scenarios depicting how it might develop out to 2030.

Like all scenarios, these were not meant to be predictions but rather a tool to challenge assumptions, identify potential blind spots, and help build more resilient strategies amid future uncertainty.

We are now almost halfway through the ensuing “*decisive decade*,” and already much has changed in the world at large and for the practice of sustainable business. A good deal

of this has been the result of the maturation of trends we analyzed in our original report, such as the intensifying impacts of the climate crisis or the growing capabilities of artificial intelligence. In other cases, change was catalyzed by sudden shocks—such as the COVID 19 pandemic or Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

This is an opportune moment to reflect on the original report in light of new developments, explore what the changes mean for sustainable businesses, and derive insights about how to approach what lies ahead. As we enter the second half of the decisive decade, strategic foresight is more essential than ever for business to navigate the rapid and complex changes to come.



Although 2018 was only six years ago, it's helpful to recall the world of that time. The Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement provided the overarching frameworks for action on sustainability and climate priorities. That year, the IPCC published its special report on 1.5°C, calling for concerted action to keep warming below that level. Human rights standards were largely voluntary; legislation that paved the way for recent progress was still quite novel, such as the 2017 French Duty of Vigilance Law.

New conceptual models and approaches were being proposed, such as "purpose" in business, well-being and happiness indicators as complements to GDP, and universal basic income as a possible way to bolster social safety nets. The advent of driverless cars was raising hopes and fears about the potential impacts of AI and automation, while blockchain and bitcoin hinted at the possibility of a decentralized, peer-to-peer future. China's Belt and Road Initiative was sowing concerns in the West about the expansion of Chinese hegemony while its development of a "social credit score" raised concerns about how technology might bolster authoritarianism and restrict freedom. Trade frictions between the US and China were starting to ramp up.

Within this context, we organized our scenarios around two critical uncertainties: 1) Would the forces of centralization or decentralization prevail? And 2) would we continue the current economic paradigm of endless growth and profit maximization, or shift toward a new approach where the economy is organized to ensure equitable

prosperity on a healthy planet? The four scenarios we developed described very different trajectories for the world and for sustainable business, each with unique challenges and opportunities.



As we enter the second half of the decisive decade, strategic foresight is more essential than ever for business to navigate the rapid and complex changes to come.



Jacob Park
Director,
Sustainable Futures Lab, BSR

Summary of the Doing Business in 2030 Scenarios



Scenario One: A Tale of Two Systems

Automation and environmental disruption cause global turmoil. China promotes a vision of "prosperity, order, and sustainability" and draws emerging economies into its orbit. Western government and business leaders realize they need to radically reform the social contract to ensure the survival of free market capitalism.

Scenario Two: Move Slow and Fix Things

Health concerns, misinformation scandals, and a global recession undermine trust. People become disillusioned with consumerism, big business, and social media. As more localized economies emerge, people rediscover the benefits of community, and a culture of healing starts to take root.



Scenario Three: Tribalism Inc.

The notion that "all business is political" drives social, economic, and cultural fragmentation. New "tribes" emerge with profoundly different experiences of reality. As collective action becomes increasingly difficult, some of these tribes experiment with radical approaches to global challenges like climate change.



Scenario Four: Total Information Awareness

Highly personalized AI companions become an essential part of everyday life. Concentrated networks of huge businesses leverage extreme data to provide affordable, effective, and seamless services. Privacy is gone and much work is automated away, but most people embrace the new reality.



A number of key questions were raised by the scenarios. Could a global public health crisis galvanize action on well-being, sustainability, and human rights? Might China export a model of centrally controlled sustainable development that would gain traction in the Global South? What would it look like if polarization intensified, amplified by artificial intelligence, and began to disrupt business and sustainability? Might people willingly trade agency and autonomy for AI-powered insights and security?

Half a decade has passed since we published the scenarios and, while it's too early to render a final judgment on these questions, we can already discern the trajectories for many of them. In a number of cases, trends and countertrends are pushing in different directions—not surprising in a time of turbulent transition. Elsewhere, developments are moving more slowly or quickly than anticipated. Ultimately, though, we can see that the issues and possibilities we explored were largely on target and in some cases quite prescient.

Remarkably, for example, the world did indeed experience a global public health emergency that shone a bright light on inequality and catalyzed greater attention to questions of equity and well-being—as we imagined might happen in our “Move Slow and Fix Things” scenario. The latest efforts from OpenAI and others to create AI personal assistants bear some striking similarities to the “Scarlett” AI personal assistant at the core of our “Total Information Awareness” scenario. Our “Tale of Two Systems” scenario

imagined Western companies one day setting science-based biodiversity targets while China promulgated a version of sustainability “with Chinese characteristics.” And, at times, we seem to be racing toward our “Tribalism, Inc.” scenario, where polarization has affected every aspect of our lives.

Stepping back, it becomes evident that we are living between two worlds. Our old ways of doing business, the world of 2018, is receding from view. In many ways, we've left that world definitively behind and we're not going back. What the new world will look like, though, is not yet clear. We've entered a turbulent transition zone where much is in flux. Our scenarios offer hints of potential changes yet to come but none of this is preordained. As disorienting and overwhelming as the flux can be, it's also a space of creativity and agency. This is the time to decide the future we want and chart the course ahead.

This report tries to make some sense out of the turbulence. We describe the most important changes we've seen for sustainable business in the six years since we wrote our original report, compare our views today with our thinking and perspectives in 2018, and share some reflections and insights about what this all means for sustainable business as we approach the second half of the decade.

Stepping back,
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worlds.

Key Developments That Have Impacted Sustainable Business Since 2018

2018



- Greta Thunberg sparks youth climate movement.

- IPCC publishes The Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C.



- The "Me Too" movement spreads globally.

2019

- The UK becomes first G7 nation to legislate a net zero target by 2050.



