

To Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi
EU Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare
Rue de la Loi 200
1049 Brussels

Cc: DG SANTE, DG ENV, DG INTPA, DG CLIMA, DG AGRI, EEAS

Brussels, 23rd January 2025

RE: Urgent Call for the EU to Strengthen the Environmental Pillar in the One Health Approach

Dear Commissioner Várhelyi,

We are pleased to write on behalf of several of the world's leading conservation, environmental, human health, animal health and welfare, animal protection, research and scientific, and development organisations to congratulate you on your appointment as EU Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare. We look forward to collaborating closely with you on a range of health-related priorities. We greatly welcome the commitment you expressed towards implementing a One Health approach, which recognises the interdependence of the health of people, animals, and the environment, during the European Parliament hearing. Strengthening the environmental pillar in the One Health approach, both in EU policies and actions in partner countries, is essential to ensure a safe, resilient, and competitive European Union.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and other disease outbreaks of animal origin such as Ebola, SARS, Mpox, and avian influenza, which have engendered massive loss of human life and suffering with severe societal and economic costs, highlight the urgent need to apply a cross-sectoral One Health approach. The science is clear that the increasing risks of new pandemics of zoonotic origin are directly related to the increased interfaces between wildlife, livestock, and humans caused by land-use change, in particular, the destruction of high-integrity ecosystems, deforestation, and forest degradation and the role of urban markets for live wildlife and trade, paired with wildlife farming practices. In addition, impaired animal welfare can increase animals' susceptibility to pathogens and the severity of infections, thereby amplifying the risk of pathogen transmission. Recent studies show that the single most effective and cost-effective way to prevent pandemics is to avoid pathogen spillovers between humans, wildlife, and other animals in the first place, referred to as pandemic prevention at the source.

The EU has already demonstrated One Health leadership in the following key strategies and reports, for example:

The **EU Global Health Strategy 'Better Health for All in a Changing World'**, published in November 2022, includes actions aiming to promote ambitious global action to tackle biodiversity loss and to strengthen capacities for upstream prevention and early detection of health threats

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_7153

globally while building a robust global collaborative surveillance network that includes the environment, to better detect and act on potential pathogens.

The **EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030 ‘*Bringing nature back into our lives*’**², published in May 2020 includes several actions aiming to reduce zoonotic disease risk and acknowledges that “a better protection of natural ecosystems, coupled with efforts to reduce wildlife trade and consumption will help prevent and build up resilience to possible future diseases and pandemics”.

The **European Parliament’s 2023 report ‘*COVID-19 pandemic: lessons learned and recommendations for the future*’** sets out a roadmap to better prevent, prepare, and respond to future health crises, including pandemics of zoonotic origin, and urges the EU and its Member States to support and assist the global community in protecting high integrity ecosystems and ending the commercial trade in live wildlife (especially birds and mammals) for human consumption, among other key recommendations.

Furthermore, a 2024 Scientific Opinion ‘*One Health Governance in the European Union*’ by the Group of Chief Scientific Advisors⁴, draws on important lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and offers several key recommendations for the effective implementation of the One Health approach within the EU. Among various science-based recommendations, the report recommends a greater focus on prevention, strengthening EU policies related to One Health and overall policy coherence, and developing a dedicated EU One Health strategy setting out ambitions and actions, supported at the political level.

In light of this momentum, we stand ready to work with you on One Health implementation and preventing pandemics at the source. Some areas we would be interested to discuss further and support include :

1. **Developing an ambitious EU One Health Strategy** that sets out concrete and bold actions that will truly reduce the risks of pathogen spillovers and future epidemics and pandemics of zoonotic origin. This strategy should extend beyond domestic issues and address global threats positioning the EU as a global leader.
2. **Advocating for an ambitious WHO instrument to strengthen pandemic prevention, preparedness and response**, and ensure that One Health and pandemic prevention at the source remain central.
3. **Ensuring that the next EU budget as well as global funding instruments, such as the Pandemic Fund, place a greater priority on pandemic prevention at the source**, addressing zoonotic disease spillover and emergence and high-integrity ecosystem conservation, while ensuring more funding is directed towards organisations engaged in on-the-ground conservation efforts (primary prevention).
4. **Promoting full consideration and meaningful inclusion of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, civil society organisations, and youth groups** at every stage of decision-making processes in multilateral fora related to One Health.

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52020DC0380>

³ www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0282_EN.pdf

⁴ <https://scientificadvice.eu/advice/one-health-governance-in-the-european-union>

We would welcome the opportunity to provide further information and would be pleased to arrange a meeting with you to further discuss these important issues in greater detail.

Yours sincerely,

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