

## OPEN LETTER - Wildlife trade and Pandemics: Urgent Call for the WHO Pandemic Agreement to prioritize Spillover Prevention

15 March 2024

*To the attention of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body (INB) responsible for drafting and negotiating a World Health Organization (WHO) convention, agreement or other international instrument on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response*

Dear INB Bureau and Parties,

On behalf of the [insert number] undersigned organisations and experts, we are writing to emphasize the critical need for the new WHO Pandemic Agreement to specifically **include pathogen spillover prevention (primary prevention<sup>1</sup>) and address the drivers of zoonotic disease emergence, including wildlife trade and markets**. Following the eighth meeting of the INB in Geneva on 19 February - 1 March 2024, we are deeply concerned that the current text does not sufficiently address drivers of emergence and primary prevention, nor the increased risk for spillover and disease spread posed by wildlife trade and markets.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, wildlife captured global attention as a central issue in discussions surrounding the origins and transmission of infectious diseases. Discussions highlighted the intricate interplay between human health and the natural world, emphasizing the imperative of proactive measures to minimize the risk of future zoonotic spillovers and outbreaks. Significant attention was paid to the issues of live animal markets and the risks linked to wildlife trade, both domestic and international, legal and illegal, wild-caught and captive-bred.

However, as the pandemic progressed and attention shifted to other pressing matters, discourse surrounding wildlife, as well as pathogen spillover and transmission, seemed to fade from public consciousness. Despite this shift in focus, the fundamental scientific understanding remains unchanged: **an estimated 1.7 million currently undiscovered viruses are thought to exist in mammal and avian hosts**; of these, 540,000-850,000 could infect humans<sup>2</sup>. Striking examples of emerging viral diseases that had their origin in wildlife reservoirs include Acquired Immunodeficiency

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<sup>1</sup> As defined by the One Health High-Level Expert Panel (OHHLEP), see OHHLEP. (2021). Prevention of Zoonotic Spillover. From Relying on Response to Reducing the Risk at Source. <https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/one-health/ohhlelep/ohhlelep-prevention-of-zoonotic-spillover.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> IPBES. (2020). Workshop Report on Biodiversity and Pandemics. IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4147317>

Syndrome (AIDS), Ebola Virus Disease, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), among others.<sup>3</sup>

Commercial wildlife trade and markets, particularly those in urban settings, continue to present a significant risk if they are not properly managed and regulated. Scientific research consistently underscores the role of wildlife trade, as well as other high risk activities that increase the human-wildlife interface (e.g., deforestation, forest degradation, habitat encroachment) in facilitating the transmission of pathogens between animals, humans and other animals<sup>4</sup>.

While international agreements, most notably the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), regulate international wildlife trade, the mandate of the Convention is to address the impact such trade may have on survival in the wild of the traded species. **CITES does not address the nexus between wildlife trade and the risk to human or animal health.** The gaps within the existing legal framework are increasingly apparent, and there is a need for a more comprehensive approach to regulating wildlife trade and markets to prevent the emergence of zoonotic diseases. CITES also does not address domestic use or trade, where the greatest risk of pathogen spillover lies and covers only a fraction of the species harboring microorganisms able to become human pathogens with pandemic potential.

The close proximity and frequent interactions between humans and wildlife in commercial trade and markets create ideal conditions for the transmission of pathogens between animals and humans<sup>5</sup>. Not all species present the same risk: **three mammalian orders (rodents, bats and primates) have together been implicated as hosts for the majority (75.8%) of zoonotic viruses described to date, and these orders represent 72.7% of all terrestrial mammal species**<sup>6</sup>. Well-regulating, and in some cases restricting or prohibiting, the trade in certain species of wildlife, or prohibiting certain practices, must be an indispensable component of any effective pandemic prevention strategy.

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<sup>3</sup> Reperant, L. A., & Osterhaus, A. D. M. E. (2017). AIDS, Avian flu, SARS, MERS, Ebola, Zika... what next? *Vaccine*, 35(35 Pt A), 4470-4474. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2017.04.082>

<sup>4</sup> Vora, N. M., et al. (2023). Interventions to reduce risk for pathogen spillover and early disease spread to prevent outbreaks, epidemics, and pandemics. *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 29(3), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2903.221079>

<sup>5</sup> Hilderink, M.H., & de Winter, I. I. (2021). No need to beat around the bushmeat—The role of wildlife trade and conservation initiatives in the emergence of zoonotic diseases. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07692>

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, C. K., et al. (2020). Global shifts in mammalian population trends reveal key predictors of virus spillover risk. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, 287(1924), 20192736. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2019.2736>

Investing in primary prevention also presents substantial cost savings in contrast to the economic ramifications of large-scale outbreaks. Even conservative estimates, in fact, indicate that the cumulative costs of prevention efforts over a decade amount to a mere 2% of the expenses incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>7</sup>.

