

Planetary health diplomacy: a call to action



As the world grapples with the wake-up call that is COVID-19, we must seize this moment to develop a better plan for our collective future. The 75th anniversary of the UN is a symbolic opportunity to take stock of the commitment of global leaders towards world peace, human rights, climate and biodiversity protection, as well as a healthy and fair recovery.

With the pandemic still gathering pace, a holistic approach could transform this crisis into an opportunity to unleash the benefits of a low-carbon economy for the benefit of people and planet.¹ Improving understanding of and communication about the nexus between the 2020 pandemic and its environmental, cultural, social, and financial causes is imperative.²

Research in the field of planetary health has highlighted the urgent need to acknowledge the effects on human health of the dangerous environmental transformations that characterize the Anthropocene. The authoritative Global Biodiversity Outlook³ shows that, despite some recent progress, governments need to step up their national ambitions to ensure that the necessary resources are mobilised to create a stronger enabling environment for the protection of nature.

Pandemics are particularly emblematic of this need in that they highlight the interconnectedness of our world and the importance of concerted action. But despite the chorus of voices calling for greater global cooperation and solidarity, multilateralism has reached an historic low point.⁴ Country-driven institutions, such as the WHO, suffer the worst consequences of current geopolitical power struggles at the expense of the health of the most vulnerable populations in low-income and middle-income countries.

In the age of COVID-19, world leaders will increasingly struggle to pursue the successful implementation of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With just 10 years left to achieve them, the pandemic has stalled—and in many cases rolled back—any progress made thus far.⁵ Concerning this development, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned there is a “surplus of multilateral challenges, but a deficit of multilateral solutions”.⁶ It is urgent to strengthen multilateralism, international cooperation, and global partnerships. Vaccine nationalism, however, threatens to torpedo efforts to ensure a fair transition to a post-COVID world.⁷

Given the dissonance between the urgent need for multilateral action for planetary health and the short-sighted leadership of key world leaders, the scope of planetary health research must be broadened. So far, planetary health studies have privileged natural science in order to become more impactful. However, the insights gained through this work deserve to be translated into actionable policies for decision makers.⁸ More social scientists are therefore needed in this process.

Planetary health is an integrative approach that can bring more coherence to multilateral bodies and countries’ foreign policies. It offers a chance to shift international cooperation by combining efforts in terms of human resources and budgets. Applying a planetary health lens to international negotiations could enhance synergies across multiple fragmented agendas, notably related to health, environment, human rights, and security.

It is high time to boost an overlooked area: planetary health diplomacy. At the multilateral level, key areas that need to be kick started include measuring progress beyond gross domestic product, broadening the understanding of security to include planetary health, and reforming international organisations to ensure the protection of a rule-based international order. These themes are not new, but efforts to address them have taken place in silos and lack a truly holistic narrative.

Innovative governance schemes built with an integrative planetary health perspective could allow greater institutional synergies and target the root causes of key challenges that are currently addressed through disconnected approaches and fragmented policy making. Instead of focussing excessively on single agendas, countries would benefit from an increased number of civil servants being exposed to the science of planetary health, which goes beyond the currently politicised climate change agenda.

Scholars of international relations are under-represented in the planetary health community. The absence of political scientists, lawyers, foreign policy experts, diplomats, and civil servants who are committed to translating planetary health knowledge into effective action comes at a high cost. Policy decisions are being reshaped in the context of evolving pandemic recovery

planning, and strategies to advance planetary health that do not take account of unfolding shifts in global power relations are doomed to fail.⁹ With only a decade remaining to shift gears towards achieving the SDGs, there is no time to spare.¹⁰

The world needs a new horizon to look towards, and the planetary health narrative offers a powerful vision. This Comment seeks to raise the voice of the planetary health community within both science and the political sphere by calling for a diplomatic action plan for planetary health. The success of this plan will rest on effective partnerships between governments, scientists, and civil society. In short, saving multilateralism means saving lives. As Henry Kissinger once wrote, diplomacy is the art of restraining power. In times of rampant populist sentiments and an erosion of trust in key Western democracies, this action plan would be a promising piece in the planetary health puzzle.

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