



LUCAS SIMONS



CHANGING THE FOOD GAME

MARKET TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE



A Greenleaf Publishing Book



Changing the Food Game lays down the problem and the solution. The book shows clearly why systemic leadership, innovation and collaboration are the only way forward in dealing with the global food problem.

Herman Wijffels, economist and former Dutch representative at the World Bank; Professor of Sustainability and Societal Change, University of Utrecht, The Netherlands

Sustainable food systems are pre-competitive. We must work together to produce more with less by focusing globally on productivity and efficiency while reducing waste. This book suggests how we can find the tipping points to get ahead of the curve.

Jason Clay, PhD, Senior Vice President of Market Transformation, WWF

This book tells an inspiring story about a just-started journey to a more inclusive and sustainable economy. More than enough reasons to continue.

Nico Roozen, Director of Solidaridad Network and Founder of Max Havelaar

Sustainability of global agricultural commodities is at a critical tipping point. We are at the junction between fragmented niche efforts that are falling short, and collective systematic action that realizes breakthrough impact with farmers and supply chains. This book maps the transformation and offers a path forwards. A must-read for leaders interested in long-lasting impact at sector-wide scale.

Barry Parkin, Chief Sustainability Officer, Mars Incorporated

Governments, NGOs, and industries alike have known for a long time that our agricultural systems are not sustainable; deeply rooted behaviors and systems by all parties need to change. Making changes that will fundamentally reshape the sector requires a long-term vision on how to do business in a sustainable way. Lucas Simons' book is compelling in that it provides an actionable framework to enable the change, stimulates all parties to think beyond their natural boundaries, and gives hope and certainty that sustainable change is within reach.

Isabelle C.H. Esser, Senior Vice President Foods R&D, Unilever

Changing the Food Game provides an in-depth spotlight on the complexities, struggles, and transformations within commodity chains. An interesting read.

**Bill Guyton, President of the World
Cocoa Foundation**

Readable, interesting and relevant... it has a valuable contribution to make.

**Bruno Dyck, Asper School of Business,
University of Manitoba**

Food security is one of the greatest challenges of our time. This book clearly shows how business can contribute to the solution, providing valuable insights and a great read.

Feike Sijbesma, CEO, Royal DSM

The way we deal with our global challenges has changed significantly over the past 10–20 years. We are much more focused on scale. Currently, unusual coalitions of competitors and key stakeholders are working together in new ways to bring systemic and structural change to the way we do business. This book gives a compelling framework to initiate, facilitate, and accelerate complex change processes. A must-read!

Joost Oorthuizen, CEO, The Sustainable Trade Initiative

Changing the Food Game
Market Transformation Strategies for
Sustainable Agriculture



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MARKET TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

LUCAS SIMONS



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Contents

Preface	xi
Acknowledgements	xiii
How to read this book	xvi
 PART I What is the problem?	1
1. Guatemala, where it all began	2
2. What you eat impacts the world	7
2.1 Agriculture: an economic force to be reckoned with.....	8
2.1.1 Land use for food production.....	9
2.1.2 Agriculture’s thirst.....	10
2.1.3 Agriculture versus biodiversity.....	11
2.1.4 Agriculture and climate change.....	13
2.1.5 Agriculture; the farmers and their families.....	15
2.2 Feeding our growing population.....	16
2.2.1 The biggest challenge of our generation.....	18
2.2.2 The price of scarcity.....	19
2.3 We need radical, systemic change.....	21

3. Reading and understanding behavior in systems	23
3.1 Thinking in loops	24
3.2 Classic examples of failing systems	26
3.2.1 The hogs-cycle theory	26
3.2.2 The Tragedy of the Commons theory	27
3.3 Individuals don't really have a choice	28
3.4 The fourth principle - Conditions for change are not there	30
3.5 The four principles of system failing	31
4. Why do agricultural markets fail?	32
4.1 Pssst ... come into my store	33
4.2 The role of governments	39
4.2.1 Food shortages in Europe- Never again!	40
4.2.2 Protecting EU farmers	41
4.2.3 Subsidizing and protecting U.S. farmers	43
4.3 What about the African farmers?	43
4.4 No social safety nets	46
4.5 A complex chicken-and-egg situation	47
4.6 Unsustainability as the natural outcome	49
4.7 A cynical conclusion - we benefit from unsustainable economies	51
4.8 When an entire system fails, who is to blame?	54
PART II What is the solution?	57
5. Phases of market transformation	58
5.1 Moving toward more sustainable systems is about higher connectability	59
5.2 Different phases of system change	62

