Independent Task Force on COVID-19 calls for urgent action to combat emerging diseases

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A group of internationally renowned experts in public health, virology, wildlife biology and ecology warned this week that emerging infectious diseases (EIDs) are "an urgent and growing threat to public health." They published their peer-reviewed findings and recommendations last week in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS).

The members of the task force include Drs. Peter Daszak, Isabella Eckerle, Marion Koopmans and 11 other widely respected scientists from throughout the world. In the decades leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, these and other scientists repeatedly warned that such a pandemic would emerge unless earnest efforts were undertaken to study, monitor, and prevent the spillover of diseases from animals to humans.

The failure to heed scientists' warnings set the stage for the disastrous response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was determined, in the final analysis, by the social, political and economic imperatives of world capitalism. Furthermore, despite the confirmations of these scientists' most dire prognostications, governments around the world continue to ignore their pleas to prepare for further pandemics.

In the PNAS report, the scientists note that RNA viruses, including coronaviruses, have had a long history of spilling over into human populations and will continue to do so at an increasing pace, for which the world remains woefully unprepared. Globalization, climate change, and environmental degradation have only raised these threats.

In many ways, the SARS-CoV-1 global outbreak in 2002-04 was a dress rehearsal for the COVID-19 pandemic. The report notes that scientific evidence shows the two events shared many similar pathways, involving spillover from bats into intermediate hosts which then emerged in human populations.

Commenting on the findings of their report, task force member Dr. John Amuasi of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana, wrote, "Despite advancements in biomedical science and technology over the past century, we have largely turned a blind eye to the inextricable interconnections among humans, other animals, and the shared environment. COVID-19 has taught us that failing to recognize the relevance, complexity and dynamism of the socioecological systems of planet earth not only puts the world at risk of pandemics but limits our ability to effectively counter them."

Not only does the report add further crucial evidence refuting the Wuhan Lab leak conspiracy theory that has been promoted by numerous politicians and the corporate media, but its primary strength and importance lie in a sober assessment of the dangers posed by the growing threat of EIDs and the necessity for addressing these under the construct of a unified "One Health" approach.

The One Health Initiative Task Force (OHITF) defines this approach as "the collaborative efforts of multiple disciplines working locally, nationally, and globally, to attain optimal health for people, animals, and the environment." In December 2007, One Health was officially adopted by representatives of 111 countries and 29 international organizations, and in July 2010 the United Nations and World Bank made recommendations of adopting the One Health approach towards pandemic preparedness. Nevertheless, the guiding principles of this scientific approach have yet to be implemented throughout the world.

Background: The Independent Task Force and the Lancet COVID-19 Commission Chair, Jeffrey Sachs

One year ago, Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs, chairman of the *Lancet* COVID-19 Commission, disbanded the group working on the question of the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, citing a supposed potential conflict of interest due to various ties of panel members to the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), which has been at the center of right-wing conspiracy theories surrounding the pandemic.

A review of these interests demonstrates that they were based on long-term academic collaborations, not a nefarious scheme to design biological weapons, as evidenced by numerous publications in top-rated scientific journals. The present political climate has ruptured this vital international cooperation necessary to address the problems of emerging infectious diseases.

Providing context to the publication, Independent Task Force chair Dr. Gerald Keusch, associate director of the National Emerging Infectious Diseases Laboratories at the Center for Emerging Infectious Disease Policy and Research at Boston University, recently told *Science* that despite the group's having been dissolved by Sachs last year, its members continued to study these vital questions.

Dr. Keusch noted, "We had a distinguished, diverse group of experts across a whole range of disciplines, and we thought we had something to offer whether or not we were part of the commission."

At the time of the split between Sachs and the highly distinguished task force members, Dr. Keusch told *Science* that Sachs did not trust the members to render a fair and scientific evaluation of a "lab-origin hypothesis" and on several occasions attempted to influence members and gain access to transcripts of confidential interviews held with experts. Sachs continues to espouse absurd theories that SARS-CoV-2 was leaked from a US biotechnology lab.

