

► THINKING ABOUT POLICY, PANDEMICS, AND WHAT'S ON OUR PLATE

A world reeling with the dangers and effects of COVID-19 does not want to hear that this virus is nothing new. Similar viruses have threatened our health in the past. What do viruses like SARS, Bovine spongiform, Swine Flu, and Avian bird flu all have in common? They all come from animals, described by scientists as zoonotic diseases.

Yet, these diseases do not really “come from animals.” After all, it is not like animals conspire against humans, or throw COVID-19 over the backyard fence. When we say this pandemic “comes from animals,” it means that these diseases come from the way society raises, harvests, and eats animals.

The fact that a growing list of pandemics originate exclusively within the animal and agricultural sectors is nothing new to a small but growing group of independent scientists.

The United Nations recently voiced a similar concern. In its report, *Preventing the Next Pandemic: Zoonotic diseases and how to break the chain of transmission*, the UN laid out some of the things needed for improving health governance in relation to food production. Some of the policy options include expanding scientific inquiry into the environmental dimensions of zoonotic diseases and developing and implementing stronger biosecurity measures. It calls for policies that strengthen animal health (including wildlife health services) and increased capacity in monitoring and regulating food production. The report also recommends that states find ways to reduce demand for animal protein.

Reducing the demand for meat is not something we often hear as a possible policy

option—partly because people still have trouble linking our current pandemic to the western diet or agricultural sector. Today's COVID-19 pandemic likely originated in markets in China where wild animals were sold. Ants and bats have been identified as a source of infection, neither of which is on the shopping lists of the average global consumer. The roots of this pandemic, however, are more complicated.

Many pandemics have originated in the animal husbandry industrial production chain. In the 1980s, the UK's cattle production began to see outbreaks of Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, also known as “mad cow disease”), and its human equivalent variant Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (vCJD). In 1997, the bird flu (H5N1) was traced to chicken factories in China. In 2009, the swine flu (H1N1) originated in pig farms in Mexico and North Carolina in the United States. And just recently a possible new strain of COVID-19 has been found in farms in Denmark, where mink are raised for fur coats.

It is clear that the origins of these pandemics are not restricted to certain countries or certain practices, such as “wet-markets.” For some researchers it has always been clear, that stemming rising demand for meat and dairy is a necessary part of reducing our risk for pandemics. In fact, this link is nothing new to Björn Olsen, Swedish chief physician and professor of infectious diseases. Olsen, who is well known for being one of the early critics of his government's COVID-19 response, is now becoming known for another early warning—a warning he has been making in books and articles for nearly ten years now. In a recent interview,

“When we say this pandemic ‘comes from animals,’ it means that these diseases come from the way society raises, harvests, and eats animals.”

Olsen states his concerns clearly: “All the pandemic viruses we have had have arisen where animals and humans meet. If we have 100 billion animals that we raise to eat—of course it will have effects.”

Consider all this in reverse: not a single pandemic in human history has been traced to plants. While increasing the capacity for regulatory and monitoring frameworks is an important part of an effective policy strategy, when societies replace animal sources of food with plant-based food they also reduce the risk of future pandemics. Olsen worries though, that this link between the rising demand for animal protein and pandemics is not getting enough attention from politicians.

A reason why politicians might not see a move towards a plant-based diet as a viable policy option could be because it relies on changing peoples' behavior. Most believe that governments should not be in the business of trying to form our thoughts, feelings and preferences. Yet there is good



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reason to think that people are already open to transitioning to a plant-based diet.

According to a recent UN survey¹ 30 percent of the world supports a plant-based diet as a climate policy. Canadians are not an exception. In fact, 10 percent of Canada's total population is already vegan or vegetarian, according to a 2018 study² lead by Sylvain Charlebois, a professor of food distribution and policy at Dalhousie. The amount of people attempting to eat a plant-based is growing, and fast. In an interview³, Charlebois admitted that, "[i]n 2018 we estimated that 6.4 million Canadians already follow a diet that restricts meat partially or completely," "But now we've already revised this number to 10.2 million. Things are changing really fast, faster than ever really."

This July, the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board (CPPIB) marked the beginning of this thematic push by acquiring a \$50-million stake in vegan, dairy maker Perfect Day. Clearly, the growing desire for a plant-based diet is not lost on some parts of government. If human health and, quite possibly, the survival of the planet may ultimately depend upon people's willingness to switch to a plant-based diet, more should be done to take advantage of this trend.

More than half of Canadians are willing to reduce meat in their diet. With these changes in dietary preferences already occurring—the Canadian government need look no further than removing barriers for people to continue to make up their own minds. To support their transition and reduce the demand in animal products, Canadian government should do its best to reduce what many could perceive as the inconvenience of a plant-based diet. Canadian governments should begin by reviewing food procurement and nutrition standards to ensure that public facilities such as schools, hospitals, prisons, and care homes to offer a plant-based meal as standard on menus every day.

Government should also look to put its own food guide in practice and make plant-based foods more accessible—including for

low-income, rural and northern residents. When the Canadian government revised Canada's food guide in 2019, it consulted extensively with nutritionists and scientists. The result was the removal of dairy, the reduction of meat, and the increased focus on plants as sources of protein. Yet currently, fresh milk still receives the highest level of subsidies within the Nutrition North Canada subsidy—a federal program that aims to ensure adequate nutrition in the north. We need to move to subsidize foods that are good for us and the planet.

Experts warn that the next pandemic could arrive at any time. "The time between these outbreaks is getting shorter and shorter," said Dr. Tracey McNamara, a professor of pathology at Western University of Health Sciences College of Veterinary Medicine. Olsen agrees that "the question is not whether a new pandemic strikes after the coronavirus, but when."

We know that there are environmental and health impacts of dietary habits. Given that there is also a clear link between the consumption of animal products and zoonotic diseases, there is further reason why policy makers should think deeply on how to support a shift to a plant-based diet. Pursuing all possible policy options need not imply a move towards an Orwellian state. Instead, a well rounded policy strategy for averting the next pandemic should also include supporting those who are already aware of the benefits of a plant-based diet and who are seeking support in making the dietary change.

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