- China announces goals to peak carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060.



- New research describes nine active climate tipping points, and scientists call for a climate emergency response.

2020



- The COVID 19 pandemic begins.



- George Floyd's murder sparks widespread Black Lives Matter protests.

2021

- Following a turbulent US election, a heavily armed mob attack the US Capitol, China embarks on its 14th five-year plan focused on domestic revitalization, developing shared prosperity, and eliminating poverty.



- Texas passes legislation penalizing companies boycotting the oil and gas industry.

- The International Renewable Energy Agency reports that the majority of new renewables are cheaper than fossil fuels.



- The Science Based Targets initiative launches the first corporate Net Zero Standard.

- The US passes the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act.

2022



- Russia invades Ukraine.

- The US Supreme Court reverses Roe v. Wade, rescinding the constitutional right to abortion.

- Mandatory climate disclosures in line with the Task Force for Climate-Related Financial Disclosures (TCFD) begin, starting in the UK.



- ChatGPT3 is released.

- The nonbinding Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework is signed by nearly 196 countries at COP15.

- The US passes the Inflation Reduction Act.

- The Global Net Zero Stocktake shows that 91% of the global economy is covered by net zero pledges.

- Global inflation rates rise post COVID 19, averaging 10.7% across G7 countries.

2023

- The German Supply Chain Act is adopted.

- Record-breaking wildfires in Canada persist for months and cover the Eastern US in smoke.



- The EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive is adopted.

- The EU passes regulation to implement Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanisms from 2026.

- The Science Based Targets Network publishes the first methods to set science-based targets for nature.

- The Task Force for Nature-Related Financial Disclosure publishes its recommendations.



- Research shows we have crossed six out of nine planetary boundaries.

- Conflict in Gaza escalates with active warfare between Israel and Hamas.

- Nearly 60% of electric vehicles sold globally are manufactured in China.

2024



- China issues ESG reporting guidelines for large businesses.

- The US Securities and Exchange Commission adopts climate-related disclosure rule.

- Legislation against greenwashing and false social claims is passed in the EU, UK, and parts of the US.

- The EU parliament bans the import of products made with forced labor starting in 2027.



- July 2024 was the warmest July on record, extending a 14-month streak of record-high temperatures.

- The EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive takes effect.

- The EU Artificial Intelligence Act takes effect.



The Changing Context for Sustainable Business

Since we published *Doing Business in 2030*, the world has certainly not stood still. Existing trends have continued to shift the ground beneath our feet while abrupt shocks catalyzed rapid and unexpected change. Although none of these developments were foreseeable in their exact details, our original report hinted at many of these possibilities. What follows are some of the most important changes in the operating context for sustainable business.

The Energy Transition Got Real



When we published *Doing Business in 2030* the “energy transition” was still largely an aspirational concept. In the intervening six years it has become real. During this time, clean energy technologies have passed critical inflection points for cost and adoption and have achieved clear momentum. Clean energy is now often cheaper than fossil fuels and the International Energy Agency forecasts that next year renewables will become the largest source of electricity globally and that fossil fuel demand will peak by 2030.

This remarkable progress has been driven by technological innovation, particularly China’s ability to lower the cost of solar panels, as well as by newly supportive policy measures, such as the Inflation Reduction Act, in the US, Europe, and China. Yet greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are at record levels and emissions continue to rise. The main culprit remains the burning of fossil fuels, particularly ongoing growth in the number of coal- and gas-fired power plants. So, while the likelihood of global warming exceeding 4°C by 2100 has significantly decreased, we’re still on track to see nearly 3°C of warming by 2100—well beyond the limit to avoid disastrous consequences for humanity and business.

The energy transition, however, faces headwinds and conundrums. Supplying the critical minerals required to develop clean energy has significant environmental and human rights impacts. China’s dominance of clean energy technologies and supply chains has become a central front in the mounting trade tensions between China and the West. Europe’s forthcoming carbon border tariffs will further complicate the relationship between climate action and trade relations. And Russia’s invasion of Ukraine sparked a renewed focus on energy security and a surge in Europe’s fossil fuel use (though, ultimately may have accelerated Europe’s long-term energy transition by five to 10 years).

In the US, renewable energy projects face challenges getting permitted and connected to the grid. As renewables become a more significant part of the energy mix, we’re also starting to see the limits of intermittent power sources and the concomitant need for more long-duration storage. AI data centers are driving explosive and unanticipated growth in new energy demand and, with their stringent latency requirements, much of this will be met with fossil fuels. And, finally, the energy transition is made harder by the sheer fact of

The path forward will be long and bumpy, and we need to move even more quickly, but there can be no doubt that the transition is underway.

economic growth and by the electrification of many of our systems and processes.

Still, these challenges and constraints do not detract from the real and encouraging progress we are seeing in the reconfiguration of our global energy system. When we wrote our original report it was unclear whether any of the major global economies would significantly decarbonize their energy systems. Now, the

change is happening and the momentum seems unstoppable. The path forward will be long and bumpy, and we need to move even more quickly, but there can be no doubt that the transition is genuinely underway.

The Climate and Nature Crises Intensified

The transition needs to accelerate because the impacts of the climate and nature crisis are becoming ever more disruptive. Temperatures in India recently approached 50°C during the most extreme heat wave in the country's history. Flooding left nearly two million people in Bangladesh facing food shortages and a lack of drinking water. Last year, extreme wildfires in Canada blanketed much of North America with choking smoke for weeks on end, while a separate wildfire in Hawaii killed more than 100 people.

More troubling changes are on the horizon. New studies suggest that if we don't rapidly change course we may pass a critical climate tipping point by the late 2030s—the collapse of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC)—which would result in disastrous and irreversible disruptions of global weather patterns. Global food security is also at risk as droughts and floods in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America have rendered land no longer suitable for growing crops. And the ability of land and water to act as a “carbon sink” has recently declined in an alarming fashion.

