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One Health and COVID-19: GLOBAL LEADERSHIP, TERRITORIAL INVESTMENT AND FOOD SYSTEMS

**SUSTAINABLE
FOOD SYSTEMS**

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The One Health approach is particularly relevant to tackle threats like COVID-19 because it links the health of humans, animals, plants and their shared environments. The current health emergency highlights the importance of these links, and offers an opportunity to place food systems at the centre of One Health actions.

This brief puts forward four proposals on how to do this: (1) a global arrangement for systematic coordination between food and other thematic institutions, (2) a territorial pact that combines public and private investment, (3) a one-year roadmap culminating with the 2021 UN Food System Summit, and (4) a combined leadership by three European presidencies of various international bodies, with the right tools at their disposal.

Healthier diets, a key outcome of more resilient and sustainable food systems, would support stronger immune systems and diminish the impact of crises like COVID-19. Sustainable food systems would also reduce income inequality, which is a strong multiplier of the negative effects of pandemics. A smaller footprint on the planet and better climate resilience as a result of more sustainable food systems would limit negative interactions between ecological, animal and human health.

Great reforms are often launched in times of serious crisis, like the design of the United Nations (UN) during the Second World War. The time therefore seems right to bring forward a new One Health approach – with food systems at its core.

A new approach: One Health, with food systems as the centre of action

The **One Health approach** means working on the connection between humans, animals, plants and their shared environments to prevent and control diseases circulating in animals and the environment and spilling over to human health. This approach – introduced in the health sector to address animal disease, food safety and antibiotic resistance – is particularly relevant to tackle threats like COVID-19 and their complex causes. The current emergency offers the opportunity for stakeholders at all levels to realise the importance of the One Health approach, and to place food systems at the centre of One Health actions.

More **resilient and sustainable food systems** should be seen as long-term answers to multiple global challenges, including our ability to respond to pandemics. Each year, unhealthy diets are responsible for 11 million preventable deaths globally. **Healthier diets**, a key outcome of sustainable food systems, would support stronger immune systems and provide solutions to chronic threats to human health, reducing the impact of crises like COVID-19.

More sustainable food systems would **reduce income inequality**, a strong multiplier of the negative effects of pandemics, with the poor suffering the most from them. A much **smaller footprint on the planet and better climate resilience**, another key outcome of sustainable food systems, would limit negative interactions between ecological, animal and human health.

Such ‘multi-sectoral systems view’ would facilitate **policy and investment solutions addressing potential synergies, trade-offs and co-benefits** (such as nutrition, climate adaptation, natural resource management, public health, innovative economic opportunities) that underpin sustainable production, increased food and nutrition security, and optimal health for all.

Drawing from our recent and current work, I would like to propose **four forward-looking ideas on how to**

implement this new approach: One Health thinking, with food systems as the centre of action.

1. A global arrangement: Systematic coordination between food and other thematic institutions

There are hundreds of international institutions dealing with global challenges and specialised in specific sectoral policies. Most of them are implementing worthwhile initiatives and providing useful policy guidance, but as COVID-19 responses have shown once again, **global coordination is often ineffective, if not absent**. Most international institutions and initiatives keep following a silo approach, even if it is increasingly evident that pandemics, climate disasters and food insecurity are all related to our huge footprint on the planet. Agriculture has been ignored in UNFCCC-led climate negotiations, and nutrition has been largely neglected in efforts to eradicate hunger. There have been very few international initiatives to help coordinate actions around those [human activities that play a huge role in turning microbes into pathogens](#) causing animal disease and pandemics.

Resilience, to health and food crises alike, needs to be planned and coordinated more systematically, through multi-level governance arrangements that maximise synergies between institutions, actions and their financing, at global, regional, national and local levels. In a paper we published with Chatham House colleagues just before the COVID-19 crisis, we conclude that closing the large SDG 2 financing gap and **making food systems more sustainable and resilient requires a [more effective ‘food and agriculture’ global institutional landscape](#)** as well as better task division between these institutions and other thematic institutions such as WHO, WTO and UNFCCC. We show that fragmentation of efforts and sometimes incoherent policies are leading not only to inadequate public investments at national, regional and global levels, but also to lost opportunities for coordinated investments in human, soil, plant, water and animal health, or for climate change adaptation actions to enable resilient local food production.