"Our mistake was to think that we were appointed as an independent, autonomous group of experts without the supervision, intervention, or micromanagement by the sponsor, the COVID-19 commission," Dr. Keusch said.

Notably, Sachs has appeared on the podcast of anti-vaccine conspiracy theorist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and has accused the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and Dr. Anthony Fauci of deceiving the public on the origins of SARS-CoV-2. He has insisted that there is equal probability that the virus emerged from a research-related incident or a zoonotic spillover event, despite ample evidence that the latter is the only viable

scientific explanation.

In promoting a nonscientific and reactionary conclusion, Sachs seeks to provide credence, using scientific jargon, for politicizing the pandemic. Virologist David Robertson has called his theory "wild speculation," adding, "It's disappointing to see such a potentially influential report contributing to further misinformation on such an important topic."

Nevertheless, the Independent Task Force persisted in its collaboration.

The natural origins of SARS-CoV-2 revisited

Searching for hard evidence on the origin of SARS-CoV-2 is like looking for a needle in a haystack. However, as summarized in the appendix of the PNAS report, a plethora of evidence has been provided in peer-reviewed publications showing that a zoonotic spillover incident led to the outbreak of the virus.

As the report notes, "The increasing scientific evidence concerning the origins of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) is most consistent with a zoonotic origin [disease spread from animals to humans] and a spillover pathway from wildlife farming and the wildlife trade."

Sharing the report on Twitter, task force member Dr. Peter Daszak explained, "the lack of dispositive information so far on COVID-19 emergence is not unusual. It normally takes many years to identify the wildlife reservoir or amplifier host of a novel pathogen. Some are still unknown decades later. Almost all important coronaviruses have wildlife origins, many from bats, including common cold coronaviruses that first spilled over to people centuries ago. Scale, frequency of wildlife coronavirus emergence in people/livestock is a key indicator of future risk."

Dr. Daszak, president of Eco Health Alliance, is one of the world's leading zoologists and researchers of bat coronaviruses. He had initially headed the *Lancet* Commission before it was disbanded by Sachs, and has been maligned by the US corporate media and far-right politicians due to his close collaboration and partnership with Dr. Shi Zhengli of the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

The PNAS report documents that the search for the origin of SARS-CoV-2 in the wild has turned up numerous SARS-CoV-2-related viruses found in bats and animals that act as intermediate hosts from Laos. At a genomic level, they share a common ancestor from 30 years ago and harbor a nearly identical receptor-binding structure that allows them to enter human cells.

The task force report also references recent laboratory-based work done on SARS-CoV-2-related viruses which lack the critical furin cleavage site (FCS) present on other coronaviruses, "suggesting that this cleavage strategy may coevolve with the host." The FCS is necessary for the virus to bind to the ACE2 receptors and enter human cells.

When these related viruses were serially passed in humanized mouse or primate animal models, they did not evolve an FCS. The authors wrote, "The failure to detect the evolution of an FCS in closely related viruses from Laos after repeated passage in human cells in vitro suggests that it was unlikely to have evolved into SARS-CoV-2 during laboratory passage in cell culture."

Important circumstantial evidence for the natural origin of SARS-CoV-2 was recently presented in peer-reviewed studies by Michael Worobey from the University of Arizona and Jonathan E. Pekar from the University of California, San Diego. These studies placed the epicenter of the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic at the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, China. They noted that it is very likely, given the two distinct mutations identified at the time, that there had been several spillover events into humans, which must have occurred before the infections latched on to enough people to ignite the epidemic.

According to the World Health Organization investigation into the origins of SARS-CoV-2, several provinces around Hubei province, including Guanxi, Shaanxi and Shandong, have significant wildlife farming and source these animals to the Huanan Market. The supply chains have yet to be investigated. Still, there are profound similarities between the origins of SARS-CoV-1, which was eventually traced to civet cats, and the COVID-19 pandemic, as many infectious disease experts have noted.