The climate crisis is also intertwined with a crisis of biodiversity and nature. Rising rates of biodiversity loss, pollution, and ecosystem change pose growing material risks to business. Humanity has already destroyed a third of the world's forests and wildlife populations have declined by 69 percent since 1970, setting in motion the sixth mass extinction. The COVID 19 pandemic's apparently zoonotic origin underlines some of the societal risks linked to nature loss and how ill-prepared we are to

The transition needs to accelerate because the impacts of the climate and nature crisis are becoming ever more disruptive.

address them.

The urgency for action on both climate and nature has never been clearer. Thankfully, we are also seeing significant progress in corporate commitments, frameworks, and disclosures, all of which are discussed later in this report.





Social Cohesion and Democracy Came Under Strain

Social cohesion and democracy have also come under strain as rapid economic, political, cultural, and technological changes reconfigure the distribution of haves and have-nots. Greater attention is being paid to questions of equity and justice, which may be fueling backlash in some quarters even while moderating polarization in other contexts.

On the global level, progress continued to be made in reducing poverty and closing the inequality gap between countries. However, income inequality within countries continued to grow, particularly in the US, China, India, and Russia. As the 1 percent continue to pull away, middle- and lower-income groups have experienced stagnating wages and a cost-of-living crisis.

Combined with other changes, such as diversifying populations, technological disruption, and intergenerational fissures, has fueled resentment, reactionary politics, and polarization. Xenophobic and authoritarian ideologies are finding new footing in this environment. This is being further amplified by misinformation, social media echo chambers, and the rise of artificial intelligence.



Polarization has undermined trust in democracy and institutions, conspiracy theories have gained currency, and it has become increasingly hard to find consensus on basic facts. Science, public health, and business have all been caught up in the contestation of what's true.

At the same time, moderating forces are also in evidence. Although the June 2024 European elections saw Eurosceptic agendas prevail in countries such as Poland, the Netherlands, and Italy, electorates largely rejected the most authoritarian and extreme candidates. Citizens in the UK and South Africa held leaders to account for poor performance, while elections in India reined in ethnonationalist tendencies.

The past several years has seen a groundswell of global movements shift awareness, activism, and action on human rights, justice, and social issues.

SHOCK

An Explosion of Activism Catalyzed Attention to Longstanding Issues of Inequity and Injustice

Against this backdrop of social fracturing, the past several years has seen a groundswell of global movements shift awareness, activism, and action on human rights, justice, and social issues. Black Lives Matter, LGBTQIA+ activism, Me Too, and the youth climate movement catalyzed attention to social injustice, the climate crisis, and intergenerational inequity.

These movements were largely fueled by viral accounts of injustices online and social media activism. Combined with the COVID 19 crisis they created an unusual moment of widespread pressure for governments and businesses to address these long-standing issues.

Geopolitics and Trade Entered a New Era

Nationalist sentiments, domestic economic priorities, human rights concerns, and supply chain volatility have started to unravel the post-Cold War project of global economic and political integration. This has been particularly evident in the growing decoupling between China and the West. In 2018, China enjoyed strong growth and a central role in the global economy. Buoyed by this, it sought to expand its economic and political influence on the world stage and assert itself as a counterweight to the West.

Much has changed in the past half decade. Successive American presidents have imposed significant import tariffs on China, on grounds of both trade fairness and human rights. The Biden administration has allocated billions of dollars to establish domestic industries for critical technologies, including clean energy and AI, with the explicit aim of reducing reliance on—and ultimately outcompeting—China. COVID 19-driven supply chain disruptions along with greater scrutiny of human rights practices in

supply chains have led many businesses to seek to diversify beyond China.

Despite these changes, China remains a critical partner for many industries as a key provider of materials and components. Its focus on export production has been reduced but its manufacturing capabilities have led to Chinese investment in production facilities in other parts of Asia.

Trade frictions and protectionism have emerged elsewhere, as well. America's new focus on subsidizing domestic industries strained relations with the EU, even as the latter also started to raise tariffs on Chinese EVs and ultra-fast fashion. The EU's planned implementation of carbon border tariffs will add further complexity and friction to global trade, even as it may accelerate progress on the decarbonization of carbon-intensive sectors.

SCENARIO DEEP DIVE

China

The “Tale of Two Systems” scenario in our original report describes a future in which China promotes a vision of “prosperity, order, and sustainability” and draws emerging economies into its orbit. Using technology to enforce an authoritarian approach, it creates an enlarged sphere of economic, political, and cultural influence that covers much of the world. In this scenario, the West belatedly shifts to a more sustainable economic paradigm in which automated ESG metrics steer capital flows and businesses seek to operate within planetary boundaries. The scenario imagines that science-based biodiversity targets become widespread among corporations by 2030.

During the early part of the COVID 19 pandemic, it seemed plausible that China's “zero COVID 19” approach and “vaccine diplomacy” might indeed extend its influence while the West floundered. However, post-COVID 19 economic headwinds, growing demographic challenges, and frictions with the West have undercut these ambitions. Still, China has made important progress on a domestic agenda of sustainable growth, poverty alleviation, and rural revitalization. It has continued to lead in the development of clean energy technologies, has started to make good on ambitious climate commitments, and is developing a set of sustainable disclosure standards “with Chinese characteristics.” While seeking to reduce its reliance on export markets, it is still an important economic presence in Latin America and Africa and is promulgating its own brand of sustainability through the BRI, which is transitioning towards a ‘Green Belt and Road Initiative’ and the BRICS country alliance, which includes a Partnership for Sustainable Development and Clean Technology Platform.

As we move into the second half of the decade an important question will be to what extent China's approach to sustainability overlaps with, and differs from, that of the West. Relatedly, will common goals such as decarbonization help temper frictions and promote greater stability in global affairs?