This is partly why the UN Secretary General has launched a multi-stakeholder process to prepare for a

World Food Systems Summit in 2021 that will involve many different sectors. It is a great opportunity to build, in the coming months, **a new global arrangement for the systematic coordination between food and other international thematic institutions** to improve resilience and sustainability of food systems, based on One Health thinking. This new arrangement **could be endorsed at the Summit**. The principles and processes we propose in our paper could be a basis to brainstorm on this, starting with the fact that such new arrangement should:

- **build on ongoing reforms** and coordination efforts of several international organisations, rather than launching a new institution mandated with such global coordination;
- include the thematic organisations that so far have had little cooperation with food institutions, both at the policy level (the **WTO** for instance, since during emergencies like COVID-19 it is key to ensure the smooth flow of international food trade) and financing level (for instance the **Green Climate Fund**, since food system resilience requires a [much higher allocation of international climate adaptation funds to the agriculture sector](#));
- **involve directly the highest leadership** of states, global institutions, farmer organisations, businesses and civil society, because inclusivity and political backing are essential for real implementation of any planned coordinated action.

2. A territorial pact: Combining public and private investment for sustainable food systems

A One Health approach with food systems as the centre of action requires much higher levels of public and private investment. This is just as urgent as a new level of global coordination, to **develop One Health thinking in specific territories** and in line with the local circumstances. Synergies and trade-offs of investments to improve climate adaptation, natural resource management, public health and economic opportunities will vary substantially in different contexts (with different features of, and interactions between, urban, rural and natural areas).

One month ago, some of the largest food companies in the world, along with farmers' organisations, various UN bodies, academics, and civil society groups issued an important '[Call to Action for World Leaders](#)', including the G7 and G20. One of its three key recommendations is "investing in sustainable and resilient food systems [...] for the recovery of people and planet" after COVID-19.

To urgently make this idea concrete, however, a sort of '**territorial pact**' is needed between public and private investors interested in better resilience and sustainability of specific food systems. This requires both new types of investment and new financial mechanisms.

Substantial [public and private funding for agroecological systems](#) would be a good example of innovative food investment. Agroecology can build resilience by combining different animals and plants and using natural synergies (for instance by intercropping plants that keep nitrogen in soil with the crops that don't) rather than synthetic chemicals – to fertilise crops, fight pests and regenerate soils.

New mechanisms are also needed to reduce the investment risk associated with the food and agricultural sector in low-income countries, which is one of the largest obstacles to the growth of their food economy. This can be done by **blending public and private finance**, with the public sector for instance providing seed capital to guarantee the private investment of a company or a bank. This 'pact' would be in the interest of the private sector, that would see its return on investment 'facilitated' by the public authorities, in addition to better prospects for a more stable business environment because of improved resilience and sustainability. On the other hand, the 'pact' would also imply the acceptance by the private sector that under certain circumstances, like a pandemic, the public authorities would be entitled to centralise decisions around food production and distribution, as there will be the need for central coordination to avoid food supply and food jobs disruptions. This is particularly important, considering that food is the major expenditure item of the poor and the food economy is their major job provider. Moreover, adequate criteria would need to be defined to identify which specific private

investments should be considered ‘aligned with the One Health approach’ (for instance using agroecology principles or the degree of sustainability of specific value chains) and could thus be supported by public seed capital.

Blending public and private finance for sustainable food systems is relatively uncharted territory and requires ‘proof of concept’. At ECDPM we will **contribute to this, through a two-year project** we just launched with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), that will [pilot in four African countries the possibility of leveraging public funds to stimulate private investments](#) that could be considered aligned with the One Health thinking. Our project will promote nutritious food value chains, resulting in healthier diets and stronger immune systems. It will also support shorter supply chains, linking more adequately rural and urban areas, mainly with fresh products (which are becoming more expensive because of COVID-19), thus increasing the resilience of local food systems to international shocks.

3. A one-year roadmap: From the Africa-Europe Summit to the Food System Summit

A number of important **summits are scheduled from October 2020 to the end of 2021**. Linking these events and planning some degree of coordination, coherence and complementarity of their results is a great opportunity to promote the One Health approach, with a focus on food systems action.

The presidencies of the summits and the associated preparatory processes, together with interested partners and stakeholders, could thus design an **‘international roadmap’ to provide global leadership** to address the deep interconnections that exist between human, ecological, and animal health, starting with improving our (broken) global food system. This one-year roadmap could begin during the Africa-Europe Summit later this year and culminate with the World Food System Summit of 2021. The link between these events would be provided by the importance of addressing the respective linkages between each summit and COVID-19, as well as of learning from the various responses thus far.

The **Summit between the EU and the AU**, scheduled for the end of October, would be an important moment to [take stock of the COVID-19 situation on both continents and look at how to improve EU-AU cooperation](#) around effective responses. Coordinated policies and investments to improve the health of humans, plants, animals and natural resources in an integrated way could be a central component of such high-level dialogue, considering that more inclusive and resilient food systems can provide safe, healthy and affordable food, as well as income for poorer people, especially in Africa. Heads of state could commit accordingly to jointly make the European External Investment Plan and other blended finance instruments more directly beneficial for smallholder farmers in Africa, by creating investment and employment in a sustainable food economy at territorial level.

