APPG PUBLIC INQUIRY

Wildlife, origins of COVID-19, and preventing future pandemics

The United Kingdom All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on International Conservation is to conduct an inquiry into the links between the trade and consumption of wildlife and emerging infectious diseases, such as COVID-19, in consideration of steps that the United Kingdom can take to prevent future pandemics.

BACKGROUND

COVID-19 is the third coronavirus-related epidemic to emerge from a spillover from wild animals to humans, following severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003, and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) in 2012. Although the definitive source of COVID-19 remains uncertain, it is suspected that the virus originated from a 'wet market' in Wuhan, China, which sold live and dead wildlife and domestic animals along with other foods for human consumption. The conditions prevailing in many wildlife markets, including the housing of numerous species in close proximity and the frequent on-site slaughtering and butchering of carcasses, pose considerable risks for disease outbreaks. As with SARS and MERS, bats are believed to be the primary reservoirs of the virus associated with COVID-19; however, the intermediate host and the mode via which the virus spilled over to humans are yet to be confirmed. Nevertheless, it is understood that the interplay of unsustainable human behaviours and ecological risks create an environment for zoonotic diseases to persist.

The global economic and social costs of the new disease have been immense and continue to increase. Tragically, this pandemic was both predictable and preventable; ca. 75% of all emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases in recent years have been of zoonotic origin (i.e., originating from animals). A lack of preventive measures in the face of other zoonotic diseases has proven costly in terms of health and the economy.

In the past decade, diseases originating from wildlife have increased in frequency, and it is clear that there is an urgent need to develop response tools for national governments. In addition to coronavirus-related diseases (COVID-19, SARS, MERS), examples of other rapidly spreading viral diseases that involve wildlife and have high fatality rates include Ebola, Marburg and Nipah virus, all of which have bats in common as primary reservoir hosts and various intermediate hosts (e.g. civets, primates, camels). These diseases have created a burden on human health and livelihoods.

Experts warn that this will not be the last infectious disease to escalate into a global pandemic. In this interconnected world, zoonotic diseases are not restricted by borders and effectively combating them requires an international approach, transboundary co-operation, and policy reforms. The prevalence of wildlife-to-human disease transmission reinforces the need for public health actions to intersect with conservation.

The UK – given its commitment to ODA, Presidency of the UNFCCC, CBD membership of key convening bodies such as the Commonwealth, G7, G20, etc. – alongside its scientific and conservation expertise, is situated to be a leader in delivering alternative actions that prompt global reform across industries where wildlife conservation plays a significant role.

This inquiry seeks to understand how to prevent a similar pandemic and to qualify the impacts that COVID-19 has had on wildlife conservation efforts. In particular, it seeks to provide the UK Government with methods and a domestic and international policy agenda that prevents future outbreaks by reducing the risk of wildlife-borne disease spread to humans.

METHODOLOGY

There will be a series of oral evidence sessions, as well as an opportunity for stakeholders to provide written evidence. Respondents are not required to answer every question in the ToR, and can limit their responses to those they have greatest expertise in. Sources should be provided for data and evidence.

All responses to the inquiry will be published, unless respondents cite a genuine reason why this would be harmful. In such cases, a redacted version will be requested.

The APPG will prepare a report with recommendations for Government – including recommendations on domestic policy, resources and levers, as well as recommendations for leveraging its diplomatic levers to support measures required at the international level. The final report will be agreed by the co-chairs of the APPG International Conservation and those MPs on the steering committee for this project. The report will then be submitted to Government and Select Committees.

CALL FOR EVIDENCE

This inquiry seeks to gather and synthesis evidence on the following key aspects:

(a) Causes of zoonotic outbreaks

- What are the main risk factors and causes of zoonotic outbreaks related to wildlife?
- What are the high-risk zoonotic disease agents, wildlife hosts and ‘hotspots’ for outbreaks?
- What is the role of international wildlife trade as pertaining to zoonotic disease emergence?
- What is the role of illegal wildlife trade as pertaining to zoonotic disease emergence?
- What is the role of other global environmental change drivers (e.g. habitat disruption, human encroachment, urbanisation, climate change) as pertaining to zoonotic disease emergence?

