



Animal Welfare.  
Worldwide.

Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus  
Director-General's Office  
WHO Headquarters  
Avenue Appia 20  
1211 Geneva, Switzerland

Vienna, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Dear Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus,  
Dear Dr Monique Eloit,  
Dear Dr QU Dongyu,

On behalf of the international animal welfare organisation, FOUR PAWS, I am writing to you upon the first anniversary of the World Health Organisation declaring COVID-19 a pandemic.

FOUR PAWS is an international Animal Welfare organization with offices in ten European countries, as well as South Africa, Australia, Vietnam, Thailand and the USA. We run several campaigns and projects for wild animals, farm animals and companion animals to improve the welfare of animals kept under direct human influence.

Reflecting on Dr Tedros' speech, a year ago today, which called for "a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach, built around a comprehensive strategy to prevent infections, save lives and minimize impact," it is deeply concerning that the same approach is not being applied to tackling the root causes of this pandemic and other zoonoses.

As you will all be aware, approximately 75% of emerging infectious diseases<sup>1</sup>, such as SARS and BSE, are zoonotic, originating from a range of animal species. COVID-19, with its potential origins in a live animal market, later infected millions of mink on fur farms across the globe, resulting in new concerning virus variants that can spill over back to humans and affect vaccine efficacy. Beyond the tragic human health toll of COVID-19, zoonoses cause approximately one billion cases of illness in people and millions of deaths every year<sup>2</sup>. Animal welfare is another key element in addressing animal health crises that indirectly impact humans. In 2018, African Swine Fever reduced the Chinese swine population by almost half, affecting food security and prices globally. This once seasonal outbreak is now an all-year-round threat, spanning continents, and multiple variants have thwarted efforts to develop a vaccine.

Therefore, it has become clear, that for complex matters of animal health, pharmaceutical responses are not the sole and long-term solution. Instead, more must be done to address the dysfunctional

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Environment Programme and International Livestock Research Institute (2020). Preventing the Next Pandemic: Zoonotic diseases and how to break the chain of transmission (page 4). Nairobi, Kenya. [Preventing the next pandemic - Zoonotic diseases and how to break the chain of transmission | UNEP - UN Environment Programme](#)

<sup>2</sup> [https://faculty.eeb.ucla.edu/lloydsmith/publications/publications\\_files/Lancet\\_Karesh\\_2012\\_Ecology%20of%20zoonoses.pdf](https://faculty.eeb.ucla.edu/lloydsmith/publications/publications_files/Lancet_Karesh_2012_Ecology%20of%20zoonoses.pdf)



Animal Welfare.  
Worldwide.

relationship between humans, animals and nature. The settings in which a huge proportion of animals globally are raised, traded, transported and slaughtered – cramped and overcrowded environments, poor hygiene, myriad origins, and conditions suppressing immune systems and encouraging pathogen excretion and uptake – create an ideal situation for the exchange, genetic modification and emergence of new pathogens. While the recent outbreak was most likely from a live market, these conditions are reflected in almost every large-scale trade of animals.

In light of the pandemic, your roles have become more relevant than ever, as you can prescribe the necessary pathways to prevent future zoonotic disease outbreaks. This must cut across all sectors and societies as outlined in the points below. It is imperative that we address the unsustainable use, financing and promotion of animal exploitation. When they suffer, we suffer.

**Make the One Welfare approach an integral part to all policy discussions, strategies and implementation:**

Over a decade ago the FAO, OIE and WHO agreed to share responsibilities and coordinate global activities to address health risks at the animal-human-ecosystems interfaces under the ‘One Health’ framework. This collaboration can only be applauded. However, the interdependence between humans, animals and the environment goes beyond pure considerations of health and extends to wellbeing, environmental and conservation aspects.

However, there has been little acknowledgement of how animal welfare can impact human health and wellbeing, for good or for bad. In fact, the 2019 publication ‘Taking a Multisectoral, One Health Approach, A Tripartite Guide to Addressing Zoonotic Diseases in Countries’ does not take animal welfare into consideration, despite promising a holistic approach. Integrated efforts are necessary to reduce disease and maintain wellbeing, for animals and humans.

This is captured more explicitly by the concept of One Welfare. “One Welfare” describes the interrelationships between animal welfare, human wellbeing and the physical and social environment. This can, for example, be achieved by joining up efforts to reduce suffering at the animal/human sides, supporting livelihoods and approaches that preserve nature.

