



# BSR Conference 2008 | Sustainability: Leadership Required Planetary Boundaries: Living within Earth's Capacity to Support Us

Breakout Session Summary

Wednesday, November 5, 2008 | 10-11:30 a.m.

## Speakers

- **Tariq J. Banuri**, Director of Future Studies Program, Stockholm Environment Institute
- **Robert W. Corell**, Director, H. John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics, and the Environment's Global Change
- **Carl Mossfeldt**, Chief Executive Officer, Tällberg Advisors (moderator)

## Highlights

- Examining planetary boundaries reveals a significant gap between current sustainability commitments and what really needs to be done for the long-term health of the planet. This gap represents an opportunity for the private sector.
- Because all of Earth's systems are interrelated, all planetary boundaries need to be considered in order to create effective long-term economic growth solutions.
- This problem is not simply an environmental issue—it is also an economic, national security, and an equity issue for human well-being.

## Memorable Quotes

- “When we let pressures and risks build up in systems, the system collapses. We've seen that in the financial system, and we may see that in the environmental system.”—Carl Mossfeldt, Tällberg Advisors
- “We are already outside the CO<sub>2</sub> boundary that the planetary system has set for itself for 10,000 years.”—Robert Corell, H. John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics, and the Environment's Global Change
- “Climate change is the easiest threat in the world. It has a solution.” —Tariq Banuri, Stockholm Environment Institute

## Overview

Mossfeldt began the session by introducing a new approach to conceptualizing the environmental problem. Instead of selecting different scenarios and predicting what the effects on the environment would be, he suggests analyzing the planet's boundaries and then





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working backward to determine what we need to do to stay within those boundaries. Taking this approach, he argued, reveals a significant gap in what we are thinking now and what we truly need to be doing. Mossfeldt compared the Earth systems to the current global economic crisis: Because the global economy exists within a fragmented local landscape whereby individual actors manage their own risks but no actor manages inter-institutional risks, risks build up until the system eventually collapses.

Corell opened by saying that for the past 10,000 years, the world has been operating within a natural set of boundaries that has provided a fairly stable environment. However, the socio-economic pathways that have evolved as a result of the Industrial Revolution are likely to take us out of those natural boundaries. In fact, our current CO<sub>2</sub> levels are already outside of these boundaries. The gap between where we need to be and where we are heading provides great opportunities for the private sector. However, in cases such as carbon emissions, which we need to reduce by 5 percent every year, this is a daunting challenge.

Banuri introduced the social impacts of crossing these planetary boundaries by describing the Hobbesian trap, a zero-sum game scenario where individualistic motives create a warring society unless controlled by some external factor. To date, we have avoided this trap due to economic growth—which encourages individuals to work together even given their diverging interests—and the political systems that support this growth. Now this economic growth model is endangered by planetary boundaries, and the next challenge is how to rescue current economic growth from its environmental implications.

Mossfeldt challenged the audience to look at the situation as a multi-issue problem within the entire planetary system. For example, a focus on carbon emissions has led to the introduction of bio-fuels. However, use of bio-fuels pushes the limits of other planetary boundaries, such as water use, land use, and nitrogen use (via fertilizers). The challenge then becomes creating a set of business models and policy practices that allow for growth within these boundaries. Corell added that while we need to look for new growth models for the long term, the current model offers opportunities to find more near-term solutions.

Banuri added that intergovernmental organizations, civil society, an engaged public, and transnational corporations will be responsible for this change. Responding an audience member's call for the scientific and academic communities to present this information in plain language and in more mainstream publications, Banuri, Corell, and Mossfeldt agreed that this was a critical step for success.

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