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## **GEF'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

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## INTRODUCTION

1. The current coronavirus pandemic is forcing humankind to confront what we have long suspected but too often chose to ignore: what ultimately drives the transmission of infectious pathogens from wildlife to human populations, with mounting social and economic impact, is the unrelenting degradation of nature. The COVID-19 pandemic is just the most recent and vivid example of how human pressure on nature and natural systems is exposing humans to grave health risks, with wide-ranging and lasting consequences for society and for the stability of national and global economies.
2. Beyond the immediate and necessary focus on health and humanitarian responses to this most recent outbreak, the world is also starting to consider ways to confront the profound societal impact of the COVID-19 crisis that will be with us in the months and years to come, along with setting in motion proper recovery actions. Hence, while the world is rightly focused on how to cope with the pressing issues of the day, it is crucial to understand better the root causes of COVID-19 as well as how to anticipate and prevent future crises.
3. What we can say with confidence is that, at its core, COVID-19 is a result of the direct collision between natural systems and human systems. The remarkable economic growth experienced during the last half century has disrupted ecosystems through unplanned urbanization and expansion of human settlements at rates higher than population growth, through rampant deforestation, and through widespread land degradation.
4. With this disruption, people can more closely interact with wildlife, with zoonosis hotbeds erupting as a consequence. What we are experiencing should not have come as a surprise. Experts armed with a solid body of science-based evidence have long alerted that a COVID-19-type of crisis would happen; and that it was not a matter of “if” but “when”.
5. With the understanding that the fundamental root cause of emerging zoonotic diseases resides on the weakening of the services ecosystems that have provided for humanity over thousands of years, the only lasting solution to COVID-19 and other such diseases is to promote transformational change to the human systems, be they energy, cities, food and production / consumption, so that a balance between natural systems and human systems be restored within planetary boundaries.
6. This logic has been at the core of the GEF-7’s strategy. A significant portion of the ongoing work, for example through the Good Growth Platform (GGP) and the Food, Land Use and Restoration (FOLUR) program, are ready-made to accelerate the transformation of food systems as economies start to recover. The same applies to our Sustainable Cities and Sustainable Forest Management Programs. COVID-19 simply reinforces and further validates the logic for transformation, pointing to a much sharper focus on the existing connectivity between natural systems and human systems.
7. The transition to lasting transformation can be achieved by the adoption of a sustainable, inclusive, resilient, low-carbon, low-polluting, nature positive and circular

economy-based pathway for society, one that can withstand future shocks coming from climate change, natural and manmade disasters, and other global challenges. This transition path has also been referred as the “Green Recovery” that governments can use to jump-start their economies.

8. We must recognize that there is no guarantee that mitigation and post-crisis efforts will embrace these same goals. Many of the measures already announced include deregulation and re-introduction of harmful subsidies in food systems. For instance, sustainability gains across commodity supply chains are at risk by a push within fiscal stimulus packages to relax existing policy drivers, and to revoke jurisdictional agreements and other commitments that have driven sustainable sourcing effort to date. These, in turn, can lead to further deforestation, land degradation and biodiversity loss. Hence, to help prevent the post-COVID-19 economy being rebuilt largely under the same tenets of the pre-crisis unsustainable pathways, response measures and recovery plans should contain alarm bells that can be rung whenever economic reactivation measures threaten the gains of the recent past, and whose lock-in effects are considered too daunting.

9. In response to all these challenges, the GEF Secretariat is working across the Partnership to identify a set of actions to be implemented in the immediate, medium and longer term to help address the present situation. This paper concentrates mostly on the first two phases with a view to protect the hard-fought gains made through current GEF investments, while pointing to the potential options for medium and longer-term directions.

## **IMMEDIATE ACTIONS**

### **1. Greater focus on GEF’s efforts to deal with the wildlife trade and consumption challenges**

10. The COVID-19 crisis can be traced to wildlife trafficking and consumption that helps bring people and wild species closer together, often in crowded markets that form biological mixing bowls ideal for spreading serious diseases for which humans have no prior immunity—a phenomenon called zoonosis.

11. This is hardly the first time that people are facing zoonotic diseases. In 2003, the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 that causes Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) entered the human population through civet cats sold as pets and food in markets in southern China. More recently, Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) was identified as also being caused by a coronavirus (MERS-CoV), in this case suspected to have been spread from infected camels to people. SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) can be traced to bats with a high degree of certainty, but the route it took from bats to people remains somewhat elusive.

12. What we know already reveals priority entry points in the short-term. Through the Global Wildlife Program (GWP), the largest global effort to date to tackle wildlife trafficking, the GEF has been working with the World Bank and many other partners to help countries in Africa and Asia invest in innovative solutions. However, important gaps remain, and more financial support is required to address all key developing countries in need of assistance. Furthermore,

the demand side of the equation needs to be placed in sharper focus to handle unchecked consumption of bushmeat and wildlife products.

