



CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE CHALLENGES OF DEVELOPMENT SERIES

Governing Planetary Health in an Unequal World

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Summary

In a world marred by the climate change and biodiversity crises, as well as growing inequalities between and within countries, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of planetary health. This framework (some call it an approach, others a narrative, and others a concept) was first proposed by The Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission in 2015, in an attempt to address the interdependence of human, animal and environmental health. With countries slow to meet its Paris Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) aims, and with the WHO's calls for vaccine equity largely ignored, the planetary health concept would appear to arise as a complementary policy tool to promote synergic action on numerous fronts, including climate action. As a companion to Dr. Li Zhang's fascinating [lecture](#) on climate change, agrarian transformation and the origins of Covid-19 in February this year, ODID, along with the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), co-hosted a side event on 'Governing Planetary Health in an Unequal World'. The two speakers, Prof. Dr. Anna-Katharina Hornidge, and Dr. Nicole de Paula, explored how the planetary health concept is being integrated into policy-making to ensure the health of both people and planet.

First, Prof. Hornidge gave a ten-minute presentation on the planetary health policy proposals of the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU), of which she is a member. This was a particularly timely talk given that Germany is currently the President of the G7 and IDOS one of the coordinators of the [Think7 process](#), a group of leading think tanks from G7 countries that has been developing policy recommendations to support Germany's G7 Presidency. The latter has committed to five key priority areas, including global health. In her presentation, Prof. Hornidge was able to speak to the role of the WBGU in informing the Think7 and the G7 on global health policy through the lens of planetary health.

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Prof. Hornidge recalled that the WBGU operates a concept of planetary health on the basis that many global challenges have joint roots; for example, to tackle the root causes of planetary ill-health is also to address those of climate change and biodiversity loss, among others. The planetary health concept, Prof. Hornidge noted, “has not quite found itself yet” given that it competes with the slightly older, more established ‘One Health’ approach. Within several German ministries, including the Ministry of Health (BMG), the Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Ministry of Environment (BMUV), the One Health concept appears to be much more salient. However, Prof. Hornidge noted that scientists working on planetary health feel the One Health concept “falls short of underlying the planetary limitedness which is so crucial...when reflecting on the urgency and the need for immediate action.”

The WBGU is contributing to the ongoing conceptualization of the planetary health framework through three, core statements. First, “our lifestyle is making us ill and destroying the planet”. Second, “healthy people can only exist on a health planet”. And third, “we must initiate a civilizational transformation for planetary health.” While slightly human-centric in its approach, WBGU configures planetary health as “the joining of a healthy planet with healthy societies”, for which other healthy systems are necessary. These include healthy food systems, healthy health systems, healthy living environments, healthy mobility, and healthy production and consumptions patterns.

Prof. Hornidge noted that WBGU’s main policy recommendation is for G7 leaders to invest in a Global Health Compact 2030, an initiative that should consist of seven action areas:

1. Fulfil already made promises, especially “with regards to the relocation and distribution of the Covid-19 vaccines pledged in 2021” to end the pandemic. Here, a question of credibility comes to the fore. If G7 countries are unable to drive vaccine equity, “the credibility of the world order which rests on rule-based approaches is at stake”, Prof. Hornidge noted.
2. Strengthen multilateral health governance by increasing financing for the WHO, embed the ACT-Accelerator and COVAX facility within existing global health architecture and establish a new ministerial-level Priority Infrastructure Taskforce to give effect to the G7 Global Health Compact Priorities.
3. Create an Inter-Agency Standing Committee for Global Health to promote coordination within the global health architecture and reduce fragmentation.
4. Promote transregional dialogue between the G7 and the G20 to identify and engage in policy priorities pertaining to global health.
5. Establish a new Planetary Health Taskforce to strengthen and enhance the global surveillance system and to respond to human, animal and environmental interlinked events.
6. Implement a multilaterally organized R&D investment and agenda-setting framework for global health, with the purpose of investing in and promoting social, scientific and pharmaceutical innovation, as well as healthcare workforces.
7. Create new financing mechanisms to invest in global pandemic preparedness.

Prof. Hornidge’s talk came one month before the Think7 Summit in Berlin (23-24th May), whereupon the official Communiqué of the Summit was published with many of the aforementioned policy recommendations of the WBGU. Prof. Hornidge and other members of the Think7 delegation handed in the [Communiqué](#) to German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on May 25th.

Governing planetary health requires synergic action with multiple areas within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These include SDG 2 on 'Zero Hunger', SDG 3 on 'Good Health and Well-being', SDG 6 on 'Clean Water and Sanitation', SDG 13 on 'Responsible Consumption and Production', SDG 13 on 'Climate Action, SDG 14 on 'Life Below Water' and SDG 15 on 'Life on Land'. Dr. Nicole de Paula, who recently published a [book](#) called 'Breaking the Silos for Planetary Health: A Roadmap for a Resilient Post-Pandemic World' focused her 10-minute presentation on sustainable and transformative food systems as a means to govern planetary health. Throughout her talk, she emphasized the importance of connecting global movements and agendas. The planetary health concept, she noted, "offers a promising framing and narrative to overcome mental and institutional silos" and protect the health of the world's most vulnerable and of the planet.

Dr. de Paula started her presentation with a stark reality. Today's food systems satisfy the nutritional needs of only 6 out of 10 people in the world. According to the FAO, in 2021 healthy diets were not available for 3 billion people. Malnutrition – leading to undernourishment and obesity - are contributing to declining health worldwide. Moreover, food wastage is a big source of carbon emissions. According to the FAO, Dr. de Paula noted, "if food wastage was a country, it would represent the third largest emitting countries in the world". 17% of the world's food is thrown away according to UNEP.