SHOCK

Unexpected Conflict Shook the World

The war in Ukraine and the Israel/Gaza conflict have added further strain and complexity to geopolitics and global trade. Russia's invasion of Ukraine marked the end of rapprochement between Europe and Russia and forced a swift reorganization of global energy markets, while also disrupting trade in agricultural commodities and threatening to undermine global food security.

The latest conflict in the Middle East, which started with the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and has only intensified due to Israel's response, has become a divisive topic globally, leading to mass protests in the US, Europe, and elsewhere and becoming a flashpoint in this year's elections. Business has also been impacted, with boycotts related to the conflict as well as workforce polarization on the issue.

In some ways the Ukraine conflict has entrenched neo-Cold War alliances: On the one hand, Russia and China have strengthened cooperation while, on the other, NATO allies with strong US leadership have stepped up to support Ukraine. However, political fissures within the US and Europe, along with the heavy economic toll of the war effort call raise questions about the durability of these commitments.

Technology Grew More Powerful, with Mixed Results

During the past half decade, technology has become more powerful and Big Tech companies have dominated the economy. While some of these technologies have brought enormous benefits, in many cases technologies have failed to fulfill hopes that they might help address broader societal challenges.

When we published our original report there was widespread excitement about a host of such technologies, including blockchain, driverless cars, lab-grown meat, 3D printing, and virtual reality. Beyond their intrinsic benefits, these were seen as ways to empower people while reducing negative

environmental and social impacts. Thus far, however, most of these have failed to achieve meaningful scale, while a few of them, such as bitcoin, have had significant negative impacts.

To be fair, technological innovation often takes longer than expected to bear fruit—and, as futurist Roy Amara pointed out, “we tend to overestimate the effect of a technology in the short run and underestimate the effect in the long run.” [The Gartner Hype Cycle](#) reminds us that mainstream productivity is often preceded by a “peak of inflated expectations,” then a “trough of disillusionment,” before slowly ascending the “slope of enlightenment.”

SHOCK

Generative AI Sparked New Hopes and Fears About Technology

The release of ChatGPT3 in the fall of 2022 abruptly upended societal expectations related to AI. Demonstrating remarkable capabilities for natural language and creativity, it raised the prospect that AI might outcompete humans in the near future.

Prior to this the consensus had been that AI would struggle to compete with human creativity for potentially decades to come and, barring a radical new advance, would only be able to automate well-defined, routine tasks. The emergence of GenAI suddenly raised the prospect that, on the contrary, jobs requiring creativity, natural language fluency, and other skills considered to be uniquely “human” might be vulnerable to replacement by AI in the near term.

One area in which this has proven true is medical advancements. Artificial intelligence coupled with inexpensive genome sequencing enabled the [development of mRNA vaccines](#) for COVID 19 radically faster than previous techniques would have permitted. More prosaically,

videoconferencing technologies like Zoom enabled the work of most organizations to continue even as the pandemic shut down in-person meetings for months on end.

SCENARIO DEEP DIVE

Artificial Intelligence

AI figures in all four of the scenarios in our 2018 report. In the “Tale of Two Systems” scenario, it’s one of the factors leading to large-scale job displacement, spurring social unrest that eventually leads to social and economic change. AI-powered “deepfakes” help spur an “opt out” movement in the “Move Slow and Fix Things” scenario. And in “Tribalism, Inc.,” a Humans First movement emerges, uniting people that have been displaced by AI and automation.

Each of these scenarios imagined a future in which the negative impacts of AI and automation sparked a backlash. Interestingly, that hasn’t yet happened in a meaningful way, even as AI capabilities have taken a massive leap forward. Is this because its shortcomings—the “hallucinations” that make it unsuitable for mission critical tasks—have become more apparent? Could it be that we’re waiting for the other shoe to drop? Or perhaps we’re willing to make peace with the downsides in return for the benefits?

Our “Total Information Awareness” scenario explored this latter possibility—that we might ultimately find AI so compelling and useful that we’d be willing to give up a certain degree of agency and autonomy in return for its benefits. In this scenario, ubiquitous AI companions emerge that provide us with powerful and individualized insights that tangibly improve our lives. They also interface with constellations of businesses that deliver more affordable products and services in return for access to all of our personal data. Although some opt out, most people “plug in” and the AI assistants also helpfully nudge society in a more sustainable direction.

We’re not there yet, of course, even as the possibility of such a scenario becomes increasingly more plausible. Still, this is the time to start asking ourselves what sorts of trade-offs we might be willing to make for the benefits AI may bring. What sorts of business models do we want to allow or discourage? How much power might we want to give AI companions to determine what’s good for us? And how can business shape the future of AI in a more responsible and ethical manner?

The COVID 19 Pandemic Abruptly Scrambled Society, Politics, and Supply Chains with Lasting Consequences

Of course, it would be impossible to cover the changes of the past half decade without discussing the pandemic. Beyond the enormous human toll in illness and mortality, the COVID 19 pandemic has reshaped how we live and work in ways that are still difficult to fully fathom.

The disparate impacts of the pandemic on different segments of the population spotlighted inequality and injustice—both within and between nations—prompting policymakers and business to commit to do more to address it, even if some many of those promises have not fully borne fruit. Global supply chain disruptions exposed the fragility of just-in-time models, over-reliance on individual supplier countries like China, and complex interdependencies. This drove a wave of reshoring and nearshoring, as well as greater emphasis on supply chain resilience, that has been amplified by geopolitical frictions.

Trust in institutions was also shaken when different views of how to respond to the pandemic became mired in misinformation, disinformation, and political polarization. Growing numbers of people were induced to question the veracity of scientific and public health discourse in striking new ways.

COVID 19 also changed how many people work and live, driving a surge in remote work that in many places persists to this day, creating both new challenges and opportunities for workforce recruitment and company culture.