13. The GEF will explore how additional projects can also become vehicles for targeted campaigns on public awareness and behavioral change. The ban on the consumption and farming of wild animals to be rolled out across China offers a unique opportunity to call the attention of citizens worldwide to the implications of buying of wild animals for food and medicine, and to put an end to the uncontrolled selling and consumption of wild animals in markets across Africa and Asia.

14. The GWP, charged with the coordination of country projects and advancing knowledge management on illegal wildlife trade, could be used as a platform to gather and disseminate information on the ecological and economic consequences of pandemics as well as to identify effective ways to address this issue. To speed up the identification of possible breakthroughs, the GWP platform could sponsor a competition or a crowd-sourcing process for solutions to address the root causes of outbreaks of zoonotic diseases among all 29 countries currently participating in the program. These proposals would need to be relevant and customizable to the highly diverse national contexts where wildlife trade and consumption take place, given that a one size fits all approach has not proven successful.

## **2. Conduct expert analyses on the future risks linked to emerging infectious diseases along with their root causes, including their connection with deforestation and ecosystem fragmentation**

15. To support GEF's response to COVID-19, the GEF Secretariat is seeking the advice from a group of experts from like-minded institutions<sup>1</sup> with complementary skills and experience to help the GEF with the current crisis and with helping to prevent new ones, concentrating particularly on the shorter-term actions described here. This includes filling immediate gaps in GEF's efforts to deal with the wildlife trade and consumption, providing short-term help to plug gaps in protected area management, exploring how relevant projects could be fitted with campaigns on public awareness and behavior change, and gathering and disseminating information on the ecological and local economic consequences of pandemics.

16. Finally, the expert group will provide expert assessment and support the development of a white paper on identifying the future risks linked to emerging infectious diseases and other issues touching human welfare linked to environmental degradation such as deforestation and habitat fragmentation.

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<sup>1</sup> The group of experts is currently composed of Ecohealth Alliance, Wildlife Conservation Society, International Conservation Caucus Foundation, Global Wildlife Conservation, World Wildlife Fund, Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, Archipelago Consulting, World Bank, UNDP, UNEP, Cornell University, and GEF's Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel.

### **3. Identify risks in projects and programs that may seriously compromise past gains and future outcomes.**

17. The suspension or inability to perform certain GEF-funded projects and program activities that are under implementation may seriously affect existing gains and outcomes of these projects or impede the successful achievement of Global Environmental Benefits (GEBs) once the situation stabilizes and work can resume. These could include activities linked to protected area management (e.g., the Brazil Protected Areas program - ARPA), enforcement activities linked to environmental regulation (e.g., the Global Wildlife Program - GWP), and supporting local operations, among others.

18. Gains that have been achieved under these projects could be lost if measures are not taken quickly and decisively. The GEF Secretariat is engaging with implementing agencies to explore how important operations, such as those performed by rangers and other essential personnel in the target protected areas, could be sustained during this difficult period. This will help to avoid creating a vacuum in law enforcement that could be used by poachers to kill the wildlife that the projects are trying to protect, as has already been reported with rhinos in South Africa.

19. As expected, delay in project implementation under the GWP is already being reported by agencies. Some 60% of the projects in Africa will require short-term adjustments to avoid reversal of achievements, but these are still considered doable given that entities involved on the ground remain largely operational. GWP projects in Asia will require short-term interventions to ramp-up work on demand reduction and behavioral change campaigns as well as emphasis on managing high-risk wildlife markets.

20. Finally, while the GEF Agencies are in the process of undertaking broader in-depth risk assessments of their GEF-financed portfolios, it is important to note that this document on GEF's response to COVID-19 does not address the entire GEF portfolio under implementation that will likely be affected by the crisis. The GEF Secretariat will continue to engage with the agencies and report on the assessments separately.

#### **MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS**

### **4. Develop an internal draft blueprint on how to deploy ongoing and upcoming GEF-7 projects that can help lay the foundation for a sustainable post-COVID-19 recovery**

21. In order to ensure the ongoing and upcoming projects and programs under GEF-7 can integrate risks and opportunities brought by COVID-19, the GEF Secretariat will work on a blueprint to guide GEF's actions for the next two years, or the remainder of the GEF-7 cycle. The work will also include examination of how the crisis is affecting strategic platforms of engagement on themes like food security (Good Growth Partnership, FOLUR), cities (Sustainable Cities), mining and mercury use (GOLD program), and circular economy projects. Important underlying factors brought about by COVID-19 will also be analyzed, ranging from changes in fossil fuel prices and impacts on emissions, likelihood of fossil fuel-based

(re)development and infrastructure needs, impacts on plastics and waste management, food (in)security, changes in consumption patterns, and impacts on and from global commodities supply chains.

