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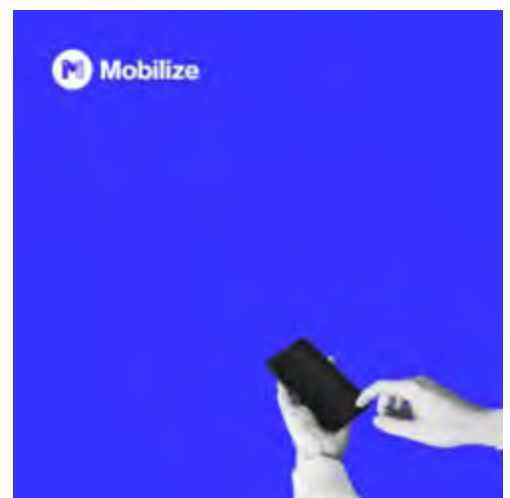
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Could Philanthropy Prevent the Next Pandemic by Stopping Zoonotic Diseases?

Michael Kavate



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The term “zoonotic” was little used outside of epidemiology circles before the current pandemic, but just as mask wearing has become habitual, the threat of diseases that originate in animals and transfer to humans has become clear and present for people around the world.

The current outbreak is far from the first. Ebola, SARS and avian flu are some of the best-known of a long list of zoonotic diseases, which have caused roughly two-thirds of emerging diseases in humans in recent decades. But COVID-19, which preliminary evidence indicates is zoonotic in origin, has shown the whole world the stakes involved with such outbreaks. Experts say more such diseases are on the way, particularly as deforestation, biodiversity loss, wildlife consumption, and intensive agriculture create the conditions for animal-to-human transmission to occur.

So how is philanthropy responding? A report released last week, “[A Turning Point for Planetary Health](#),” from the Milken Institute’s Center for Strategic Philanthropy, part of their [Giving Smarter in the Age of COVID-19 series](#), includes a look at several distinct ways philanthropists are fighting zoonotic disease threats—and where philanthropic capital could have the greatest impact.

“Philanthropy is not a silver bullet, but it can be catalytic, and it can be helpful in writing a new playbook and bringing together various stakeholders,”

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said Matt Lurie, associate director of the Milken Institute Center for Strategic Philanthropy, and author of the report.

Food systems, biodiversity and wildlife trade are some of the key root causes of zoonotic diseases, and there is a need for broad, multidisciplinary efforts to address those threats, Lurie told me. Many foundations have long invested in these areas, but not all make the connection between their portfolios and zoonotic disease risks, and many efforts are not coordinated, he said.

I spoke to philanthropists and experts in several of those areas to learn about how they are confronting these challenges and how they think philanthropy could prevent the next pandemic.

A Threat With Many Heads

A complex array of systems and factors drive the emergence and spread of zoonotic diseases, including environmental issues such as climate change, land development, pollution, and food systems. The siloed nature of much work in those fields, both within philanthropy and outside of it, has challenged efforts at systematically addressing those drivers.

[Ending Pandemics](#) is one of the organizations seeking to align those disparate parts. Originally part of the Skoll Global Threats Fund, which was an early funder of pandemic prevention efforts, it is now an independent nonprofit. Funded by the Skoll Foundation, its work includes issuing about \$5 million a year in grants, as well as connecting other donors,

according to its president, Mark Smolinski. “Our goal is to become more of a donor collective,” he said.

The organization uses a public health framework known as One Health, a collaborative approach that brings together a range of disciplines in pursuit of optimal health for people, animals, plants and the environment. Many of its efforts have focused on funding interventions at the intersection of these issues, often innovations that governments lack the resources to take a chance on, particularly as they do not always pan out.

“Bringing some catalytic funds to a country has been very helpful,” Smolinski said. “Some of these things are really low-cost investments that philanthropic dollars can help bring that synergy between these different groups.”

For instance, in Cambodia, the organization worked with local partners, including the major telecommunications companies, to launch a free national hotline that members of the public can call to report disease outbreaks. “That’s probably something that wouldn’t have happened so quickly if it weren’t for philanthropic dollars,” he said.

The organization observes a few rules in its international efforts. It makes a five-year commitment to any country it enters. It prioritizes directly engaging communities within the country. And it works to ensure there’s a path for any solution to be taken over and funded by the host government. “Nothing we do in countries is sustainable unless the money is ultimately coming from that country,” Smolinski said.

There are a few large global funders that have long invested in stopping pandemics, including the threat of zoonotic disease. These include the Rockefeller and Bill and Melinda Gates foundations, as well as the Wellcome Trust. Along with Ending Pandemics, they are part of a 10-member group informally called the Pandemic Collective. They hold monthly calls “that no one has missed since 2014,” Smolinski said.

It can seem like preventing pandemics, let alone focusing on zoonotic disease outbreaks, is the sole province of such international grantmakers. But Smolinski and others say there are important roles to be played domestically.

For instance, in 1999, there was a mysterious die-off of birds at the Bronx Zoo. Officials later realized the mass deaths were related to a novel infection: West Nile virus. But because there was no communication between that system and others, the discovery came too late to stop the virus from spreading across the United States, Smolinski said.