5.3 The four phases of market transformation.....	64
5.3.1 Phase 1: the awareness and project phase	64
5.3.2 Phase 2: the first mover and competition phase	65
5.3.3 Phase 3: the critical mass and institutionalization phase.....	66
5.3.4 Phase 4: the level playing field phase.....	67
5.4 The patterns of market transformation are all around us	68
 6. How does market transformation start?	70
6.1 Palm oil: the fire that woke up the world.....	71
6.1.1 Awareness is rising.....	72
6.1.2 The blame game begins.....	73
6.1.3 What about the companies who buy palm oil?	75
6.2 Poverty in your coffee cup.....	76
6.2.1 Fairtrade coffee to the rescue	78
6.2.2 Pressure increases.....	79
6.2.3 Then came the big turnaround.....	80
6.2.4 Now that we have got your attention	81
6.3 How it started in the cocoa sector.....	81
6.3.1 Diseases spread.....	82
6.3.2 Public outrage.....	83
6.3.3 Insufficient progress	84
6.4 Reflections on the first phase of market transformation	85
6.4.1 A good campaign: no pain, no gain	87
6.5 Examples of other sectors in this phase of market transformation	88
6.5.1 The spices sector.....	88
6.6 Preparing for the next phase	89

7. The first mover and competition phase	92
7.1 The sustainability race in the coffee industry.....	93
7.1.1 Douwe Egberts' grand opportunity.....	96
7.2 On your marks ... get set ... go.....	99
7.2.1 Coffee standards gain in popularity.....	102
7.3 The sustainability race in the cocoa sector.....	104
7.3.1 Let the games begin.....	105
7.3.2 National industry commitments.....	107
7.3.3 Perception versus reality on the ground.....	108
7.3.4 Reality strikes.....	109
7.4 The first mover and competition phase in palm oil.....	111
7.4.1 Governments (re-)enter the arena.....	114
7.4.2 Increasing competition and gaining momentum.....	115
7.4.3 Has it all made a difference?.....	116
7.4.4 The palm oil sector is getting ready for the third phase.....	117
7.5 Other examples of agricultural sectors in the second phase of market transformation.....	120
7.5.1 The tea sector.....	120
7.5.2 The livestock sector.....	121
7.5.3 The soy sector.....	122
7.5.4 The cut flower sector.....	123
7.5.5 The aquaculture (fish farming) sector.....	124
7.5.6 The sugarcane sector.....	125
7.5.7 The cotton sector.....	125
7.5.8 The tropical timber sector.....	126
7.6 What is the next step for these sectors.....	127
7.7 Reflections on the second phase of market transformation.....	128

8. The critical mass and institutionalization phase	134
8.1 How the cocoa industry took leadership	135
8.2 Collaborative action in the coffee sector	141
8.2.1 Meeting on neutral grounds	143
8.3 Reflections on the third phase of market transformation	145
8.3.1 Resisting change	148
8.3.2 Other examples of agricultural sectors in this phase of market transformation	150
8.4 Summary of the third phase	150
9. The level playing field phase	153
9.1 Learning from other examples that have reached the fourth phase	154
9.1.1 Banning factory eggs	155
9.1.2 Banning useless electronic waste	156
9.1.3 Switching off the lights	157
9.2 September 2025: a future scenario for agricultural commodity markets	158
9.3 How it got to this point	160
9.4 Sustainability will become a mainstream qualifier	161
9.5 Summary of the fourth phase of market transformation	162
10. Key questions about market transformation	165
10.1 Do we always need a certain level of urgency to start the change process?	167
10.2 Are NGOs always the first to sound the alarm and raise awareness?	168