22. The blueprint will benefit from the upstream dialogue and initial assessment being conducted with GEF Agencies. This engagement addresses key aspects of ongoing work and the design of new projects that can better integrate the risks of COVID-19 in the delivery of GEF's objectives, as well as laying the policy groundwork for the application of green recovery tools and approaches. This assessment includes preliminary information provided on how agencies are factoring the risks associated with the COVID-19 crisis in the existing portfolio, and how these risks will be shaping the design of projects under preparation that will eventually be submitted for CEO endorsement.

23. From a preliminary analysis, a checklist with key issues that the agencies will need to address is emerging. These will need to be tackled before the final submission of CEO endorsement packages of PIF-approved projects. For the Programs, the checklist may include, among others:

- For FOLUR, attention to maintaining intact ecosystems, assessment of threat to indigenous knowledge and land ownership, connectivity between protected areas, and sustainable food systems that promote both human health and ecosystem health.
- For Sustainable Cities, greater focus on the use of green infrastructure such as nature-based infrastructure to mitigate sea level rise and storm surges, and that can both protect people and ecosystems at the same time.
- For the GEF GOLD program, how mining operations may intrude into indigenous communities and expose them to novel diseases.
- For Congo and Amazon Sustainable Forest management Programs, renewed attention on ecosystem-wide integrity and tackling wildlife trade.

24. As the GEF Secretariat starts considering the new strategy that will be presented to the GEF Participants Group to orient the GEF-8 cycle of investments, the blueprint can help with providing preliminary information and early exploratory guidance on what types of project design features and principles can enhance the likelihood of a sustainable post-crisis recovery pathway.

25. The blueprint will also encompass our highly relevant program on adaptation funded by the Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF) and Special Climate Change Fund (SCCF), as any recovery effort must be built with resilience at its core. The successful Challenge Program on Innovation funded under the GEF-7 Adaptation Strategy can, for example, be further harnessed to more rapidly identify new concepts that also involve the private sector directed at building resilience and adaptability of communities and businesses in the time of crises. Nature-based solutions and initiatives that provide development (and employment) benefits would be particularly relevant in this context.

26. The blueprint can also delve into GEF projects and programs in other areas of relevance for the crisis, such as through the Chemicals and Waste focal area. During the COVID-19 pandemic, infectious healthcare waste is a rapidly increasing waste stream and is overwhelming waste treatment facilities. Developing countries, especially low-income countries, which historically have been faced with limited public and private investments in sustainable waste treatment systems, now find themselves in the dire situation of mounting infectious healthcare wastes flooding existing waste management capacity, while in other cases such capacity is not in place at all. This situation calls for the GEF agencies to intervene, without which, the release of UPOPs, mercury, and other hazardous chemicals will experience surges when wastes are not sorted/collected properly and burned in the open or in low technology incinerators. Interventions can also play an important role in protecting waste workers and healthcare staff who may be at risk of (re)infection from the unsound handling of healthcare wastes.

27. Finally, the analysis can point towards appropriate entry points to convey the message that COVID-19 is one of the many manifestations of the progressive encroachment of our economic systems onto the planet's safe operating space. From this analysis, we also hope that specific guidance can emerge which is tailored to decision-makers who have a strong influence on the possible recovery pathways that will follow the crisis.

#### **LONGER-TERM ACTIONS**

28. In less than one year, the GEF will start to develop new strategies to guide the 8th Replenishment cycle. As noted above, COVID-19 at its core has resulted from the collision between human systems and natural systems; and the fundamental solution to this problem is to transform human systems and re-align them with more sustainable practices.

29. The GEF has been promoting systems change through GEF-6 and GEF-7, but more is needed. As the strategic discussions for GEF-8 initiate, we must be well informed about the origins and consequences of COVID-19, and how to address them. This will surely require accelerating our collective efforts with a sharper focus on how dependent our societies are on the interconnectedness between human and nature systems, also with a view to start restoring the integrity of natural ecosystems at the scale it is required.

30. This ambition cannot be realized by the GEF on its own. The GEF has been engaging with multi-stakeholder platforms as one essential ingredient to promote transformation and the current crisis will need to be addressed in the same way.

31. Going forward to GEF-8, we would continue to explore opportunities to engage with key GEF stakeholders in developing strategies that ensure GEF's plans and actions are permeating all key sectors of society. Such an engagement could provide guidance on how domestic and international recovery programs can be steered towards nature-based, low carbon, resilient and safer infrastructure and systems, including with the provision of proper tools and methodologies.

## **CONCLUSION**

32. The mandate of the GEF, combined with its global vision and reach, places it in a critical position to work with the community of nations to ensure that the COVID pandemic evolves from a global threat to an opportunity for lasting change. While the challenges are many, the current crisis can serve to reset the humanity's relationship with the natural world by embracing norms and practices that it can follow towards pathways to a more sustainable future for people and nature.