

## Zoonotic Diseases

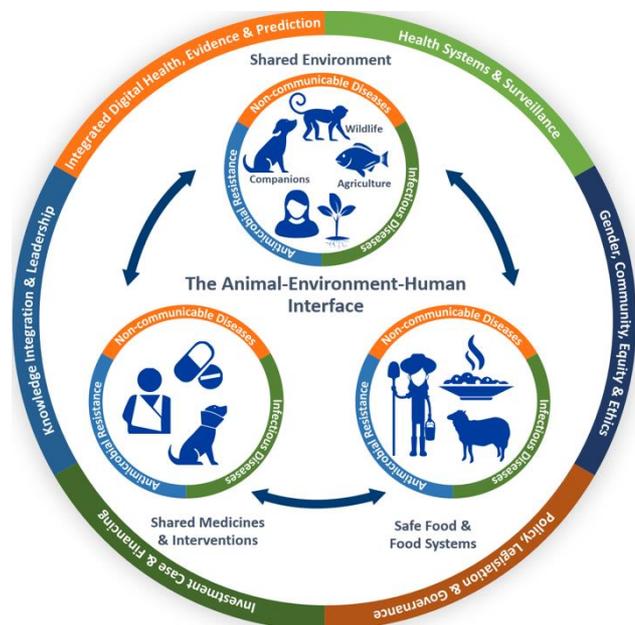
“Never before have so many opportunities existed for pathogens to pass from wild and domestic animals to people.”

**United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP),  
Executive Director, Inger Andersen**

Unless we act to protect habitat and biodiversity loss, says United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Executive Director, Inger Andersen, pandemics could become a new normal in this century. In response, UNEP is seeking to complement the work of its partners to advance a One Health approach that links the health of people, agricultural systems and nature, to explore how the deterioration of the world’s ecosystems is fueling the rise of zoonotic disease pandemics; and to offer practical recommendations to de-escalate this risk.

### COVID-19 and Zoonotic Diseases

[75 per cent of all emerging infectious diseases have come from wildlife.](#) And while the science is not yet conclusive as to the origin, it seems likely that COVID-19 originated from human-wildlife transmission and has since spread to nearly all countries in the world. But this should not surprise us. Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) was transmitted from camels to humans in 2012, and viruses ranging from Avian Flu to Ebola all have their sources in wildlife to human transmission. As more and more people encroach and shrink remaining natural areas, and as the process of urbanization moves us ever closer to wildlife, we increase our potential exposure to disease-causing pathogens. Unless we rethink our relationship to nature, zoonotic pandemics could be repeated, again and again.



### UNEP’s Response

Zoonotic disease transmission is a global, regional and local challenge, so solutions must be context specific. There is no one-size-fits-all. Given this, UNEP will support targeted, site-specific strategies to reduce the threat of such diseases by considering the impacts on equity, indigenous communities and vulnerable groups. This will take the form of three key interventions:

### **Zoonotic early warning system**

A new zoonotic risk and response programme will be developed to improve capacity to reduce threats of zoonotic diseases, in coordination with key partners. UNEP's work will identify demand-driven recovery options that contribute to the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goal targets. This framework will address the root drivers of zoonotic diseases, with specific policy options to reverse habitat destruction and promote sustainable wildlife management. Working together with United Nations agencies and Resident Coordinators, this initiative will develop a framework for recovery that incorporates the full capabilities of the United Nations system and is founded on the science-based evidence of the critical role of nature for health and sustainable economic recovery—with the Congo Basin being a potential first location for a new zoonotic disease surveillance programme.

### **National zoonotic risk reduction action plans**

While many countries already have action plans for dealing with zoonotic diseases, UNEP will explore how it can work with partners to further support Member States in both rebuilding post-pandemic economies better and reducing the threat of zoonotic diseases in the future. In collaboration with partners including Regional Offices and Resident Coordinators, we will develop evidence-based country/region-specific road maps with policy options for green investment to support economic recovery. These custom packages of support will include environmental impact assessment toolkits; improved regulation to reduce the risk of zoonotic cases; inspection and standards for markets and trade corridors, restoration to enhance habitat connectivity; strengthening resilience of the tourism sector; rural livelihoods, and enhanced biosafety practices.

### **Ambitious new biodiversity targets**

While investing in public health systems is critical to address zoonotic disease, our best hope of keeping people safe is by reducing the risk of zoonotic diseases at their source.

Given this, UNEP will seek to reduce one of the main drivers of zoonotic disease transmission—the degradation of ecosystems—by increasing the ambition and commitment to new global biodiversity targets and their means of implementation. Increasing focus on health in the biodiversity frameworks as well as food management systems will be key, as will ensuring that COVID-19 recovery investments enhance biodiversity and climate commitments, rather than undermine them. Building

back better has to be greener and rebalance our relationship with nature.

### **Way Forward**

UNEP will explore current tools and see how they could be supplemented so that Member States have a global risk dashboard on the emergence of zoonotic threats, by the end of 2020. The aim is to:

- Have supported recovery and action plans for governments to mitigate the risk of zoonotic diseases in their countries, as they relate to their origins in nature, by the end of 2020;
- Have supported governments in raising the ambition of their biodiversity targets and means of implementation; and to ensure that the recovery investments work for, rather than against nature, by the end of 2021.

This work will build on existing capabilities and develop new ones for UNEP and Member States.

We welcome support from a range of stakeholders and states. As this plan comes together, we look forward to collaborating, learning and partnering with those keen to engage on this agenda.

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