10.3	Does it always have to be standards as instruments of change in phase 2?.....	168
10.4	Do standards play a role in and after phase 3?.....	169
10.5	Is there one transformation curve or are there several going on at the same time?.....	171
10.6	Do we reach true sustainability in phase 4, and does the change process then stop?.....	172
10.7	Can you skip a phase or can accelerate the systemic change process?.....	173
10.8	Can a phase fail? If so, why, and what happens then?.....	176
10.9	Does a sector move as a whole from one phase to another, or are there groups of leaders and followers? Does this differ per region or market?.....	178
10.10	Is this transformation curve also useful for solving complex problems outside of agriculture?.....	178
10.11	Who are the leaders of the transformation? Do we have the same leaders throughout the change process?.....	179
10.12	What can I do to initiate change on an issue I care about?.....	181
11.	Ten examples of inspirational change-makers.....	183
Appendix 1:	Sector fact sheets of coffee, cocoa, and palm oil.....	199
Appendix 2:	Sources.....	212
Notes	216
About the author	239
Index	241

Preface

We live in fascinating times. Never before has our world population grown so fast. Never before have so many people had so much money to spend on consumption. Never before has the projected demand for more resources, energy, raw materials, and food been so high. And never before have our global economies destroyed so much of our natural resources and ecosystems, leaving hundreds of millions of people behind in poverty.

We read about these issues in the newspaper while we eat our breakfast and drink our coffee or tea. We read the news flashes on our phones during lunch and watch televised reports on the evening news while we eat our dinner with a glass of red wine. We do this without realizing that this same breakfast, lunch, and dinner are perhaps the biggest drivers of poverty, social abuse, and environmental degradation of all. Of all global sectors, agriculture is probably the most unsustainable. And to feed our growing population, predictions are that, in the next 40 years, we will have to almost double our food production. Fixing agriculture is probably the challenge of our generation and we will not get a second chance to get it right.

While this may sound grim and ominous, I have written this book with a positive message. A book about large-scale systemic change, new ways of doing business, new partnerships, and new strategies to change the way food is produced. This is not just an idea or a plan, it is actually

happening on a large scale in many sectors. Change is coming and it is important that you know this as it will not only influence your future, your children's future, but also that of the organization or the industry you work in.

For many years I have worked in the field of sustainable market transformation. This means that I take a macro, systemic view on why complex problems emerge and persist, what are the drivers behind it and look for the systemic pressure points that, when pushed, can change the system. It also means that I do not believe in quick wins and easy solutions. Instead, I ask questions such as: Why does unsustainability seem to be the natural outcome of our collective actions in the marketplace? What drives individual behavior in a larger system and what can be done to change that? I work primarily in global agricultural systems for three reasons: the need is highest in this sector; it affects the most people; and it is the most interesting, fascinating, real, uplifting, and sobering sector of all. It doesn't get any more real than when you are dealing with farmers in Africa or other emerging markets.

The topic of market transformation and systemic change processes in agriculture may sound daunting. Perhaps you are thinking, that sounds interesting, but I don't know anything about agriculture or systemic change processes. Then this book is especially for you. It explains, in simple terms, why agricultural markets across the globe are—and continue to be—so unsustainable, and describes which systemic change processes are currently happening in many agricultural markets. These change processes are described from a practical, easy, third-person viewpoint. The book deliberately avoids being too technical, too scientific, and too detailed. As a result, you will get an overview of systemic dynamics and start to see and recognize patterns of behavior, and you will understand generic intervention strategies that eventually will lead to major systemic change in the sector. And these patterns and dynamics can be applied to other major challenges as well.

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Changing markets and systems cannot be done alone; it is always a partnership effort. The knowledge and insights in this book were developed over time only because I had the honor and pleasure to work with many devoted, inspiring, and professional colleagues, leaders, and organizations from all over the world, from industry, trade, government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), farmer organizations, multilaterals, research centers, and consultancy firms. Moreover, I have the honor to be one of the World Economic Forum's Young Global Leaders and a member of the Ashoka Fellows Network: both are sources of real inspiration, hope, and learnings. In this book I pay tribute to some of these great organizations and individuals, but I had to leave out so many others. For this I apologize. I wish society could give more recognition to these heroes who wake up and stand up for a better world every day.