The pandemic also catalyzed a newfound focus on work-life balance, well-being in the workplace, and mental health across society—from school children to employees who were subject to the

same remote working and learning routines. It highlighted the vulnerable and those excluded entirely from the digital world, unable to access work or school and left in isolation.

Although the causality is complex and contested, COVID 19 was followed by a new era of inflation and high interest rates, at least some which was driven by government stimulus spending. While neither inflation nor interest rates are extraordinarily high by historical standards, and both are moderating without having triggered a major recession, these have nevertheless heralded an end to the fifteen year era of “cheap money” that followed the 2008 financial crisis.

SCENARIO DEEP DIVE

Healing

The scenario in our 2018 report that felt the most aspirational and perhaps the hardest to imagine was “Move Slow and Fix Things.” In this scenario, a global public health crisis caused by plastic pollution leads to a large-scale rejection of consumerism. In its stead come community, time, and, eventually, healing—on an individual and a planetary level.

As it happens, we did experience a global public health crisis, but the outcomes have been different. While the pandemic did catalyze important moments of coming together, a rethinking of our personal and societal values, as well as greater awareness of injustice, it has not driven a transformation of our basic economic model.

What would it take for that to happen?

The seeds for new approaches already exist—from new conceptual frameworks like “[doughnut economics](#)” to circular and regenerative business models to policy experiments, such as [France’s ban on domestic short-haul flights](#).

Thus far these have been no match for the overwhelming weight of our linear, extractive, and profit-driven economic model. However, as we start to exit the safe operating space for humanity defined by the planetary boundaries, there will be growing pressure for change.

Now is the time to identify the seeds of change that exist today, create collaborative visions of transformation, and nurture the innovations that might provide a bridge to a more just and sustainable future. Futures thinking frameworks like [Three Horizons](#) will be an important tool here, helping business and other stakeholders to start imagining and then mainstreaming alternative and more sustainable economic models.



This has led companies to trim budgets, slow innovation efforts, and delay capital investments, while exacerbating a “cost-of-living crisis” for ordinary people.

Finally, the pandemic was a traumatic event for most of humanity in ways that have yet to be fully understood and processed. Many millions of those infected are still impacted by Long Covid, and we are likely to see long-term persistent impacts on people’s mental and emotional health. Although the worst of the pandemic is apparently over, it’s reasonable to believe that it will continue to shape our reality for many years to come.



The pandemic was a traumatic event for most of humanity in ways that have yet to be fully understood and processed.



The Evolution of Sustainable Business

Against this backdrop of maturing trends and sudden shocks, the practice and discourse of sustainable business has changed in significant ways over the past half decade.



Climate Came to Be Seen as a Material Risk for Business and Finance, with Nature Following Close Behind

In 2018, investors were [beginning to ask companies to disclose](#) financial risks associated with climate change. However, frameworks were nascent and voluntary, and evaluating climate risk was not yet a high priority for business.

Since then, business leaders, investors, and policymakers have come to understand climate change as a material financial and business risk. This has driven efforts to assess these risks and to redirect capital flows to mitigate them. The recommendations of the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), issued in 2017, provided the foundational framework for subsequent national and regional climate risk disclosure regulations.

In parallel, [net zero](#) evolved from a concept in climate science and policy to a mainstream business commitment, investor expectation, and opportunity for clearly defined business leadership on climate action. As a result, a groundswell of net zero commitments was made in just five short years—increasing the

portion of the economy covered from 16 percent in 2019 to over 90 percent today. Even as questions remain about the solidity of some of these commitments, this still represents impressively fast progress.

Finally, the growing impacts of the nature crisis led to the passage of the Global Biodiversity Framework—the nature-related analogue of the Paris Agreement on climate. This established a global goal to halt and reverse nature loss by 2030 and defined a clear role and expectations for business. In 2023, the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD) published its [recommendations and a disclosure framework](#) for nature risk management. In parallel, the Science Based Targets Network (SBTN) published the first [methodology for businesses](#) to set science-based targets for nature. The disclosure and management of nature-related risks is now following a similar trajectory as that for climate, with even faster movement toward mandatory and harmonized disclosure frameworks.



The rapid development of frameworks and standards for nature foretell the rising expectations of regulators and stakeholders. Companies that seek to understand and address their nature impacts and dependencies will be well positioned to comply with ever-evolving regulation, meet the expectations of diverse stakeholders, and enhance resilience while curtailing risks.



Erin Leitheiser
Associate Director,
Nature, BSR

Business and Human Rights Matured, While Justice and Equity Emerged as New Concerns

There has also been a growing recognition that justice and equity are material issues for business. Although movements for environmental justice, racial equality, and women's rights have existed for many decades, it is only recently that they have assumed such an important place on the business agenda.

The surge in activist movements spotlighting inequality that drew widespread attention at the start of the decade coincided with the maturation of human rights frameworks for business that had been developed earlier in the 2010s, including the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises and the UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights.

Climate justice and the just transition have also become important issues on the business agenda. Beyond the increased focus on justice and equity this is being driven by increasingly visible climate impacts, greater appreciation of the socioeconomic shifts anticipated from the transition, and a recognition of the systemic nature of the challenges. Environmental disruption will further exacerbate social and economic challenges, with disproportionate impacts on vulnerable populations. Job losses and skills shifts are also becoming more tangible, and it is increasingly obvious that if we do not bring people along, the transition will not only be disorderly but could be derailed.

Sustainability Disclosures Became Increasingly Harmonized and Mandatory with Clear Governance Accountability

The acknowledgement that climate, nature, and human rights are material issues for business has prompted a shift toward increasingly mandatory and interoperable disclosures. Business leaders have realized they need to understand and manage these issues. Investors have pushed for standardized frameworks to compare peers across markets. And policymakers have made national and regional commitments on the issues that require business action.

