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Planetary Health: A More Resilient World Post-COVID-19?

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SYNOPSIS

The care of nature offers holistic solutions to a wide range of issues that include climate change and the pandemic. The emerging concept of planetary health has the potential to contribute and, if widely adopted, may lead to a more resilient world post-COVID-19.

Protest at COP26….Will world leaders find a balance between human health and planetary health? Credit to Alamy

COMMENTARY

WORLD LEADERS currently gathered at the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of

the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow are making a commitment to end deforestation by 2030. The new multibillion-dollar pledge in the climate summit manifests a renewed and stronger interest in nature-based solutions. The care of nature has indeed come into sharper focus in recent years.

It is perceived to offer more holistic solutions to multiple environmental issues and their attendant consequences that include the current COVID-19 pandemic. Among the various theories that explain the causes of the global health crisis, nature decline has emerged as a plausible answer. This view posits that degenerating nature increases the risks of zoonotic disease outbreak and spread ─ from animals to humans.

Planetary Interdependence and Southeast Asia

This context set the foundation for the concept of planetary health to gain some traction. As an emerging idea, planetary health focuses on the interdependence of human health and the health of the environment. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified this critical interdependence. This framing positions environmental protection, conservation, and restoration as a key element to building a more resilient world post-COVID-19.

The paradox is seen in nature's continuing decline regardless of the existence of various institutions established to protect and conserve biodiversity.

The Southeast Asian experience is a case in point. ASEAN-led initiatives are found in the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), the ASEAN Working Group on Coastal and Marine Environment (AWGCME), and the ASEAN Working Group on Nature Conservation and Biodiversity (AWGNCB).

Other sub-regional arrangements include the Turtle Islands Heritage Protected Area between the Philippines and Malaysia; Sulu-Sulawesi Marine Ecoregion (SSME) in the Coral Triangle between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines; and the Heart of Borneo ─ one of the most important centres of biodiversity in the world ─ between Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

ASEAN not on Track

Despite their comprehensive mandate, the latest 2017 ASEAN Biodiversity Outlook 2 report concludes that ASEAN member states had not been on track to meet the Aichi Biodiversity targets due in 2020 as part of a multilateral treaty. Of the 20 Aichi Biodiversity targets agreed to in Aichi, Nagoya, good progress was made only in one target area, namely in designating certain percentages of terrestrial, inland water, coastal and marine areas as protected areas.

The report elaborates on reasons behind such a lack of progress, among which was inadequate action taken to address the drivers and pressures of biodiversity loss that often originated from other sectors. Examples of such drivers include increasing resource demand for income and food, growing population in coastal area, marine debris and pollution, excessive and direct fish take, and habitat destruction.

These observations imply that biodiversity protection and conservation efforts have

largely been confined within their own domain and are not purposefully designed to mitigate the sources of threats to biodiversity loss.

Additionally, the works of these regional institutions were often found to be rather fragmented and in need of stronger coordination, cooperation and collaboration between agencies. Problems include conflicting policy objectives among sectors and government levels, and fragmented programs activities between ministry in charge of biodiversity protection and other institutions.

This partly explains why environmental degradation continues in the region.

Planetary Health Concept: Better Approach?

In light of these apparent limitations, the concept of planetary health may offer a better approach. The concept embodies systems thinking and encourages systems change that may lead to the embodiment of environmental protection and conservation as the overarching guiding principle across different sectors.

It offers an integrative approach that can bring synergies and coordinated policy action to otherwise conflicting agenda such as land-use planning and biodiversity protection; and more consistent policies and more coherent interventions in other sectors to minimise trade-offs among different targets and achieve environmental goals.

A stronger emphasis on nature across different sectors will strengthen environmental regulations, boost their enforcements, and enhance their monitoring capacity. Moreover, due to its focus on the environment, the planetary health concept can generate co-benefits to other green initiatives.

For example, its adoption across sectors may lead to significant improvement in resource efficiency, sustainable agricultural intensification, cleaner production processes, reduction in food loss and waste, improved access to food and good nutrition, and changes in lifestyle, consumption preferences and consumer behaviours.

The planetary health concept thus has the potential to address the various gaps identified in existing biodiversity protection and conservation arrangements in Southeast Asia. The concept can also be applied to similar initiatives at the national and international levels thereby contributing to better care of the planet.

Towards a More Resilient World Post-COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned the spotlight on environmental degradation and reinforced the relevance of the environment-human health nexus. By linking the health of the Earth’s systems and human health, the planetary health concept is offering a pathway towards of more resilient world post-COVID-19.

Prioritising environmental protection and conservation not only could reduce the risks of future pandemic, but also it could contribute to solving triple planetary crisis of biodiversity loss, pollution and climate change.

The challenge, however, lies in the integration of the concept in different sectors. For it to be effective, concrete parameters and clear indicators need to be laid out to enable each sector to contribute meaningfully towards a healthier planet. These will lead to better policy synchronisation and coherence across sectors.

The involvement of multiple stakeholders including the epistemic or knowledge community, civil society, the business and health sectors, among others, is necessary to operationalise the planetary health concept in various settings. There is a need to provide credible quantification of the disease burden relating to biodiversity loss. Significantly, governments need to be convinced of its merits.

As countries continue to juggle between dealing with the virus and reviving the economy, the attention given to the concept of planetary health may not be immediately gaining steam. Regardless, considering its immediate relevance in view of the current public health crisis, and the greater emphasis placed on the care of nature to solve climate change issues, among others, more effort is critically needed to examine how it can be applied across sectors to create a more resilient world post-COVID-19.

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