When writing this book I had the privilege of being able to count on many professional people who have helped me with the writing, research, and interviews, and who have given me valuable feedback, even at times when I really didn't want any! Without their help, this book would not have been possible. I would like to briefly acknowledge them here. Jorrit Reintjes, who did much of the research, many of the interviews and prepared the basic outline of the book. Suzanne Uittenbogaard, who compiled the detailed sector fact sheets and reviewed the entire manuscript. Timo van Dun, Migle Damaskaite and Sarah Muller, who provided project

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I wish to thank the members of the editorial board who have spent their valuable time reading the manuscript and giving me honest, unpolished input and feedback. Sometimes straight in the face, but the book has improved because of it. The editorial board members are: Edna Kissmann (one of the owners and senior partner in Kissmann Langford), Felix Oldenburg (Director of Ashoka Germany and Europe), Gerda van Dijk (Director of the Board at the Zijlstra Center for Public Control and Governance and Professor of Organizational Ecology at the University of Tilburg), Lucian Peppelenbos (Director of Learning and Innovation at IDH) and Shatadru Chattopadhyay (Managing Director of Solidaridad South & South-East Asia), Bruno Dyck (Professor at the University of Manitoba and second expert editor), and Anne Schoemaker (Management Team SCOPEinsight). And, of course, I wish to thank Rebecca Macklin from Greenleaf Publishing. Greenleaf Publishing believed in the topic of sustainable market transformation in agriculture from the beginning and in me as the author, and I thank her and the team for their continuous support, ideas, and encouragement.

A very special word of recognition and gratitude goes to Nick Bocklandt, the Belgian coffee grower from Guatemala and co-founder of the Utz Kapeh Foundation. Nick is the hero in my personal story. This story began with him as he set me on the path I continue to walk today. His dedication, care, and loyalty for the Mayan Indian people made a deep impact on me. When times get tough I still repeat his mantra “Happy-Healthy-Strong.”

Most of all I wish to thank Pauline Simons, my partner, for her continuous love, support, endurance, and patience. Besides her own busy and impactful life as a fantastic mother, teacher, and student, she had to put up with me travelling around the world, managing two companies, and writing a book. I could have done none of this without her.

This book is dedicated to my children Carmen (9), Vincent (7), and Lizet (6). They continue to be my source of unconditional love, joy, life energy, wonder, and inspiration. It is with their future and their children's future in mind that I tell this story.

How to read this book

The title of this book, “Changing the Food Game: Market Transformation Strategies for Sustainable Agriculture,” suggests that systemic change is possible. There is even a strategy, a formula, and a model that can help you recognize the patterns and phases of change, and that can help guide leaders to initiate, accelerate, and drive systemic change and solve some of the complex problems of our generation. Solving complex problems may not be easy, it cannot be done quickly, but systemic change is possible. It is happening all around you, you just need to be able to see it, recognize it, and have the willingness to act or support those that do. If you want to know how you can take action as well or offer support, then read the final chapter of this book as it gives examples of great leaders who have decided to take action rather than wait and it mentions different organizations that do fantastic and important work in supporting them.

The book is in two parts. Part I consists of Chapters 1 to 4. It describes the global challenge, and shows the importance of our global food producing systems and the enormous impact it has on our economies, ecologies, and societies. It also explains what goes wrong in the system that drives this negative impact. You will come to see why our global food producing system serves as such a perfect example to explain the causes and drivers of failing systems. Once you understand what drives the race to the bottom in global agriculture, and how this is the result of our collective actions, you will start to see and recognize similar patterns causing other large and complex societal problems as well. With this understanding,

we can start thinking about how to change the rules of the game in such a way that the system becomes more sustainable.

Part II consists of Chapters 5 to 10. These chapters introduce an approach to initiate and accelerate systemic change. Chapter 5 is particularly important because, and I encourage you to read it carefully, it introduces the theory of change for dealing with systemic drivers that cause the problem in the first place. Changing failing systems is all about changing the rules of the game to start rewarding the right behavior. This is done by creating a higher level of awareness in the actors in the system and a higher level of connectability within the sector. Systemic change processes do not happen suddenly: they go through various sequential phases. Each phase has its own tactics, agendas, and partnerships, and if you want to be a systemic change agent yourself or support them, it is important that you recognize the different phases and understand “what to do,” “how to do it,” “with whom to do it,” and “how you know when it is the right time to switch gears to the next phase.” If done well, it is possible to initiate, accelerate, and influence a systemic change process. If done badly, it is possible to slow down or stop a change process, or even cause it to fail. So let’s get it right, as I believe we no longer have any time left to slow down or fail to implement the necessary change.