Ensuring a unified One Health and One Welfare approach that helps address and support animals, people and their shared environments across a wide range of policies should be a key change stemming from this pandemic.

**Work towards the end of fur farms:**

In April 2020, the first infections with SARS-CoV-2 were identified on mink farms in the Netherlands. In the months since, Covid-19 outbreaks have continued to affect hundreds of farms with millions of animals in several countries.

Mink are known to be highly susceptible to SARS-CoV-2, they can efficiently transmit the virus and serve as intermediate hosts. Scientific studies demonstrate that American mink, as well as raccoon



Animal Welfare.  
Worldwide.

dogs,<sup>3</sup> can act as a reservoir for the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It is therefore evident that mink – and most likely also raccoon dogs - farming creates a potential reservoir for SARS-CoV-2 increasing the risk for the development of new strains of the coronavirus. The recently published GLEWS+ TRIPARTITE assessment about SARS-CoV-2 in animals used for fur farming<sup>4</sup> acknowledges these risks, in particular in regions with high production levels. The intensive rearing of mink creates the conditions described as ideal for novel pathogen emergence.

The examination of massive outbreaks in The Netherlands and Denmark provides evidence that the rapid and uncontrolled spread of SARS-CoV-2 between farms has not been halted by the implementation of measures based on surveillance in the human-animal interface, enhanced biosecurity and use of personal protective equipment. Despite the implementation of such measures, infections among mink farms and the subsequent spread of mink-associated variants to farm employees and the broader communities continued.<sup>5</sup> The uncontrolled spread in mink has provided ample opportunities for viral evolution and mutation, and evidence indicates that this has happened. Mink-related mutations in humans have also been found in South Africa, Switzerland, the Faroe Islands, Russia, Canada and the United States.

The widespread infection of SARS-CoV-2 in mink farms exposes the serious risks associated with the intensive rearing of mink – and if nothing is done, may lead to future pandemics related to coronaviruses and other pathogens<sup>6</sup>

#### **Address risks of factory farming systems stemming from poor animal welfare practices:**

Industrial animal agriculture is a powerful incubator of diseases. Many industrial farms use production methods that severely restrict basic animal behaviour and needs, such as access to the natural environment and even free movement, especially in cage-keeping.

Under natural outdoor conditions, high virulence is unhelpful for a virus, since killing its host too fast actually stops it from spreading if there is no new host nearby. This naturally limiting mechanism is bypassed, however, under the cramped and unhygienic conditions of factory farms. Also, the lack of genetic diversity in high performance breeds lead to a loss of resilience against environmental changes and diseases.

Yet, there are established and effective husbandry and welfare practices that can improve health outcomes for animals. For example, using straw as enrichment and roughage reduces the incidence for gastric ulcers and infections from tail biting. They can also offset one of the barriers to the wide uptake of more technological disease prevention strategies; a lack of capital, particularly in developing countries.

<sup>3</sup> [https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/12/20-3733\\_article](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/12/20-3733_article)

<sup>4</sup> [SARS-CoV-2 in animals used for fur farming. GLEWS+ Risk assessment Published by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Organisation for Animal Health and the World Health Organization, 20 January 2021](https://www.who.int/news-room/press-releases/2021/01/20-sars-cov-2-in-animals-used-for-fur-farming)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.eurosurveillance.org/content/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2021.26.5.210009>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-48255-5>



Animal Welfare.  
Worldwide.

This pandemic has also shown that farmers, veterinarians, and abattoir workers, particularly, are at an increased risk of contracting zoonotic diseases and play an important role in their spread, with one particular outbreak putting this group at a 1,500-times higher risk than the general population.<sup>7</sup>

**Address unsustainable consumption as a key driver of pandemics as it causes climate change and biodiversity and acknowledge wider dietary shift from meat is more resilient:**

The pressure to produce more and cheaper animal products, leads to the fact that more and more animals being raised and kept in poor-welfare environments which has significant consequences on animal welfare. Such a food system fails to address the inequalities in our diets such as hunger, malnutrition and lead to non-communicable diseases such as cancer.

The expansion and intensification of agriculture and unsustainable trade, production and consumption disrupt nature and increase contact between wildlife, livestock, pathogens and people<sup>8</sup>. Rising demand for meat consumption and the globalized food trade therefore drive the risk of pandemics. i.e. the production of animal feed in Latin America, through land use, land change contributes to climate change and biodiversity loss.