Not only do unsustainable food systems result in waning health, but they accentuate inequalities and the planetary emergency. For example, women are more likely to suffer from food insecurity than men. Furthermore, climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution are intimately linked to health through food and nutrition. In particular, with a global population of 10 billion expected by 2050, policy-makers must make choices now to ensure that more people can be fed without exploiting more land, increasing emissions (particularly methane), or polluting soils and groundwater. A similar challenge is already being faced today. Food insecurity is increasing worldwide as a result of the war in Ukraine, given that Russia and Ukraine together account for 30% of global wheat production. Fertiliser prices have also increased due to a hike in gas prices.

Amidst the conundrums of our times, "change is really our only chance", noted Dr. de Paula, for which "the planetary health narrative can be transformational". There is a governance problem – which includes how to distribute technology to produce more quality food – that has to be tackled. In particular, the high-level UN Food Systems Summit in 2021 has led to the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub to support so-called 'National Pathways for Agrifood Systems Transformation'. This initiative is meant to enable multiple stakeholders to engage to co-create solutions, repurpose finance and "overcome governance failures". These include thinking about how agricultural subsidies are being delivered. For example, Dr. de Paula noted, if half of the agricultural subsidies throughout the world were repurposed to support growing foods that benefit health, "we would have a 20% increase in fruits and veggies, which would reduce GHG emissions by 2%".

With a background in international relations, Dr. de Paula noted that the exciting part about planetary health is that "everyone has the potential to be part of this transformation". She added: "I can tell that, before, I would have never seen myself as part of the solution for public health and now, because we are seeing the importance of bringing this conversation to policy-makers, discussing governance and multilateralism, we are part of the solution as well".

The discussion that followed was short but packed with additional insights from both speakers. The first question, directed to Prof. Hornidge, was on how the Global Health Compact 2030 proposed by the WBGU helps deliver on other sustainable development aims. Prof. Hornidge noted that the Global Health Compact 2030 “bridges the discussion between the health community and the Agenda 2030 community, and links it with the Beyond 2030 discussion.” She further noted that the suggestion of a Global Compact was perhaps chosen as a “strategic tool” to package the various recommendations formulated by a group of health experts. These messages can then be unpacked and unlocked again by the G7’s Health Ministers, partly through the planetary health concept. Prof. Hornidge further noted that narratives are important in policy advisory activities, though they can also reach their limits as they can sometimes hide details. Narratives can, one was left to think, reduce complexity of the policy conundrum at hand.

The second question, on how initial inequalities may be driving planetary ill-health, was directed to Dr. de Paula. She emphasised that inequalities as manifested in power asymmetries, can lead to overexploitation of resources and lack of access to the same resources. For example, with regards to generating sustainable food systems, access to land is a problem, particularly for women. Many countries today do not grant equal access to women. Furthermore, vulnerable populations and indigenous populations may be facing systemic prejudices that do not support planetary health solutions. There is also a big implementation gap. The real difference is to be made at the national, and even the local level. Transformations towards planetary health need to also come from the ground-up. Here, cities are especially important.

A third question, from the floor, noted the following:

“The European Union’s Farm to Fork Strategy has been postponed indefinitely due to the war in Ukraine and environmental issues do not seem to be a priority. They [these environmental issues] are not the ones deciding elections in democratic systems, so isn’t this one of the root causes why we are seeing an implementation gap and shouldn’t we be paying much more attention to healthy democracies where voters can understand what is best for the common good and vote accordingly?”

Dr. de Paula kicked off the conversation by noting that indeed, healthy democracies are incredibly important. However, we also need greater policy coherence. For example, a policy on agricultural subsidies that may not be supporting the Farm to Fork Strategy could turn into a governance challenge that leads to an implementation gap vis-à-vis planetary health.

Prof. Hornidge, too, noted the importance of democratic systems to support planetary health governance. Her comment also built on another question from the floor on whether global governance systems are fit for purpose to tackle the planetary health crisis and whether they need to change to achieve the needed transformation. To this end, Prof. Hornidge noted that “we are challenged by a weakened multilateral system” and by increasing polarization and autocratization processes around the globe. She further noted that 63% of the world’s populations live in autocracies, and 34% of countries “are going through autocratising processes”. These undermine the multilateral system.

So, are global governance systems fit for purpose to drive planetary health? Prof. Hornidge noted that “we must honestly say no.” What, then, can we do? Prof. Hornidge argued that G7 countries need to invest in the multilateral system “and then find fruitful ways to facilitate dialogue with the G20”. This, and not the G7, is the decisive platform in terms of club governance formats according to Prof. Hornidge, as

this is where “the music of the future” is playing. It is important, therefore, that the G7 seek constructive dialogues with BRICS countries in particular to address important global challenges, particularly the interlinkages between the environmental sphere, social inequalities and global health.

Finally, both speakers were asked to summarise, in one sentence, how they would govern planetary health in an unequal world.

Dr. de Paula noted that it would be important, and relatively easy, to first start combating gender inequalities and changing social norms. She further noted, in reference to the previous discussion on multilateralism, that planetary health is not a technical fix to global problems; rather, geopolitics are part and parcel of the planetary health conversation.

Prof. Hornidge argued that investments need to be made to shrink the governance space. “It is not global governance or nothing”, she noted. Common challenges need to be addressed through common and joined approaches, she added.

A former MPhil in Development Studies student, Alexia Faus Onbargi, who now works as a Policy Research in the Environmental Governance and Transformation to Sustainability Programme at IDOS, Bonn, organized this event. She wrote this summary in June 2022.

Please reference as:

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