Chapters 6 through 10 in Part II contain real-life examples of agricultural commodity markets that have gone through, or are currently going through, these phases of systemic change.

My aim with this book is to help you see what drives so many of our systemic and complex problems in society. I want you to understand and see that almost all of them are the result of the same principles, the same patterns and same kind of (wrong) incentives that lead to the wrong collective actions that ultimately drive systemic failure. I hope that this book makes you optimistic about the opportunities for positive change on a large scale. Moreover, after reading this book, I hope that you will decide to join us on the exciting journey toward sustainable market transformation. In the famous words of renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”



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PART I

What is the problem?

**A systemic analysis of why
agricultural markets fail**

1

Guatemala, where it all began

I had been sitting in a four-wheel-drive car for hours, holding on to the door while we maneuvered abruptly around potholes and sharp curves. We had left the main road long ago and were driving on a dirt road. It was September 2002 and I was sitting in the car with Nick Bocklandt, a Belgian coffee farmer who had been living in Guatemala for more than 20 years. Nick knew the road by heart and drove the dirt roads confidently at high speed. We drove through beautiful landscapes, hilltops with spectacular views, forested areas, waterfalls, plots of land with maize, beans and chickens, forgotten villages, and isolated homes.

After an eight-hour drive from Guatemala City, there, at the absolute end of the road, we arrived at El Volcán, a mid-sized coffee farm in the Guatemalan Highlands. I got out of the car, still a bit shaken from the long, rough drive, and looked around. In front of me was an astonishing view over the hills. Behind me I heard some laughter and voices. When I turned around, I saw a group of about ten Mayan Indian women wearing beautiful traditional dresses looking, pointing at me, and laughing. I didn't quite know how to behave, so I smiled and mumbled a simple *buenos dias*, and walked away. It must have been quite a sight for them to see a sunburnt gringo with a bald head, wearing sunglasses, very out of place.

This was my very first encounter with Guatemala, with a coffee farm, and with Mayan Indian women. Two months earlier I had been hired as

the manager of an organization called Utz Kapeh, which means “good coffee” in Q’eqchi, the Mayan dialect spoken in that part of Guatemala. At the time, Utz Kapeh was a new initiative with big and bold ambitions to make the global coffee sector more sustainable by introducing a global standard for sustainable coffee production.¹ The idea was to work with the major coffee brands and coffee roasting companies. The idea was that these large coffee brands would use the Utz Kapeh standard as an instrument to source sustainable coffee and use the claim of sustainability assurance in their brand and product marketing. As the new manager, I was there on my first learning trip, and I got what I came for.

The year 2002 was the height of the big coffee crisis. For more than two years global coffee prices had been steadily declining and had fallen to their lowest levels in history. In the years preceding the coffee crisis there was a constant but significant increase in the supply of coffee, mainly from Vietnam.² With major support from the World Bank, Vietnam had rapidly developed into the second largest coffee producing country in the world. Moreover, Brazil, which is the largest coffee producer, had also increased its production. With both countries producing record volumes of coffee, world prices fell from well over \$1 per pound of green coffee to as low as \$0.40 per pound.

The Guatemalan coffee sector was (and still is) known and praised for its specialty: mountain-grown coffee with a full body, pleasant acidity, and a delicate, sweet aroma. Coffee growing normally provided income to about 90,000 farmers and their households.^{3,4} With prices plummeting, however, they fell into poverty and despair. The price collapse was a disaster for all of the Central American regional economies, causing some 600,000 people to flee the countryside and move to the cities, leaving everything behind. In total, 1.2 million people in the region required direct food aid.⁵ People were desperate, cutting down trees and occupying plots of land everywhere to grow something they could eat in order to survive.

The coffee crisis was the result of what economists call the “hogs-cycle” theory.⁶ But what I witnessed was not theory at all, but real people getting into real problems on a massive scale.

In the midst of that crisis some coffee traders continued to bargain down prices even further, thus exploiting the despair of the farmers who

were trying to survive. The government of Guatemala was struggling: it was unprepared, unequipped, perhaps even unwilling, to handle the situation and give people the proper support and basic means to cope with disaster.