A growing set of comprehensive and holistic sustainability reporting requirements has begun to build on and replace what had been a set of fragmented and siloed voluntary frameworks. Oversight of sustainability commitments is moving from civil society organizations to standard-setters, such as the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) and the European Financial Reporting Advisory Group (EFRAG). This is pushing companies to report more rigorously and transparently on concrete steps forward such as climate transition plans and governance improvements.

The adoption of the CSRD by the EU in 2023 increased the number of companies in scope for mandatory reporting by more than 10 times. Organizations like ISSB are developing global standards, with input from diverse economies. At the end of May 2024, the IFRS Foundation reported that more than 20 jurisdictions, representing over half of the global GDP, have either decided to use the ISSB standards or are taking steps to introduce them into their national sustainability reporting frameworks.

Investor demand for comparability, alongside a need to reduce compliance complexity and overhead, has helped drive the harmonization of standards globally. Efforts like the interoperability guidance among IFRS, CSRD, and



Since 2018, the field has seen the important role of voluntary initiatives in shaping mandatory requirements. Companies that only focus on the 'mandatory' work of the present, however, may find themselves unprepared for future developments. By constructively engaging in voluntary efforts at the forefront of the field, companies have an opportunity to increase their own resilience and positively influence the sustainable business agenda.



David Korngold
Managing Director of
BSR Innovation Group

TCFD are moving us toward a common sustainability language, with standardized frameworks, methodologies, and accountabilities.

Across these frameworks, governance is now a mandatory requirement for disclosure and has been elevated to the board level with direct accountability for and oversight of sustainability impacts, risks, and opportunities. This is bringing an exponential increase in awareness by board directors and executive leadership about the issues. It also highlights the need for upskilling as well as rethinking board composition and strategy oversight.



While we have a way to go to truly transformative leadership, it's inspiring to see board members and leaders, from both publicly-listed and privately-owned companies, actively inviting external views to the table and challenging their own thinking on emerging issues such as nature, affected stakeholders, inclusion, and the link to long-term business value.



Christine Diamente
Managing Director,
Transformation, BSR



Responsible Development of Technology Emerged as a Concern

The impact of technological innovation and disruption was a key theme in our [2018 report](#). While many new technologies have the potential to advance the enjoyment of human rights, they also present serious risks. Disinformation spread via social media platforms may undermine the right to free and fair elections, new applications of AI may reinforce biases and discrimination, and the exponential growth in smart and connected devices poses risks to privacy and data protection. Other new risks and challenges will no doubt emerge in the next few years. The impacts can be rapid and the details difficult for non-specialists to fully comprehend.

All this has created a challenge for government and regulators seeking to ensure that citizens are protected while also supporting technological innovation and economic development.



The increased expectation of stakeholders on companies to respect human rights, combined with the more assertive stance taken by governments and regulators in recent years to 'rein in' technology companies, means we may now be approaching the point where the risks of causing harm become too significant for even the most innovative and fast-moving tech companies to ignore.



Richard Wingfield
Director,
Technology Sectors, BSR



While many new technologies have the potential to advance the enjoyment of human rights, they also present serious risks.

Since 2018, we have seen some efforts from governments (particularly in the EU) to start regulating social media platforms and AI, as well as global and regional efforts to set “soft law” frameworks on the development of new technologies.

However, these have been slow to develop and too often address the problems of yesterday rather than tomorrow. In the absence of mature regulations, stakeholders expect that companies developing and using new technologies will do so in a way that ensures respect for human rights. This has been the preserve not only of civil society, but increasingly of investors, international organizations, and other stakeholders.



The ESG Backlash Has Complicated Efforts

Even as the regulation and governance of sustainable business have seen enormous progress over the past several years, countervailing trends have driven a backlash. Some of this has been grounded in legitimate questions about the degree to which “sustainable” investments or commitments deliver actual results, while a significant portion can be attributed to political maneuvering, particularly in the US. Populist political movements are both driving and amplifying this discourse—abetted by misinformation, disinformation, and generative AI.

In the US, at least 61 anti-ESG bills were pending in various state legislatures at the beginning of 2024. In Europe, protests across 12 countries this year saw farmers taking to the streets to denounce the EU’s green policies as hampering their economic survival.

Court rulings and legislation to roll back certain rights have also complicated efforts for just and sustainable business. In the US, reproductive rights and affirmative action in higher education have both suffered significant reversals in the Supreme Court. In Latin America, there is a growing movement to reject “gender ideology” in politics, business, and education.



Although we’ve seen significant political backlash and subsequent reversal of rights, progress on social issues and human rights are rarely met without societal backlash. As soon as measurable progress is made, there is a backlash from those who hold power in the established system.



Paloma Munoz
Director,
Human Rights Standards, BSR

This backlash has led some companies to retreat on commitments and resourcing, while others continue the work but are more cautious about messaging. In several high-profile cases, businesses have gotten caught in the crosshairs of politicians seeking to score political points in the battles over ESG. Despite this backlash, however, and perhaps in some cases because of it, we see that investor, business, and consumer momentum for just and sustainable business continues. And the pushback is not universal. France

and Ireland, for example, have recently enshrined women's rights in their laws and constitution, while respect for LGBTQIA+ rights has progressed in parts of Asia Pacific.

Despite this backlash, however, and perhaps in some cases because of it, we see that investor, business, and consumer momentum for just and sustainable business continues.

SCENARIO DEEP DIVE

Tribalism

Perhaps the most worrisome scenario in our 2018 report is “Tribalism, Inc.” It describes a future in which social fragmentation has reached such a degree that humanity is splitting into tribes—with radically different politics, cultural values, and economic systems. These tribes take vastly different stances on issues including technology, climate science, and human rights. Virtual reality enables people to wall themselves off from others more completely than ever. Collective action on shared challenges becomes nearly impossible.

