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No Protection from Pandemics Unless we Fix our Food Systems

Open letter to the G20 from the EAT Advisory Board.



As the world's premier forum for international economic cooperation, the G20 carries responsibility for leading the resilient recovery of the global economy from the coronavirus crisis. Resilient recovery is not possible without transforming food production and consumption. Food has emerged as a macro critical risk to global economic stability.

To reduce the risks and costs of repeated pandemics and secure the foundations for future prosperity, the G20 must take the lead in forging a coordinated action agenda that can deliver a healthy, sustainable and equitable food future for humanity.



intact ecosystems for food, and food trade.

An impact, as obesity and diseases associated with unhealthy food increase mortality of Covid-19, and as food related inequities and vulnerability increase food shortages, displace workers and disrupt supply chains.

“Resilient recovery from Covid-19 can only be achieved by radically transforming our food systems.”

We see clear signs of dangerous vicious cycles, threatening social stability, with food as part of the cause and as an effect multiplier. The pandemic thereby exposes a fundamental fact: Resilient recovery from Covid-19 can only be achieved by radically transforming our food systems.

Food at the Heart of the Global Risk Landscape

Infectious disease outbreaks due to virus spill-overs from animals to humans have increased over the past 20 years, from SARS, to Ebola and MERS, and now Covid-19.[1] That increase has followed the pace of our continued expansion of food production into natural wildlife habitats, along with bush-meat and wet market trade, intensified factory farming, and other factors.

Zoonotic diseases between 2000 and 2010 caused economic losses of more than \$200 billion.[2] This pales in comparison with the cost of the current pandemic, which could set back the global economy by as much as USD 82 trillion in the next five years according to a worst case estimate by Cambridge University.[3] As the pressure on nature increases, the risk of new and potentially far more dangerous pandemics is growing. Climate change makes the situation even more dire. Compounding the problem, inequality in access to adequate incomes, quality nutrition and health care undermines our ability to protect the most vulnerable and mount an effective pandemic response.

Even as governments have imposed costly but necessary measures with dramatic consequences for daily life and our economies, we must reckon with a glaring fact: Not one of the measures in our current field of focus—vaccine development, social distancing, testing and tracing, the wearing of masks, economic shutdown—can address the root causes behind zoonotic pandemics, much less save us from the far more dangerous climate disruptions or the accelerating extinction crisis already underway.

Food is at the heart of the new global risk landscape—a macro critical risk to global stability—every step of the way.



waste) food sits at the center of the climate crisis, the extinction crisis and the rapidly expanding diet-related health crisis. The recently published [State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World Report](#) confirms that we must add to this tally humanity's rising exposure to pandemics. We must urgently shift our investments towards sustainable, healthy and equitable food systems.

Expansion of unsustainable agriculture, and in particular unsustainable meat production and unbalanced consumption, drives up greenhouse gas emissions, destroys ecosystems, accelerates biodiversity loss, and increases the risk of virus spill-overs from animals to people. Expanding consumption of unhealthy foods is a leading cause behind the rapid rise of obesity, diabetes type 2, cardiovascular disease and malnutrition, all of which are increasing the death toll from Covid-19 around the world. That is on top of the 11 million who die prematurely every year from diet-related diseases and the massive inequalities of access and income embedded in our food systems.

Modern food production and consumption are undermining the main shields protecting humanity from harm—healthy ecosystems and healthy diets.

“Modern food production and consumption are undermining the main shields protecting humanity from harm...”

All the evidence we have today shows that if we want to achieve a resilient recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, avoid future pandemics and stand a chance of delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement, we must focus on food.

The G20 Must Lead

We are inspired by the recent [Leaders' Pledge for Nature](#) signed by 64 Heads of State and Government around the world. We need leaders who listen to the science and understand the most basic fact of present-day reality: Humanity is altering the biosphere so fast that the Earth's capacity to support humanity is at risk.

We need new ways of governing and problem solving, and new approaches to the economics of food, with collaboration for the common good as the core principle, anchored as much in science as in human rights, human dignity for all.

As the world's premier forum for international economic cooperation, the Group of Twenty ([G20](#)) carries responsibility for leading the resilient recovery of the global economy from the coronavirus crisis.

Accounting for 85 percent of the world economy and three quarters of world trade, the G20 also holds



to drive food systems transformation, tailored to regional, national and local contexts. Building back a resilient economy must include transitions towards safe, sustainable, equitable and healthy food systems across the world. There is no way to have one without the other.