(b) Current monitoring and prevention of zoonotic diseases

- What national and international infrastructure is in place to monitor potential zoonotic outbreaks related to wildlife?
- To what extent does current UK policy address and prevent the risk of zoonotic pandemics emerging from wildlife (such as COVID-19) and what is its implementation status?
- What international institutions and other bodies monitor potential zoonotic outbreaks related to wildlife?
- What role do international institutions and other bodies play in preventing future pandemics related to wildlife and how effective is that role?

(c) Actions to prevent future wildlife-related pandemics

- What specific lessons should the UK learn from the COVID-19 pandemic about actions required to combat the potential resurgence of infectious disease?
- How should these institutions be amended/reformed to prevent future outbreaks, and are there gaps that require the formation of new bodies?
- What projects, scientific research, conferences, or capacity building efforts should the UK engage in to propel zoonotic disease research into preventative action?
- How can policy be better integrated/co-ordinated to prevent future zoonotic pandemics such as COVID-19?
- How could enhanced biodiversity management and ecosystem resilience help to prevent the spread of zoonotic diseases from wildlife?
- What conservation measures should be adopted as part of the overall policy response to minimise the risk of zoonotic diseases being transmitted to humans? What principles or criteria should be integrated and why?
- What other measures of support can the UK provide to disseminate stronger risk communication?
- Should UK ODA be utilised both bilaterally and multilaterally to support conservation efforts to prevent future pandemics, and if so how?
- What is the UK's role in involving the local population and building local capacities to stop the resurgence of COVID-19 and future zoonotic diseases?

(d) Co-ordination of bilateral and international policy

- How can the UK increase and facilitate co-operation internationally and among countries at high risk for zoonotic disease emergence? Are there specific foreign policy tools or partnerships that can be utilised?

- What outcomes and protections should the UK Government promote at the forthcoming UN negotiations on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework at the Convention on Biological Diversity COP 15, G7, G20, Commonwealth CHOGM, and other bodies such as CITES to prevent future wildlife zoonotic pandemics?
- What wildlife conservation initiatives have other multilateral bodies, NGOs, working groups, or alliances proposed that the UK should follow, join onto, or incorporate?
- How can the UK provide financial assistance to support the involvement of developing countries? How can international aid be most effective at preventing future pandemics?
- What legal changes or legal amendments can the UK implement to reduce zoonotic disease spread and how can the UK ensure that laws will be enforced without allowing for loopholes?

(e) Pairing nature-based solutions to prevention of zoonotic pandemics

- Which nature-based solutions are most effective in achieving climate and biodiversity goals alongside the prevention of zoonotic outbreaks?
- What would constitute clear indicators of progress and cost-effectiveness of nature-based solutions, and how should trade-offs and co-benefits associated with nature-based solutions, biodiversity, and socioeconomic outcomes be considered?
- How can funding be mobilised to support effective nature-based solutions to international conservation and preventing zoonotic outbreaks from wildlife? How can the private sector be encouraged to play an active role in capacity building and funding?

(f) Impact on conservation

Conservation measures can act as a natural barrier against pandemics stemming from zoonotic outbreaks from wildlife. However, such projects and schemes have been significantly affected due to loss of revenues. This inquiry will also seek to address the following questions:

- What impact has the current pandemic had on existing conservation efforts and how will this impact the resilience of countries in preventing future wildlife pandemics?
- What methods can be used to help support communities around the world in building sustainable and resilient ecotourism through challenges like a global pandemic?
- What impact have international travel restrictions had on conservation efforts and resources for building resilience to future pandemics?

Responses should be submitted by 27 August 2020 to:

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