

Offline: The origins story—towards a Deep Ecology



Whatever the precise origins of SARS-CoV-2, one doesn't have to wait for the definitive source of COVID-19 to be identified before important lessons are learned—lessons that the global health community presently seems to be ignoring. There are four immediate priorities. First, countries must strengthen public health surveillance to deliver a globally robust early warning system for pneumonias of unknown aetiology. The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, chaired by Helen Clark and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, made this recommendation in their May, 2021 report to the World Health Assembly. They also recommended that WHO should be empowered to investigate suspected outbreaks with pandemic potential in all countries at short notice; that declarations regarding public health emergencies of international concern should be based on the precautionary principle; and that WHO's IHR Emergency Committee should be more transparent. Progress on these proposals has ranged from slow to non-existent. A \$100 million "hub" for pandemic intelligence has been established in Berlin. A first meeting to discuss possibilities for an international treaty on pandemic preparedness concluded in December, 2021. But there is little sense of urgency. The glutinous bureaucracy of global health once again threatens to dampen any impetus for action.

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A second lesson concerns the divisive debate around the origins of SARS-CoV-2. Accusations thrown at countries, institutions, and individuals have harmed conditions for trusted cooperation among scientists and governments. Yet a productive environment for collaboration is an essential prerequisite if we are to improve our collective response to a future pandemic. The confrontational approach taken by some politicians, policy makers, and journalists has poisoned the atmosphere for cooperation. China has been a particular target for criticism. It is sometimes hard to be a friend of China when one examines the long list of concerns levelled against the government—the plight of Uighurs in Xinjiang; repression of freedoms in Tibet; military manoeuvres over Taiwan; Hong Kong's fearsome National Security Law; quadrupling of the country's nuclear stockpile by 2030; and the assertive erasure of criticism of officials from an already constrained public sphere. But without

in any way wishing to diminish those concerns, our shared future health security depends on the full and welcome participation of all countries, including China, in cooperative international efforts to respond to pandemic dangers. Now is not the moment to blame China over the origins of COVID-19. On the contrary, now is a moment to strengthen our solidarity with China in the face of a common global threat. Third, the debate over a laboratory leak has had at least one positive outcome. It has focused a spotlight on those laboratories that are authorised to handle some of the world's most dangerous pathogens. It is no exaggeration to say that these laboratories exist in an almost complete vacuum of regulation. There should be swift action to create an independent inspection regime for the 59 Biosafety Level 4 laboratories spread across 23 countries in the world today—in Europe (25), North America (14), Asia (13), Australia (4), and Africa (3). Alarming, only a quarter of nations hosting these facilities score highly on measures of biosecurity.

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Finally, there are lessons for One Health—the linkages that exist between human and animal health. SARS-CoV-2 is most likely the product of ecological conditions that our species has created. Our numbers, density, and connectivity. And specifically our interactions with animals, interactions that are growing as the climate crisis diminishes the availability of resources, so forcing people and animals to occupy increasingly crowded spaces. Just as an appreciation of the importance of climate to health has triggered an environmental turn in global health, so the pandemic should precipitate an ecological turn. The living conditions of organisms interacting with one another and their surroundings will be critical for improving pandemic preparedness. And here the writings of Arne Naess might be informative. Naess was a Norwegian philosopher who died in 2009. He coined the term Deep Ecology to represent a view of the biosphere that emphasised the intrinsic value of both human and non-human life. It's a Deep Ecological turn that we urgently need today—a radical transformation in our conception of health, habitat, and humanity. The most important lesson of all.

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