It was during this journey in Guatemala that I saw and really understood for the first time what happens in a global economy when people are only interested in “what’s in it for them” and ignore the longer term effects of their collective behavior.

Nick Bocklandt was different. At that time Nick owned several coffee estates, and was responsible for the fate of hundreds of Mayan families living on the coffee farms as workers. Born in Belgium, he came to Guatemala in 1984, bringing his European point of view with him. When he became the owner of the coffee farms, he did something that was outrageous at the time. He felt personally responsible for the Mayan people who lived on the coffee estates, and he worked together with them to understand their needs and improve their lives. There, at the end of the road, on a coffee farm in the middle of trackless wilderness, Nick built a school for the workers’ children, who otherwise would never receive any form of education. There was a small hospital, a church, a community center, barracks for the seasonal workers, and wells for drinking water. Lush forests, which had been cut down for firewood years ago, were replanted again. The workers and their families were also given small plots of land to grow their own corn and beans. It was not heaven on Earth compared to our Western standards, but these people were clearly better off. Surprisingly, Nick began these activities in the early 1980s, at a time when almost nobody cared about workers on Guatemalan coffee estates or about the environment. Nick wryly observed: “It was so unique that they even thought I was a communist.”⁷

Little did he know at that time that his activities would ultimately result in a meeting with Ward de Groote (at that time the CEO of Ahold Coffee Company in the Netherlands). Later, around 2000, they joined forces to start the Utz Kapeh Foundation, an organization whose mission was to implement a global standard for responsible coffee production. Together with the great work of other sustainability standards such as Fairtrade, the Rainforest Alliance, and the Common Code for the Coffee Community (4C), Utz Kapeh ultimately grew into one of the largest certification

programs for sustainable coffee, cocoa, and tea in the world and part of a global movement that would eventually change the face of agricultural commodities.

Today, there are literally hundreds of global and local sustainability standards and product labels in the marketplace, in almost every commodity sector—tea, cocoa, cut flowers, spices, soy, fish farming, tropical timber, sugar, beef and many more. You can see them when you do your daily shopping. Standards, certification programs, and product labels have proven to be a very effective instrument of change in agriculture because they reward companies who care about where they source their products, and they make companies compete on sustainability. The lives of millions of farmers and producers have been positively affected as a result of the success of these standards. However, as we will see, the use of standards is an instrument that is very effective in a certain phase of market transformation. They also have their limitations. As the change process evolves to the next phase of market transformation, other and more holistic strategies are needed to complete the market transformation cycle.

During these years at Utz Kapeh, which later became UTZ Certified, I developed a passion to understand why markets, particularly agricultural markets, become so unsustainable, and why it is so hard to change them. When you talk to most organizations and individuals working in these agricultural sectors, each of them understand very well that the larger system they work in is unsustainable and that this situation cannot continue to go on, but then they raise their shoulders, say it is not their fault, they cannot change it and even resist change nevertheless. Why is this? How can this resistance be overcome?

This is not just a small problem that happens somewhere far away in an obscure African or Latin America country. It is a global problem that will affect you and your children on the largest scale possible. Global agriculture, and our global food producing systems, are probably the most important, most critical and most unsustainable systems we have. As you will read in this book, the way we produce and trade our food has become a classic example of failing systems on a massive scale, with unprecedented implications for hundreds of millions (in reality more than a billion) of people, for many economies, and for our planet as a whole.

In the year 2050, experts predict that we will have approximately 10 billion mouths to feed (almost 3 billion more than we have today), which means that food production will have to almost double. More food will need to be produced in the next 40 years than in the last 6,000 years combined. Growing enough food for all 10 billion mouths in a sustainable way is one of the biggest challenges of our generation. We will not get a second chance to get it right. To meet this challenge, I believe that we have to fundamentally change the agricultural and food producing systems, and that we need to do this on a massive scale. And this requires systemic change through a process called market transformation.

Luckily, the seriousness of the challenge is starting to sink in. Many important people and powerful organizations are working very hard and passionately to face this challenge, with increasing success. We have already come a long way and systemic change is slowly under way. The strategies that are used to drive this systemic change are important for everyone to understand, because these strategies will largely determine your future and your children's future.