

Inaction leaves world playing ‘Russian roulette’ with pandemics, say experts

New coalition calls on governments to tackle root cause of emerging infections – the destruction of nature



The destruction of nature has led to a great increase in diseases crossing from animals to people in recent decades. Photograph: Rodrigo Abd/AP

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Governments must fill a major gap in post-Covid recovery plans with action on the root cause of pandemics – the destruction of nature – a new coalition of health and environment groups has warned.

Crucial investments and actions are missing, the **Preventing Pandemics at the Source** coalition said, leaving the world playing an “ill-fated game of Russian roulette with pathogens”.

Many trillions of dollars are justifiably being spent to strengthen human healthcare and boost the global economy, said the coalition, but far less

expensive measures to halt deforestation and end the illegal wildlife trade are vital. The call is the latest in a series of high-level warnings that worse and more frequent pandemics will strike without action, but to date these have been largely unheeded.

The coronavirus that causes Covid-19 is thought to have jumped from wild bats to humans and about two-thirds of diseases that infect humans start in other species, including the influenza, HIV, Zika, West Nile and Ebola viruses. The increasing destruction of nature by farming, logging and the wild animal trade has brought people and their livestock into closer contact with wildlife and led to a great increase in diseases crossing from animals to people in recent decades.

“The Covid-19 vaccines will help rescue us from this current mess, but it won’t do a thing to protect us from the next pandemic” said Aaron Bernstein at the TH Chan school of public health at Harvard University in the US, which is part of the coalition. “Only with actions that stop emerging infections where they start can we end our ill-fated game of Russian roulette with pathogens.”

Amy Vittor from the University of Florida’s division of infectious diseases and global medicine said: “Forests – and tropical forests in particular – harbour complex networks of microbes and their wildlife hosts. Degrading these landscapes carries the potential of unleashing these microbes upon our domesticated animals and ourselves. Therefore, maintaining the integrity of forests serves to not only protect biodiversity and mitigate climate change, but also to contain these complex and potentially dangerous pathogen networks.”

Global spending to date in response to Covid-19 is believed to exceed \$20tn (£14.45tn) but a study from July estimated **spending just \$27bn a year** would substantially reduce the risks of another pandemic on the scale of the coronavirus outbreak.

Jon Epstein, an expert on zoonotic viruses at the EcoHealth Alliance, said: “Relatively modest spending and cooperation between governments in emerging disease hotspots to combat deforestation, significantly reduce commercial wildlife trade and improve biosecurity around livestock would help significantly.”

Cutting the tropical deforestation driven by beef, soy, palm oil, and wood pulp and paper is crucial, the coalition said. Recognising the rights of indigenous peoples, who hold centuries of knowledge on living harmoniously with nature, would also be an important step towards forest protection, it said.

In October, the world's leading scientists said **the world was in an "era of pandemics"** and that diseases would emerge more often, spread more rapidly, kill more people and affect the global economy with more devastating impact than ever before, unless the devastation of the natural world ends.

Since the coronavirus pandemic began, the UN, World Health Organization and others have warned the world must tackle the **cause of these outbreaks and not just the health and economic symptoms**. In June, experts called the pandemic an **"SOS signal for the human enterprise"**.

Melinda Kimble, a senior fellow at the UN Foundation, said a G7 summit being hosted by the UK in June and a new US administration made it "the perfect time for global leadership and concrete action to protect people and the planet".