Towards a Transformational Agenda

Driven by real leadership and will, a global agenda for transforming our food systems must be hammered out, grounded in the best available science and economic analysis, and guided by established universal norms. Such an agenda must itself emerge through a global, collaborative effort, but we want to offer seven key elements that we believe it must contain, building on the Leaders' Pledge for Nature:

1. *Tightened protection of remaining natural ecosystems from agricultural expansion and other extractive activities.* We need a global treaty to curb further conversion of natural forests, grasslands and wetlands and protect marine and other aquatic ecosystems, coupled with financial mechanisms to enable it.
2. *Regenerative, carbon- and nature-positive production of healthy and nutritious foods,* through systematic adjustment of agricultural, land-use and fisheries policies and practices guided by science-based targets and true cost accounting. Closed environment and cellular production could play an increasingly important role in reducing the overall environmental footprint of food.
3. *Coordinated, transformational adjustment of policies, regulations and other public sector instruments to make healthy and sustainable food affordable and available for all:* there is a whole tool-box of instruments that can be used as best suited in different contexts; including taxes, changes to marketing, zoning regulations, public procurement, preventative healthcare reform, education, research and innovation. Marketing of health-damaging foods to children and youth should no longer be tolerated.
4. *Halving food loss and waste,* using strong incentives, regulation, and financial innovation along the entire value chain of food, creating a truly circular food economy.
5. *Economic policy makers need to step up and lead,* in order to make the required policy shifts at both the supply and the demand side and everywhere in-between. Aligning economic recovery investments with building healthier, more sustainable and equitable food systems can significantly reduce the net loss from COVID-19 while awarding real protection from future pandemics. We also urgently need the equivalent of a price on carbon for food system activities that degrade human and environmental health, with social dividends built in to protect



must integrate environmental, social and health risk into company disclosures. The key to unleashing this shift is that there is already a growing realization in parts of the financial and business community that narrow, shortsighted profit seeking is no longer a viable strategy for building wealth. Initiatives like the [World Benchmarking Alliance](#) and [Principles for Responsible Investment](#) are designed to help accelerate this seismic shift, by giving investors no excuses for looking the other way.

7. *People everywhere must have access to knowledge and tools they need* to demand change from policymakers and business, and to enable better informed, satisfying everyday food choices. We need nutritional guidelines that integrate health and sustainability, improved food labeling and apps that make it easier for people to know where food products come from, their sustainability impact and nutritional value. Culinary, behavioral, and marketing expertise needs to be more widely enlisted to build global consumer preference for healthy, sustainable and culturally diverse food choices.

Moment of Truth: 2021 Food Systems Summit

By the time of next year's [United Nations Food Systems Summit](#)—an historic opportunity for forging a shared, global agenda for transforming our food systems—an ambitious framework should be on the table, within which varied action strategies suitable to all cultures and socio-economic contexts can be developed. We are convinced that if we can come together around a concerted agenda for transforming our food systems,

The enormous investments that are now urgently needed for economic recovery are also our unique, historic opportunity to change our destiny, to safeguard the integrity of Earth's natural systems and secure a more resilient, just and equitable future for humanity—with significantly reduced risk of new, dangerous and economically crippling pandemics.

This must be the essence of *building back better*, as laid out by the OECD.^[5]we can make a quantum leap in improved public health and wellbeing with enormous dividends for our economies.

We must start right now, as we think about the next policy reforms, what and where to invest next, even as we, as individuals and households, think about our next meal.

If we decide that now is the time to halt the destruction of our only home and our health and wellbeing, the year that Covid-19 struck could still go down in history as the moment when humanity—particularly people in charge—finally rose in the face of reality.

That is up to all of us.



Signatories

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[3] https://insight.jbs.cam.ac.uk/2020/economic-impact/?utm_source=MeltwaterPressRelease&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=COVID19&utm_content=GDPRisk_CRS&mod=article_inline

[4] The [Food System Economics Commission](#)—launched recently by the [Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research](#), Food and Land Use Coalition and [EAT](#)—will produce a first-of-its-kind integrated assessment of the economics of food systems, including existing vulnerabilities and transition pathways to a healthy, sustainable, economically inclusive food future, while detailing the costs of holding back progress.

[5] <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/building-back-better-a-sustainable-resilient-recovery-after-covid-19-52b869f5/>

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