The other summits to be included in this One Health international roadmap would be the Climate Adaptation Summit in October in the Netherlands, the Tokyo Nutrition for Growth Summit in December, and the UNFCCC COP26 on Climate and the COP15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity, both postponed to 2021. The final event, that could **possibly be renamed ‘Resilient and Sustainable’ Food System Summit**, would then bring it all together, including, as proposed above, the endorsement of a new global arrangement for the systematic coordination between food and other thematic international institutions.

4. A combined leadership: Three European presidencies, with the right tools in the making

This roadmap, and the ambition to achieve some degree of coordination, coherence and complementarity between the results of different summits in terms of One Health and food system approaches, would require strong leadership by one or more of the involved key players. **Europe seems well positioned to assume such leadership**, thanks to the substantial assistance provided to other countries for COVID-19 responses, to the policies that it is planning to launch for Europe itself, and to the European presidencies of various international bodies scheduled for the next year and a half.

The [package of measures already put in place by the European Commission](#) to assist countries in the **Global South with their response to the pandemic** is very significant, totalling €15.6 billion (of which €3.25 billion is channelled to Africa). But the EU could do even more and better collectively (the EU and its member states provide 57% of global aid), as highlighted by [ECDPM and partners last month](#). Even before COVID-19, the EU had put forward, through the independent 'Task Force Rural Africa' of which I was a member, a [new vision for its future cooperation with Africa on food security](#) that is centered around the sustainability of food systems, a territorial development approach and climate actions.

Moreover, Europe has recently launched very **ambitious internal policy initiatives** that, if implemented, could make the continent a global leader in sustainability. The Green Deal puts forward an innovative agenda for deep transformations towards environmental sustainability and climate resilience within the EU and internationally. As part of this Deal, the '[Farm to Fork](#)' strategy was announced with the goal of making Europe's food system the gold standard for sustainability (but its launch was postponed by a few months due to the COVID-19 emergency).

Finally, also the **international calendar of upcoming presidencies held by European countries** seems to favour a leadership role for Europe that can push for a 'roadmap' towards One Health and food system approaches:

- **The Netherlands** will have the presidency of the global Climate Adaptation Summit taking place in October 2020, when the Global Commission on Adaptation will present the results of its Year of Action, including on food security and rural livelihoods. A possible deliverable of this summit could be for world leaders, from the public and private sector, to commit to accelerating and upscaling the actions aligned with the One Health approach, synergising the use of: nature-based solutions for adaptation; measures to increase climate resilience of smallholders; better mechanisms for adaptation financing; and demonstrating how this is also important for human health.
- **Italy** will have the G20 presidency in 2021, and could draw on the global success of the [L'Aquila Food Security Initiative](#) launched during the Italian G7 presidency of 2009 in response to the 2008-2009 food price crisis. A possible deliverable of the Italian presidency would be a strong role for the G20 in embracing the One Health thinking. This could be done by supporting this 'roadmap' and some degree of coordination, coherence and complementarity between all the events in 2021; by having the G20 use its political weight for the success of the 'Resilient and Sustainable' Food System Summit (including endorsement of a new global arrangement for the coordination between food and other thematic international institutions); and by committing some financial resources of the G20 to fund, in priority low-income countries, the 'territorial pacts' combining public and private investment for sustainable food systems (as proposed above).
- The **UK** will have both the G7 and COP26 presidencies in 2021, with the possibility of creating synergies between many of these crucial topics and initiatives. The UK could use the G7 political weight to back this 'roadmap' in coordination with the G20 (UK and Italy in fact were already working in close cooperation on the climate negotiations, with the COP itself in Glasgow and the pre-COP in Milan). Another possible deliverable of the UK presidencies could be to transform any progress made during the 'One Health roadmap', including at the Climate Adaptation Summit, into concrete steps for the Paris Agreement implementation to also support synergies between different sectors (facilitating for instance a much higher allocation of climate adaptation funds for food system resilience, as proposed above).

Concluding remarks

Of course all the above may sound politically difficult. But **great reforms are often launched in times of serious crisis**. The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the United Nations, for instance, were all designed during the Second World War. And one of the most effective coordination mechanisms on food systems at global level, the United Nations

Task Force on Global Food Security (UNHLTF), emerged during the 2008-2009 food price crisis. The time therefore seems right to bring forward a new One Health approach, with food systems as the centre of action, and its four key components: (1) a global arrangement for systematic coordination between food and other thematic institutions, (2) a territorial pact that combines public and private investment, (3) a one-year roadmap that begins at the AU-EU Summit and ends at the Food System Summit, and (4) a combined leadership by three European presidencies, with the right tools at their disposal.

ECDPM stands ready to contribute, by facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue and innovative partnerships around the important topics and initiatives outlined in this briefing note, through its independence, ‘think-and-do-tank’ methodologies, and extensive networks in Europe, Africa and beyond.

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