



AU-IBAR concerned over COVID-19 Impact and Risks to the Wildlife Sector and implications on Wildlife Trade from future Pandemics

*A message from Prof. Ahmed El-Sawalhy,
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Introduction

Wildlife is an important resource in Africa, contributing to ecosystem goods and services, food security, sustainable livelihoods, ecotourism, resilience, and economic growth. The African Union, concerned by the unsustainable use of African wild fauna and flora, has developed the African Strategy on Combating Illegal Exploitation and Illegal Trade in Wild Fauna and Flora [ASCIE&ITW&F Strategy] in Africa. As clearly stated in the Strategy, the livelihoods and socio-economic development of communities in both rural and urban areas depend heavily, especially in the Rain forests, on the use of wildlife, thus the loss of African wildlife directly or indirectly affects the livelihoods of African people. Additionally, the illegal trade in Africa's natural resources deprives the continent of revenues, hindering economic growth.

The vast and rapid changes to our landscapes, food production practices, and other large-scale environmental changes have resulted not only in impacts on wildlife biodiversity and ecological dynamics but also have demonstrated profound implications for human health. Changes in climatic conditions, shifting pathogen host ranges, altered interactions with natural environments to meet the demands of Africa's growing population and other environmental changes are driving increased disease incidence and burden for endemic and emerging zoonotic diseases, as well as non-communicable diseases. The close relationship between biodiversity and emerging diseases has been demonstrated over the years through diseases such as pandemic influenzas, Nipah, SARS, Ebola and currently the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ongoing pandemic has been reported to have originated from wild animal trade in China, with the pathogen suspected to have originated from bats and passed to humans through pangolins. Numerous pangolins are shipped out of Africa annually, through trade. Wildlife trade means taking and selling dead or living plants and animals and the products derived from them. Some of these are legal. But much of it is not; the U.S. State Department estimates that wildlife trafficking is the third-largest type of illegal trade, after drugs and weapons. Animals such as the African grey parrots and the Rock Python may be wanted as pets. Meat from wild animals may be in demand as a delicacy. Through trade, this meat is distributed beyond the hunters and their families, which places millions of people at the risk of the diseases as meat veterinary controls are not implementable along the chain as it is in slaughterhouses for domestic animals. Many animals from protected species are killed for meat and most of the hunters are poachers and therefore

are avoiding all types of control. Animal skins and hides may be sought for rugs or as leather for handbags or shoes. Animals and their products may also hold medicinal properties that can be exploited for the benefit of human beings and used as status symbols or decor. Plants, including wood from trees that are already excessively logged, are in demand for furniture or ornamental or medicinal purposes. Indeed, one of the objectives of the ASCIE&ITW&F Strategy is to promote the participatory approach with economic development and community livelihoods through sustainable use of wild fauna and flora. Wildlife trade is big business, with wild plants, animals, and products made from them sold around the globe, legally and illegally. Illegal trade can lead to excessive extraction, and therefore this kind of trade is unsustainable. The economic impacts of emerging diseases are high, running into hundreds of billions of dollars, and they are linked to underlying threats to wildlife conservation and other drivers of disease emergence such as demography and changing climatic patterns.

Achieving the African dream of an integrated and prosperous Africa necessitates adopting an integrated One Health [Public, Animal and Environmental Health] approach to the management of diseases and leveraging on the health impacts in order to mitigate the underlying threats to biodiversity and stable ecosystems. This requires effective implementation of wildlife and ecosystem health functions among the African Union Member States. It is noteworthy that in the ASCIE&ITW&F Strategy, Africa commits itself to promote compliance, by African Member States, with international treaties that are developed to promote the protection of wild fauna and flora. Currently, out of the tragic experience from the COVID-19 Pandemic, international organizations such as the WHO and Civil Society Organizations, are calling for drastic measures to prevent future pandemics, which may arise from unsuitable contact or use of wild animals. Indeed, some of these organizations are calling for an end to wildlife trade altogether, out of fearing future pandemics and catastrophic destruction of ecosystems.

We acknowledge that there is a risk of increased consumption of meat by poaching where income has been affected by the COVID-19 outbreak and where surveillance has been less intense due to falling tourism revenues. Given that ultimately, the illegal extraction and consumption of wildlife from Africa translates into a serious risk of future pandemics, so long as wildlife trade continues to be a means to distribute wildlife and wildlife products, it is fulfilling to take note of the recent measures by countries in Africa, such as Gabon, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria and Malawi, which are encouraging people to stop bush-meat consumption.

Ultimately, if we do not stand together, the impact of ecosystem destruction and future pandemics, on an African scale, will be huge and extensive, thereby creating challenges to regional collaboration and support in dealing with the aftermath of the crisis and its impacts on the wildlife sector and the wildlife economy. There is an urgent need to implement solutions that achieve both human development goals and wildlife conservation.

Recommendations for the African Union Member States to Mitigate the Risk of Future Zoonotic Pandemics:

- I. Awareness creation, on the risks of zoonotic diseases, to stakeholders in leadership and consumers
 - Targeted messaging and awareness creation on the prevention and containment of zoonotic pandemics among wildlife sector actors and communities;
 - Greater promotion of food security and the health values of domestic-animal-sourced foods
 - Creation of awareness, targeting the general public on the risks of bush meat consumption

2. Safety Nets and Stimulus Packages for Animal Resources Sector Growth and Building Resilience of Livestock Systems, as Alternatives to Reliance on Extractive Wildlife Use
 - Provide social safety nets for wildlife sector dependent communities and value chain actors to encourage them to produce adequate and affordable alternative foods and to establish alternative sources of livelihoods;
 - Provide a stimulus package for the growth of alternatives to wildlife resources value chains, and for the industries to competitively engage in non-extractive wildlife use such as tourism on wild animals in the wild, to capture domestic, regional and continental market shares previously met through extractive use;
 - Raise greater awareness and appreciation of zoonotic diseases and the need to contain the disease agents within the host animal populations to avoid spill-over to humans. [keep wild animals in the wild]
 - Develop and implement regional and national policies, strategies, and legislations on the prevention of extractive wildlife use to avert ecosystem destruction and future epidemics/pandemics.
3. Promote the One-Health Approach during Wildlife Protection Interventions
 - Inter-sectoral consultations for expertise in animal health, public health and environmental health to be inclusively applied;
 - Adequate investment in the development and implementation of appropriate policies and strategies for a One Health approach to prevent future pandemics.

For more information, please contact:

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