Additionally, many of the root causes of climate change also increase the risk of pandemics. Climate change has already made conditions more favourable to the spread of some infectious diseases, including malaria and dengue fever. Other effects from climate change can also affect our health, for example there have been a number of studies investigating the link between air pollution and respiratory problems, including specifically on the link to high mortality due to SARS-CoV-2.<sup>9</sup>

**Putting an end to the dog and cat meat trade:**

Up to 30 million dogs and cats are killed every year for their meat in Asia and are frequently slaughtered in live animal markets alongside other species. While there has been some effort to reduce the risk from live animal markets in response to COVID-19, as well as to eradicate the dog and cat meat trade in some countries, the continued trade presents significant public health risks.

There are multiple zoonotic diseases that have been definitively linked to the dog and cat meat trade including cholera and trichinellosis. In addition, the dog and cat meat trade itself fulfils many of the conditions for pathogen emergence and spread described above. The nature of the dog and cat meat trade and growing public sentiment against it means that regulation of the trade is not a viable solution, particularly given that an overwhelming majority of the citizens of Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, China and South Korea do not consume these meats.

It has also been demonstrated that the dog and cat meat trade severely hampers global efforts to end rabies, a fatal disease that kills approximately 59,000 people every year and results in economic losses

---

<sup>7</sup> Arends, J. P. & H. C. Zanen (1988): Meningitis caused by Streptococcus suis in humans. Reviews of Infectious Diseases 10(1), 131–137. doi:10.1093/clinids/10.1.131

<sup>8</sup> [IPBES Workshop on Biodiversity and Pandemics Report\\_0.pdf](#)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7725793/>



Animal Welfare.  
Worldwide.

of an estimated \$8.6 billion.<sup>10</sup> The practices of the trade encompass a considerable risk of transmission at all stages, with multiple outbreaks of rabies being documented and linked to the trade and multiple studies showing a significant prevalence of rabies-positive animals in slaughterhouses. Its detrimental effects on rabies control efforts, particularly through impeding efforts to attain and maintain herd immunity, cannot be ignored.

To eliminate the risk of the next pandemic and ongoing health consequences for people from the dog and cat meat trade, efforts must be made to take urgent preventative measures by prohibiting all aspects of the trade and to enforce these measures.

**Ban the commercial trade of wild animals for human consumption, for traditional medicine, entertainment, and private keeping:**

The emergence of SARS-CoV-2 has been linked to the trade of wild animals in a live animal market in China. It is common for see a large-scale mixing of wild and domestic animals of various species and geographic origins as well as humans. Animals are further held in extremely unsanitary conditions as described above and often slaughtered on the spot for their meat.

Such wildlife markets are widespread in China and other eastern Asian countries, and the sale of wild animals is widespread in many other parts of the world.

All forms of wild animal trade are associated with high risks of spreading zoonotic diseases. The SARS outbreak in 2002 (caused by a coronavirus) has also been traced back to a wildlife market in China. To prevent the next outbreak, we need to ban the commercial trade of wild animals and derivatives for human consumption, for traditional medicine and private keeping. We need to strengthen law enforcement to ensure that the trade of wild animals no longer takes place. We need to immediately close all markets that sell live wild animals to protect animals, ecosystems and humans.

**It is clear that the way we, humans, treat the animals and our environment affects our health and wellbeing – with potentially devastating effects.**

As such high-risk practices, like the commercial wildlife trade, the dog and cat meat trade and fur must be urgently phased out if we are to prevent another crippling pandemic. Our food and farming systems must become more resilient to crises, through a reduced reliance on animal products, and less disruptive to the natural processes that protect us from emerging diseases.

To do this we need joint leadership and joint action. The World Health Organization, the World Organisation for Animal Health and the Food and Agriculture Organization shall together adopt a One Health and One Welfare approach. You can lead the way for countries worldwide to enjoy a future where human wellbeing, animal welfare and our environment thrive together.

---

<sup>10</sup> Hampson K et al. Estimating the Global Burden of Endemic Canine Rabies. PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases. 2015;9(4): e0003709. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pntd.0003709>



Animal Welfare.  
Worldwide.

I look forward to hearing how the Tripartite can provide guidance and a clear perspective on stopping the next pandemic through the measures outlined above. And remain at your disposition to expand on these solutions further with your organisations at this critical juncture.

Yours faithfully,

Josef Pfabigan  
President FOUR PAWS