As for weighing the evidence between the natural origin and lab-leak theories, Daszak writes, "We reviewed theories on the origin of COVID-19, laying out all available scientific (reproducible, validatable, testable) evidence and assessing rigor of the science behind them. Most publications with evidence on so-called 'natural' origins have primary data and analysis and are in peer-reviewed journals. 'Lab leak' papers are almost all Op-Eds, commentaries, preprints, or web articles. This is part of the normal measure of rigor for a scientific hypothesis. Our review concluded that the quality of evidence for the so-called 'natural' origins hypothesis substantially outweighs that for 'lab leak.' In fact, we found no reproducible, testable, scientific evidence for the latter."

In their key findings, the task force notes, "[We] find no verifiable or credible evidence to support the possibility that SARS-Cov-2 was created in or released from a laboratory."

Fundamentally, the natural origin theory provides the correct orientation to the question of the growing rate of outbreaks of EIDs, which are now approaching 10 per year.

RNA viruses, SARS-CoV-2, and wildlife trade

The COVID-19 pandemic has been only the latest zoonotic RNA virus epidemic of concern and will not be the last. Three years into the pandemic, global society is presently witnessing the complete dismantling of all surveillance systems for tracking COVID-19 infections, in a vast assault on the basic principles of public health. At the same time monkeypox is being declared "endemic" globally, while Ebola and cholera are reemerging as potential international menaces.

The task force writes in their report, "The emergence of animal-origin (zoonotic) RNA viruses like SARS-CoV-2, whether from wildlife, livestock, or domestic animals, is an urgent and growing threat to public health. Understanding how SARS-CoV-2 and other RNA virus outbreaks originate can guide how we can more effectively prevent, mitigate, or respond to future emerging infectious diseases (EIDs)."

They add, "Increasing outbreaks in recent decades have been driven by many factors, including human and livestock population growth coupled with expanding human-animal-environment interfaces, changing patterns of land use, climate change, globalized travel, and trade. These outbreaks have common characteristics, including zoonotic spillover from an animal reservoir host to humans, with or without involvement of another animal transmission host. These events highlight the importance of a One Health approach to design relevant, feasible, and implementable solutions to prevent, mitigate, and respond rapidly to future outbreaks."

The task force conducted an extensive review of previous epidemics and pandemics involving RNA viruses, including the origins and causes of coronavirus infections in humans and livestock.

They highlight the driving force of globalization, which has seen human activity encroach upon highly biodiverse regions of the world, as well as the effects of wildlife trade, land usage, demographic shifts and the broader issue of climate change, all of which are contributing to the

acceleration of emerging infectious diseases. These include the influenza pandemics in 1918, 1957, 1968 and 2009; HIV, first recognized in 1981, continues to kill around 650,000 annually; and, most recently, SARS, MERS and other pathogens in the current century.

As to emerging RNA virus outbreaks, the PNAS report notes that from 1967 to 2015, all such epidemics involved ancestral animal viruses, all were zoonotically transmitted to humans, repeated spillovers were common, the majority were readily transmissible between people, and it took years to identify their origins.

The World Bank reported in June 2021 that zoonotic diseases affect more than 2 billion people and are implicated in the deaths of 2 million people annually, deemed the "normal burden of zoonoses."

While the economic impact of SARS, H1N1 and Ebola has been in the billions, the global economy contracted 4.3 percent in 2020, amounting to trillions of dollars in "goods, services and other output lost." Estimates of excess deaths place the true death toll from the pandemic at more than 22 million worldwide, while studies indicate that well over 100 million people are now suffering from Long COVID, which will have immense social repercussions for years to come.

The need for proteins and access to food has driven an increase in "traditional wildlife hunting." The PNAS report notes, "Traditional wildlife hunting to provide food for small rural communities, particularly in Southeast Asia and southern China, has been transformed into an industrial-scale process that employed around 14 million people in China alone in 2016. Wildlife trade supply chains now include thousands of wildlife farms with mixed captive-bred and wild-caught animals transporting live animals, carcasses, or products regionally and nationally, while the international trade in live animals and their products has continued to expand."