Thankfully, we are still a long way from the world imagined by this scenario. But developments over the past few years should serve as a warning. The breakdown of shared truths, the erosion of trust in institutions, and the spread of conspiracy theories have happened with alarming speed and force. The new capabilities of generative AI are poised to amplify and accelerate these tendencies as it becomes increasingly difficult to assure the authenticity of images and text.

Business has an important opportunity to play a moderating role here. While it has sometimes found itself in the crossfire of culture war battles, it enjoys a relatively high level of trust. Diverse workforces and customer bases mean that it has to attend to the concerns of a wide variety of stakeholders. While seeking to avoid the partisan fray, business can still take a stand for truth, democracy, and science.

This will be most credible if business backs up its words with actions. This includes aligning its lobbying and political giving with its principles, taking meaningful steps to address economic inequality, and embracing constructive regulation that seeks to protect institutions and democracy.



Reflections and Insights



Reflecting on the myriad changes that have taken place over the past half decade as well as the view of the future articulated in our original report yields insights about the transition underway, implications for sustainable business, and the future yet to come.

01

We Need to Rapidly Turn the Ship on Climate and Nature, Even While Preparing for the Impacts Already Underway

As the impacts from the climate and nature crises continue to intensify, they pose growing, systemic, and increasingly existential risks to business, the economy, and society as a whole. [WEF's 2024 global risk report](#) suggests that five of the top 10 global risks over the next decade will relate to climate change and nature. And yet emissions continue to rise, and nature degradation worsens.

Despite growing corporate commitments and actions, the pace of the energy transition is insufficient. Concerted action by business and investors is urgently required. Gaps, loopholes, and misaligned incentives need to be addressed. The challenge of scope 3 emissions reductions

must be prioritized, even amidst supply chain reconfigurations. This will require adhering to the spirit—not just the letter—of new laws and taking a coherent whole-of-business approach. Business leadership and governance accountability for long-term value will be essential.

At the same time, businesses and policymakers must also accelerate adaptation and resilience efforts. We are simply not prepared for the disruption that has already started, and the longer we wait the harder and more expensive this will be.



02

The Transition Is Happening but Will Require Perseverance and Ongoing Ambition

There has never been a better time to address these challenges. Momentum for a transition is growing rapidly along with the requisite technologies, capital, and leadership.

However, this transition is unlikely to be orderly or fast. (Remaking the global economy rarely is.) Political backlash will require business to more credibly deliver social benefits and address questions of equity. Geopolitical frictions will complicate global cooperation and necessitate more resilient and agile strategies. And the challenges of overhauling our legacy energy, food, and industrial systems while expanding access will not be met without volatility and disruption.

These challenges must not be cause for retreat. Rather, we need to accept that the years ahead will be disorderly and disruptive and plan accordingly. To stay the course amidst the turbulence will require ambitious vision and commitment, complemented by foresight and agility.

“

The challenges of overhauling our legacy energy, food, and industrial systems while expanding access will not be met without volatility and disruption.

”



Margot Brent
Manager,
Transformation, BSR

03

We Must Develop and Deploy Technology More Wisely

Technology may help address some of these challenges. However, we should be wary of techno-solutionism—our desire to embrace technological solutions as a quick and flawless way to solve complex real world problems.

Many technologies that have been proposed in recent years as solutions to our most pressing sustainability challenges remain far from scale. Some, such as using blockchain for supply chain traceability, may prove to be a distraction. Others, like lab-grown meat and fiber recycling, might hold more promise over the long term but are unlikely to become mainstream during the time frame needed to radically reduce our negative impacts.

This doesn't mean they shouldn't be pursued at all. Technological innovation is nonlinear and periods of slow progress can be followed by rapid breakthroughs. We should be

cautious, however, about placing overly large bets on unproven and expensive technological solutions at the expense of underinvesting in messier but less speculative approaches, such as policy reform, business model innovation, and behavior change.

Nowhere is this moral hazard more significant than with carbon dioxide removal (CDR) technologies. While some amount of CDR may ultimately be required, this must not provide an excuse to keep polluting. Climate change is pushing planetary systems toward irreversible tipping points, beyond which no amount of carbon removal will be able to restore them to their previous state.

We should exercise similar discernment when it comes to artificial intelligence. While AI is already helping address the climate crisis in some important ways—for example, through climate modeling and more accurate methane emissions monitoring—other ideas will take longer to bear fruit, such as using AI to develop better materials for renewable energy. In the meantime, we are pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into new AI training models and the massive increase in power demand has caused a number of Big Tech climate leaders to badly miss their climate targets.

Some innovations accelerate transformation toward a new, more sustainable paradigm. Others merely extend business as usual. In this turbulent transition zone, it is vital that we try to distinguish one from the other. As the stakes and the urgency increase, we must balance the patient cultivation of potentially transformative innovations with greater discernment and wisdom about which solutions will get us where we need to go at the pace that is required.

And for those technologies that are developed and deployed, business has an important role in helping contribute to a societal consensus on how to do this responsibly. This applies in particular to those technologies with truly planetary implications such as climate technology, biotechnology, and AI. We need to ensure that shared ethical and human rights principles and commitments guide the responsible development and deployment of these nascent and powerful technologies.

04

We Need to Address the Tensions Between Growth and Environmental Goals

A related conundrum concerns the mounting tension between growth and sustainability. Given the scale and urgency of the crises that confront us, and the limited progress made to date, we need to confront the reality that even "green growth" may be insufficient to keep humanity within safe and just planetary boundaries.

We need to consider approaches that more fully address the clear disconnect between our economic system and our sustainability objectives. The rate and scale of production and consumption perpetuated by the current

We need to confront the reality that even "green growth" may be insufficient to keep humanity within safe and just planetary boundaries.



economic system has become unsustainable regardless of how resource efficient we become. There is strong evidence that relative decoupling is unlikely to happen in the time frame and at the scale needed, and that absolute decoupling—where economic growth and a total reduction of resource use takes place—is highly unlikely, if not impossible.

