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Disruption as an opportunity: giving rise to a global ethos for planetary health

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Life as we know it has, for millions of people around the globe, been put on-hold because of the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic. Positive consequences so far recorded include unpolluted skies, cleaner waterways and thriving wildlife.¹ Meanwhile, some richer nations have begun to question their socio-economic priorities. This is an opportunity to think carefully how we resume “life” in a post COVID-19 era.

Humankind has already entered Anthropocene, the geological epoch which is characterized by unprecedented pressures on the planet’s natural systems due to human activities. One tangible consequence of anthropogenic environmental change is the emergence of more zoonotic infections, like SARS, H1N1 and Ebola due to enhanced proximity of humans to wildlife and their pathogen pools.² A growth in legal and illegal wildlife trade fuels global movements of infected wildlife and wildlife products.³ The emergence and rapid spread of SARS-CoV-2 is a product of unparalleled levels of global interconnectedness and the environmental impact of human activities. If not halted, they may result in an irreversible and potentially catastrophic shift of the entire Earth system to a state which is not supportive of thriving human societies.⁴ The partial halt of many of these harmful activities, as a result of multi-country lockdowns attempting to limit the spread of SARS-CoV-2, precipitates a series of fundamental reflections.

No-one is exempt from the ramifications of this outbreak, though the consequences will be more acutely felt by the poor and marginalised. It is now that people across the world, maybe for the first time, consciously experience what it truly means to live in a globalised world. This realization, caused by the profound disruption of our daily lives, provides a huge window of opportunity – an opportunity to harness a new collective consciousness towards other threats to human wellbeing now and in the future and promote the concept of planetary health. Planetary health, defined as “the health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends”⁵, has the notions of interconnectedness and interdependence at its core. Human health and wellbeing will only be restored and maintained if our present and future actions become rooted in a planetary health approach.

Planetary health expands the notion of health to include well-functioning natural systems on which human health ultimately depends. It also recognizes

the interdependence between political, social and economic systems – the core pillars of societies – the natural environment and human well-being.⁵ Systems thinking is required to govern the interplay of these complex systems.



Planetary Health in the post-COVID world : Illustrative Image by Giovanni Maki. Ultimately, it is people and their relationships who constitute the complex conglomerate of interactions which we call a health or societal system.⁶ When we think about how to change our societal systems in order to prevent further adverse outcomes of human activities, we need to consider the worldviews and normative values that inform the nature and scope of societal systems' goals and processes. To do this, the following cross-cutting principles characterize ways in which human systems in the Anthropocene can achieve planetary health:

- Interdisciplinary work and cross-sector collaboration are essential and need to go beyond the realm of professions which are traditionally concerned with health. Integration of knowledge and processes in order to assess harms and benefits against indicators which reflect human well-being in conjunction with the state of all natural systems is necessary.⁷
- Planetary health demands a new form of altruism which includes non-human life and natural processes as well as all “not yet alive” beings. Hence, the future has to be valued differently. Let’s stop the systemic discounting of the future in terms of financial mechanisms and moral attitudes and replace it with decisions and processes that secure health in the short and long-term.
- Advocacy for the values of planetary health has to happen at all levels of society, by means of effective communication. Although local context informs worldviews, effective advocacy can facilitate the development

of common ground. Ultimately, everyone, regardless of their social, cultural and educational background should be able to relate to the concept of planetary health.

Planetary health is a means to its own end, a philosophy of life which should become a global ethos, underlying and informing all sociocultural or religious worldviews and societal orders to enable humankind to thrive – now and in the future.

Let us all take advantage of the “great pause”⁸ from our lives-as-usual, that we have suddenly been conceded due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Let’s kickstart the reinvention of humanity’s global society – it is about time.

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None declared

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