

# Covid-19: A planetary disease

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**This blog focuses on the underlying environmental causes of Covid-19 (Covid) and the role of international law in tackling both Covid and other planetary crises. I argue that major changes to our relationship with our planet and its creatures are needed and these changes must be supported by new international law.**

## **What caused Covid?**

Covid-19 is a planetary disease and we humans are its cause: 'The animals who infected us did not come to us; we went to seek them out.'<sup>1</sup>

Human beings have suffered from diseases arising from contact with animals since time immemorial; most infectious illnesses were, at one stage, of animal origin. The rate of emergence of new diseases has increased over the last century. Transmission of biological material between species is needed in order to transmit and develop zoonotic disease, and thus some kind of contact, however minimal, is needed. And there is now more contact

between human beings and animals than ever before. Estimates of the percentage of zoonotic diseases in relation to new or re-emerging infectious diseases vary between 65% to nearly 75%.

Underlying factors relevant to the frequency of zoonotic disease outbreaks, and hence the Covid crisis, include human population increase (expected to reach around 9 billion by 2050);<sup>2</sup> human food crises; human conflict, decreased habitat available to non-humans; climate change (influencing environmental conditions that affect the survival and distribution of pathogens); deforestation and forest degradation; environmental destruction impacting on both human and animal populations; biodiversity loss; accelerated pressures on animals of all kinds forced into human contact; the breeding of animals under artificial conditions; and the capture, trade and killing of animals for human consumption as well as for therapeutic purposes and use as exotic pets. The illegal trade in wildlife is estimated to be the fourth most lucrative global black market (estimated at around US \$23 billion) after drugs, people, and arms smuggling, and hence a reason for the decline of many endangered species.

Many of these factors are underpinned and amplified by globalised trade, communication, criminal networks, and consumerism.

The immediate causes of Covid are related to these general underlying forces. One possible animal candidate for Covid transmission, the pangolin, is the most widely traded wild animal in the world, although this is illegal under the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora*.

The World Wildlife Fund's *Living Planet Report 2020* states that Covid is '..a clear manifestation of our broken relationship with nature'.<sup>3</sup> We have now arrived at "the Pandemic Era": one where we can expect continued pandemics, with their consequences for health system overload, human suffering, and economic meltdown - unless change occurs.



Image by Alex Strachan from Pixabay

## **What can be done?**

*A ban on wildlife trafficking and on wet-markets?*

In April 2020 a group of 339 animal welfare and conservation organisations appealed in an open letter<sup>4</sup> to the World Health Organization to work for bans and/or regulations of wildlife markets; and to close down or limit the trade in wildlife. Other forms of petitions and appeals have been launched, with cautious support from a few officials. China has already taken some action in this area.<sup>5</sup> There are however arguments against complete bans, including enforceability, the risk of underground trade, and business interests both large and small.

*What about international health law?*

The International Health Regulations 2005 (IHRs) set out a process for identifying possible pandemics and for follow-up action. The IHRs also require routine biosecurity controls. Development of the IHRs 2005 was specifically triggered by the SARS epidemic (caused by a coronavirus) of 2002-2003.

The IHRs 2005 have undoubtedly been a major force in managing public health emergencies over the last 15 years. But the IHRs do not have an explicit role in preventing or managing a new disease outbreak - until it shows signs of international spread. Any review of the IHRs, once Covid appears better controlled, is unlikely to address fundamental issues such as whether the IHRs could aim at preventing the fundamental drivers of zoonotic transmission. But in principle, at least, any review could at least consider whether 'international spread' is needed to trigger emergency action.

## *International environmental law*

Attempts to develop an effective and overarching international environmental framework go back to the Stockholm Declaration 1972 and before. The Declaration was followed by (among others) the World Charter for Nature (1982), the Rio Declaration (1992), the Earth Charter 2000, the Draft Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth (2010), the principles of Climate Justice (2011), and the Hague Principles (2018).

These declarations, statements of principles, and proposed frameworks have evolved with overlapping ideas. These include those relating to an earth systems approach; new scientific findings, in particular the idea of planetary boundaries;<sup>6</sup> the need for interdisciplinary approaches such as OneHealth, ecohealth and planetary health;<sup>7</sup> incorporation into legal thinking of indigenous approaches; international policy commitments, most recently in the UN Sustainable Development Goals; earth-centred philosophies and legal approaches;<sup>8</sup> and ideas around earth trusteeship.

### *The UN Global Pact for the Environment*

This is the most recent major initiative. In 2018 the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution *A/RES/72/277 Towards a Global Pact for the Environment*. The next years' work foundered, however, in failure in May 2019. The proposed international treaty, intended as legally binding, was rejected in favour of a non-binding Political Declaration. Timing was deferred till 2022.

## **Since Covid: any new ideas on where to next?**

The World Wildlife Fund challenges us to embrace a *New Deal for Nature and People*,<sup>9</sup> a globally binding agreement to:

- Halve our footprint on nature
- Stop the loss of natural habitats
- Stop the extinction of living species.

But currently the only legal initiative that seems to have some current traction in the UN systems is the *Towards a Global Pact for the Environment*, though this is weak. The organisation *Common Home of Humanity* is leading a campaign for a stronger and more effective version of the *Global Pact*, aiming to ensure legal recognition for the Earth System as a common heritage of humankind. Goals and rationales for new law are set out in their 2020 paper.<sup>10</sup> The (new) New Zealand Government should also push for a stronger version of the *Global Pact* in the UN system, as well as for a review of the IHRs.

## **Conclusions**

The NZ and international public health community is justifiably focused on immediate Covid consequences: health, social and economic. But we need to keep an eye also on the fundamental causes of pandemics such as Covid. These must be tackled at the planetary level, as well as by national measures and local action. They involve addressing intermediate risk factors such as the wildlife trade, wet-markets, and excessive dependence on animal protein. The IHRs require review. More deep-seated changes to our relationship with our planet and its creatures are also fundamental and must be underpinned by law.

As the Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz says (adapted): If we don't tackle Covid causes at the planetary level, we may eventually get out of the pandemic frying pan. Into the climate change fire.

**Further resources:** Some organisations that allow us to keep in touch with what is happening globally, and participate as appropriate in international campaigns, include:

- Common Home of Humanity (working for an overarching international legal framework): <https://www.commonhomeofhumanity.org/>
- World Wildlife Fund for Nature: <https://www.worldwildlife.org/> (advocates for a *New Deal for Nature and People*)
- United Nations Environmental Programme: <https://www.unenvironment.org/> (eg, see their excellent though anthropocentric report *Preventing the next pandemic – Zoonotic diseases and how to break the chain of transmission*)

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