IPBES Expert Guest Article by Professors Josef Settele, Sandra Díaz and Eduardo Brondizio[1] and Dr. Peter Daszak[2] on 27 April 2020

COVID-19 Stimulus Measures Must Save Lives, Protect Livelihoods, and Safeguard Nature to Reduce the Risk of Future Pandemics

There is a single species that is responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic - us. As with the climate and biodiversity crises, recent pandemics are a direct consequence of human activity – particularly our global financial and economic systems, based on a limited paradigm that prizes economic growth at any cost. We have a small window of opportunity, in overcoming the challenges of the current crisis, to avoid sowing the seeds of future ones.

Diseases like COVID-19 are caused by microorganisms that infect our bodies – with more than 70% of all emerging diseases affecting people having originated in wildlife and domesticated animals. Pandemics, however, are caused by activities that bring increasing numbers of people into direct contact and often conflict with the animals that carry these pathogens.

Rampant deforestation, uncontrolled expansion of agriculture, intensive farming, mining and infrastructure development, as well as the exploitation of wild species have created a 'perfect storm' for the spillover of diseases from wildlife to people. This often occurs in areas where communities live that are most vulnerable to infectious diseases.

Our actions have significantly impacted more than three quarters of the Earth's land surface, destroyed more than 85% of wetlands and dedicated more than a third of all land and almost 75% of available freshwater to crops and livestock production.

Add to this the unregulated trade in wild animals and the explosive growth of global air travel and it becomes clear how a virus that once circulated harmlessly among a species of bats in Southeast Asia has now infected more almost 2 million people, brought untold human suffering and halted economies and societies around the world. This is the human hand in pandemic emergence.

Yet this may be only the beginning. Although animal-to-human diseases already cause an estimated 700,000 deaths each year, the potential for future pandemics is vast. As many as 1.7 million unidentified viruses of the type known to infect people are believed to still exist in mammals and water birds. Any one of these could be the next 'Disease X' – potentially even more disruptive and lethal than COVID-19.

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Future pandemics are likely to happen more frequently, spread more rapidly, have greater economic impact and kill more people if we are not extremely careful about the possible impacts of the choices we make today.

Most immediately we need to ensure that the actions being taken to reduce the impacts of the current pandemic aren't themselves amplifying the risks of future outbreaks and crises. There are three important considerations that should be central to the multi-trillion-dollar recovery and economic stimulus plans already being implemented.

First, we must ensure the strengthening and enforcement of environmental regulations – and only deploy stimulus packages that offer incentives for more sustainable and nature-positive activities. It may be politically expedient at this time to relax environmental standards and to prop up industries such as intensive agriculture, long-distance transportation such as the airlines, and fossil-fuel-dependent energy sectors, but doing so without requiring urgent and fundamental change, essentially subsidizes the emergence of future pandemics.

Second, we should adopt a 'One Health' approach at all levels of decision-making – from the global to the most local – recognizing the complex interconnections among the health of people, animals, plants and our shared environment. Forestry departments, for example, usually set policy related to deforestation, and profits accrue largely to the private sector – but it is public health systems and local communities that often pay the price of resulting disease outbreaks. A One Health approach would ensure that better decisions are made that take into account long-term costs and consequences of development actions – for people and nature.

Third, we have to properly fund and resource health systems and incentivise behaviour change on the frontlines of pandemic risk. This means mobilising international finance to build health capacity in emerging disease hotspots – such as clinics; surveillance programs, especially in partnership with Indigenous Peoples and local communities; behavioural risk surveys; and specific intervention programs. It also entails offering viable and sustainable alternatives to high-risk economic activities and protecting the health of the most vulnerable. This is not simple altruism – it is vital investment in the interests of all to prevent future global outbreaks.

Perhaps most importantly, we need transformative change – the kind highlighted last year in the IPBES Global Assessment Report (the one that found a million species of plants and animals are at risk of extinction in coming decades): fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values, promoting social and environmental responsibilities across all sectors. As daunting and costly as this may sound – it pales in comparison to the price we are already paying.

Responding to the COVID-19 crisis calls for us all to confront the vested interests that oppose transformative change, and to end 'business as usual'. We can build back better and emerge from the current crisis stronger and more resilient than ever – but to do so means choosing policies and actions that protect nature – so that nature can help to protect us.

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***Note**: The above article is **not** a formal product of IPBES – but of the four authors who are leading global experts in their own right – building on the results of approved IPBES Assessment Reports. Work is currently underway on three IPBES assessments with direct relevance to the current crisis and future pandemics: an assessment on the sustainable use of wild species; another on invasive alien species, and one on the different ways of understanding the plural values of nature. Work has also just begun on scoping a new IPBES nexus assessment on the interlinkages between biodiversity, water, food and health in the context of climate change.*