"Smart surveillance" and future pandemic preparedness

Coronaviruses, first discovered in the early 1930s, will remain as pathogens with high pandemic risk. The emergence of three highly virulent coronaviruses in this century alone—SARS-CoV-1, MERS, and SARS-CoV-2—concretizes the dangers they pose to human populations.

In a report published in *Nature* in April 2022, Dr. Colin Carlson and colleagues noted that ongoing climate change will dramatically increase the potential for novel viruses to spill over into human populations in the coming years. Of the 40,000 viruses that are known to infect mammals, a quarter could infect humans too.

Under the climate-change and land-usage scenarios up to the year 2070, they note, "We predict that species will aggregate in new combinations at high elevations, in biodiversity hotspots, and in areas of high human population density in Asia and Africa, causing the cross-species transmission of their associated viruses as estimated 4,000 times."

To address these risks, the Independent Task Force report stresses that three fundamental approaches must be implemented. The most essential is "smart" surveillance that incorporates two strategies: 1) identifying and targeting regions at high risk for spillover events and 2) systematizing the surveillance of "wildlife, farmed wildlife, domestic animals, and people who have high contact with animals."

These surveillance efforts must be supplemented by field and laboratory research that attempt to identify "priority pathogens" to enhance pandemic preparedness, as well as vaccines and therapeutics which entail the coordination and cooperation of pharmaceuticals and industry that supports such work. Beyond this, buy-in with local and national public health authorities and health systems is critical to assist in efforts when outbreaks occur to immediately eliminate them and the threat to affected people.

Without this buy-in and international collaboration, these efforts will fail to the detriment of the world's population. The report also stresses the need to combat anti-scientific misinformation and disinformation from right-wing forces and governments, and that information sharing and investment in collaborative scientific efforts is essential.

Conclusion

The growing threat posed by emerging infectious diseases is not relegated just to novel viruses. Previously eliminated pathogens like cholera, which have high fatality if adequate medical resources are unavailable, are reemerging in a world that is facing a global economic catastrophe accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Extreme poverty and social strife are increasingly commonplace and the threat of nuclear war is now imminent.

The recent catastrophic flooding in Pakistan, directly attributed to climate change, has devastated the world's fifth most populous country. Eight million people have been displaced, 2 million homes destroyed, crops and livestock wiped out, and the infrastructure collapsed, with roads no longer accessible to affected regions. Much of the country's land remains underwater, raising the specter of further disease and pestilence.

As WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus recently stated, "There is now a malaria outbreak in 32 districts [of Pakistan], while the incidence of cholera, dengue, measles, and diphtheria is also increasing in flood-affected districts. We expect the situation to continue to deteriorate. But so far, international support has not been at the scale or speed needed. [Meanwhile] trillions of dollars are being poured into fighting wars around the world."

In this present global context, the emphasis of the Independent Task Force report on the need for a highly-integrated, multi-disciplinary and international "One Health" approach to address EIDs is compelling.

However, what has emerged openly during the COVID-19 pandemic is the frenzied resistance of the corporations and financial elite against any such efforts to defend or expand public health or social planning. Indeed, the advanced decay of global capitalist relations mean that the acknowledgment for the need of a "One Health" approach by leading international institutions like the World Bank amount to mere rhetoric, as is the case with global agreements on climate change and other international crises.

The commendable role played by the task force in continuing its collaboration in the face of controversy and roadblocks placed before it speaks volumes on the integrity demonstrated by these principled scientists. Their document stands as critical testimony on the COVID-19 pandemic and the dangers of future pandemics.

The problems raised by the report must be analyzed in their political context. Any examination of the growing threats posed by EIDs must be situated in the context of the breakdown of world capitalism, which now threatens the very foundations of human society.

The report provides powerful evidence that protecting human society from infectious diseases requires global planning and the organization not just of economic life, but of wildlife conservation and ecology. However, all of this is impossible under capitalism, which subordinates everything to the profit interests of a money-mad financial oligarchy whose wealth has vastly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The scientists' methods to prevent future pandemics are correct, but these methods are incompatible with the capitalist order. The rational organization of human society and the conscious and scientifically grounded stewardship of the planet is inseparable from the fight for

socialism.

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