By adopting proactive measures to address the underlying drivers of zoonotic disease emergence, governments can commit to reducing the risk of future pandemics and safeguard the health and well-being of current and future generations. **A pandemic agreement without meaningful commitments to reduce the risk of pathogen spillover will indeed be short-sighted.**

We respectfully urge you to follow the scientific advice, and directly address spillover prevention - including the role of wildlife trade and markets - within the new WHO Pandemic Agreement. We stand ready to support and collaborate with you in this crucial endeavor.



Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Yours sincerely,







The undersigned organisations and **experts**:





**Commenté [1]:** If you are signing as an independent expert, please continue scrolling and sign below.






**Organisations**






Global Initiative to End Wildlife Crime	
Preventing Pandemics at the Source (Secretariat)	

<sup>7</sup> Andrew P. Dobson, *et al.* (2020). Ecology and economics for pandemic prevention. *Science*, 369(6502), 379-381. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abc3189>

<p>ADM Capital Foundation</p>	
<p>FOUR PAWS</p>	<p>Animal Welfare. Worldwide.</p> 
<p>Vietnam One Health University Network (VOHUN)</p>	
<p>Wildlife Conservation Society</p>	
<p>Born Free Foundation</p>	
<p>International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW)</p>	

<p>Legal Atlas</p>	
<p>Indigenous Peoples Rights International</p>	
<p>Pro Wildlife</p>	
<p>Apostolic Voice University</p>	
<p>Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research in the Forschungsverbund Berlin E.V.</p>	
<p>David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation</p>	

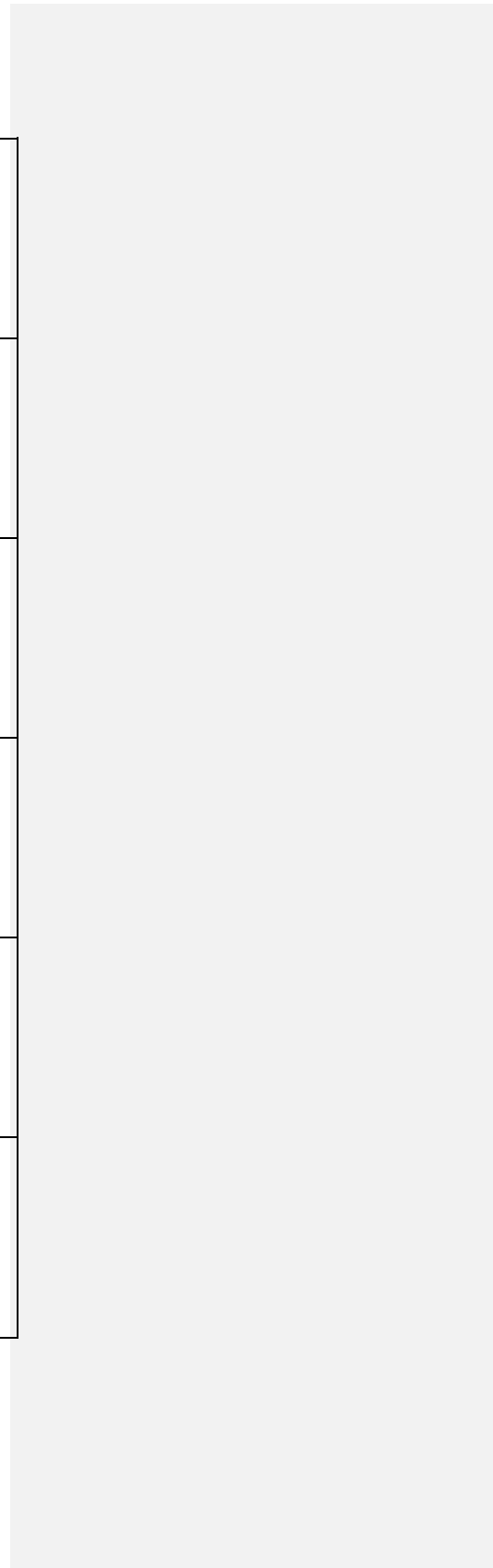
Fondation Franz Weber	 <p><b>FONDATION FRANZ WEBER</b></p>
Elephant Protection Initiative (EPI) Foundation	 <p><b>EPI</b> ELEPHANT PROTECTION INITIATIVE FOUNDATION</p>
Lega Anti Vivisezione (LAV)	 <p><b>LAV</b></p>
International Union of Biological Science (IUBS)	 <p><b>105 years</b>   <b>IUBS</b></p>
One Health in Action Initiative	 <p><b>ONE HEALTH IN ACTION INITIATIVE</b></p>

<p>World Animal Justice</p>	
<p>One Health Colombia OHCol / University of Cordoba</p>	
<p>Global Law Alliance for Animals and the Environment at Lewis &amp; Clark Law School</p>	
<p>OSCAP Outraged South African Citizens Against Poaching</p>	
<p>Wild Parrot Coalition</p>	



Universidad San Francisco Xavier de Chuquisaca, Bolivia	
Ecoflix Foundation	
CODE ANIMAL	




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