A more fundamental rethink of our economic system and business models is urgently needed. Alternative models, such as Post-Growth, the Regenerative Economy, and Sufficiency, are starting to move from theoretical concepts into mainstream discussion. Emerging regulations, such as CSRD and CSDDD, are also pushing companies to critically rethink their business models.



I have no doubt that the questioning of ‘green growth’ will be one of the key themes as we look ahead. We are already seeing early examples of regulation on consumption levels in the EU and corporates moving to address the tension between business growth and environmental sustainability targets, which gives me hope as it’s something that was unthinkable only a few years ago.



Giulio Berruti
Director,
Climate Change, BSR

05

Companies Have an Important Role to Play in Promoting Truth, Democracy, and Cooperation

The erosion of truth, democracy, and cooperation—amplified by populist demagoguery and artificial intelligence—holds peril for business. It threatens social stability, the rule of law, and sound governance—all of which are essential for business to thrive. It also creates a more volatile and incoherent regulatory environment, with wild swings in policy and fragmentation across jurisdictions. Progress on core sustainability priorities like climate and human rights is undermined.

These trends have been most evident in the US, though they are gaining ground in Europe and elsewhere. In this context, the emergence of increasingly global and interoperable sustainability standards is an encouraging counterexample of convergence and cooperation to be celebrated. It demonstrates the important role that business and policymakers can play as a counterweight to the centrifugal forces fragmenting society in many places.

Business has not yet come to terms with the reality that these dynamics reflect the fact that the economy is not working for many people today, and that anxiety about the future is widespread and justified.

However, business has not yet come to terms with the reality that these dynamics reflect the fact that the economy is not working for many people today, and that anxiety about the future is widespread and justified. Business can address these issues by focusing more attention on inequity, and by ensuring that innovations contribute to social stability and broad-based economic opportunity.

The widespread anxiety about the future that leads to populism can be mitigated by

demonstrating how the average person will benefit from new technologies, new business models, and the transition to a clean energy economy, along with genuine efforts to address income inequality.

More equitable economic progress will also help stabilize the global system. Isolationism and anti-trade backlash is also happening because many people have concluded that they don't and won't benefit. Business has a stake in a global system that addresses global challenges, and that system is teetering.

06

The Agenda for Boards and the C-Suite is More Complex Than Ever, as They are Called on to Navigate a Highly Complex Set of Questions

The intersection of business and society is shaping the agenda for boards and the C-suite like never before. Business strategy, success, and impact are more deeply intertwined than ever with questions that once were limited to political, academic, or cultural matters. This is being driven by multiple factors, including recognition of the strategic business importance of sustainability, the rise of regulations that require board oversight, investor interest, employee expectations, external stakeholder pressure, and to some degree a generational shift in the boardroom.

This complex board agenda also requires increased attention on geopolitics, political risk in G7 nations and wider G20 emerging economies, and the rapid rise of generative AI as a technology whose impacts are not yet widely understood. In this context, the perspectives, skills, and networks needed for boards and senior business executives to provide leadership and stewardship are changing fast, with an ever greater need to adapt to new topics and opportunity to foster long-term business value.

07

Strategic Foresight is Essential for Navigating What Comes Next

If nothing else, this report should make clear the astonishing scale and pace of change underway in the world and for sustainable business. It should also demonstrate the value of strategic foresight, also known as futures thinking.

While none of these changes could have been predicted in their exact details, our Doing Business in 2030 report anticipated many of today's most relevant issues and questions. A reader of that report might have been surprised by some of the specifics but not shocked by the overall contours of what's transpired over the half decade since it was published.

While none of these changes could have been predicted in their exact details, our "Doing Business in 2030" report anticipated many of today's most relevant issues and questions.



We should expect to see as much or more change over the next five years. The trajectories of the key trends we've analyzed in this report, such as intensifying climate impacts and accelerating technological change, can be anticipated with some degree of confidence. Trends analysis should be a table stakes exercise for sustainability teams, ensuring that these changes are baked into planning and strategy.

New issues and concerns will continue to emerge. Here's where the foresight practice of horizon scanning can serve as an essential early warning radar. Few developments emerge out of nothing. Ongoing scanning for signals of change—those nascent changes that could become mainstream and prove disruptive in the future—can help ensure that sustainable business practitioners are not blindsided by unexpected developments.

Even with careful attention to trends and horizon scanning, many aspects of the future are highly uncertain. The results of the upcoming US elections, the capabilities of AI five years into the future, and the outcome of the Russia/Ukraine conflict, for example, are all impossible to predict with certainty. Here, scenario planning offers an essential tool for business to explore different plausible developments, stress-test thinking and strategies, and build greater resilience.

Futures thinking is not only about anticipating and preparing for what may come but also provides us the basis and agency for actively shaping a better future. Our Doing Business in 2030 scenarios provided a window into some of the risks and opportunities that lie ahead. Frameworks like [Three Horizons](#)

provide a means for us to collaboratively articulate the transformative change we wish to see and identify tangible pathways to get us there.

How might business serve to moderate tribalism and restore trust in institutions? What are the new business models that are truly sustainable in a world of accelerating climate change? How can business ensure that new technologies like AI empower humanity in a responsible manner and help address our shared planetary challenges? The important task now is for business to grapple with how it can influence these in the most positive way possible and produce truly contemporary solutions to the challenges of today and tomorrow.

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BSR® is a sustainable business network and consultancy focused on creating a world in which all people can thrive on a healthy planet. With offices in Asia, Europe, and North America, BSR® provides its 300+ member companies with insight, advice, and collaborative initiatives to help them see a changing world more clearly, create long-term value, and scale impact.

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