“We really missed the opportunity to have all those sort of early indicators that there was something going on,” he told me.

Food Systems and ‘Pandemic Roulette’

Food systems—the networks that move animals from pastures to our plates—are **responsible** for roughly half of all zoonotic diseases that have spread to humans. As the world’s population increases and rising incomes expand consumer demand for meat, agriculture production is ramping up around the globe, and countries are clearing forests to make way for farms

and feedlots. In other words, the risk of those diseases is only growing.

[Dr. Michael Greger](#), a physician and *New York Times*-bestselling author, most recently of “How Not to Die,” argues that industrialized agriculture’s packed feedlots and breeding pens present one of the greatest threats the world faces in the quest to avoid another deadly outbreak.

“It’s like squeezing a thousand pigs in an elevator. What do you expect is going to happen?” said Greger, who has worked with the philanthropic affinity group [Farmed Animal Funders](#). “It’s like playing pandemic roulette.”

A recent [report](#) from the United Nations, produced in partnership with the International Livestock Research Institute, came to a similar conclusion. It found increasing demand for animal protein and an unsustainable growth in livestock production are the two leading drivers of emerging zoonotic diseases.

Funding for farmed animal issues has grown significantly in recent years, at least within the relatively small world of animal funding, which accounts for an [estimated](#) 0.5% of total philanthropic funding. Andrew Rowan, former president of Humane Society International, estimated funding for all farmed animal issues had grown from roughly \$5 million to \$50 million over the past 15 years.

Greger argues a lot more is needed to overhaul those systems. “I think that’s a huge area that people have been neglecting,” he told me. “That’s where more focus has to be attuned.”

‘A Finite, Solvable Problem’: The Wildlife Trade

Early reports about COVID-19 suggested it originated in a Wuhan wet market. A growing number of scientists now [believe](#) it emerged elsewhere, but there is still consensus that such markets—where live wild animals are bought and sold, typically in open-air stalls—are a major risk factor in animal diseases jumping to humans.

The legal and illegal trade that supplies such markets is a major focus of those seeking to stamp out the root causes of zoonotic diseases, and is one of the key areas highlighted by the Milken Institute report.

EJF Philanthropies is one of the funders working in this area. The foundation has [supported](#) wildlife protection rangers in Africa, groups that investigate wildlife crime, and campaigns to move public opinion on the ivory and pangolin trade, including sharing their links to zoonotic outbreaks. Zoonotic diseases were always a concern, but the pandemic has emphasized the threat.

“All of a sudden, this little, in some ways niche area we’ve been involved with has become this nexus for this huge global crisis,” said Simone Friedman, head of philanthropy and impact investing at EJF, who is also the niece of its founder, investment manager Manny Friedman, and a longtime animal activist. Friedman is also a member of the advisory board of the Center for Strategic Philanthropy.

Recently, Friedman launched End the Trade, a public campaign to pressure governments to stop the

commercial trade and sale of wild mammals, birds and other terrestrial animals. The campaign is also supported by the Sheth Sangreal Foundation and the Collier Foundation, which has long supported anti-pandemic causes. There's also a dose of celebrity: Leonardo DiCaprio is involved in the campaign. A long list of domestic and international environmental organizations have signed on as well, including many zoos, conservation organizations, and wildlife advocacy groups.

Friedman is also taking aim at endowments and beyond. EIJ has funded a new effort, the [Investor Alliance on Zoonotic Risk](#), that seeks to engage institutional investors who have holdings in companies whose operations are related to zoonotic disease risk. It will launch later this year.

“There are major investors who have ESG commitments who don't even realize they have holdings in the pangolin trade,” she said, using the acronym for investments that take into account environmental, social and corporate governance.

In addition to these types of advocacy campaigns, the Milken Institute report urges philanthropy to work with local organizations to provide culturally appropriate alternatives to wildlife food sources.

“It's a finite, discrete problem that is much more solvable. If we can stop this trade in wild animals, we will eliminate one of the huge drivers of zoonotic disease risk,” Friedman told me. “Philanthropy has the power to solve this problem.”

But so far, the resources are not there. “It’s the white space in this area,” she said. “That’s really where philanthropy has not engaged.”

Philanthropy’s Strengths and the Threat Ahead

Philanthropy has given nearly \$12 billion worldwide to address the fallout from COVID-19. The promise of the efforts outlined above is that they address, at a much lower cost, the root causes of such outbreaks.

Preventing a pandemic is, to adapt the old adage, a lot cheaper than responding to one. Nor are the benefits limited to stopping the emergence of zoonotic diseases. Preventing deforestation or improving the food system benefit the world far beyond reducing the risk of another pandemic.

Melissa Stevens, executive director of the Milken Institute Center for Strategic Philanthropy, says foundations have several major—and familiar—strengths to leverage in confronting zoonotic diseases: pioneering innovative approaches, reducing risk for government and investors, serving as patient capital, and bringing stakeholders together.

“This is not something that’s going to be solved overnight,” she said. “It’s really going to take a multi-sector approach.”

Currently, many funders are struggling just to respond to the current pandemic’s devastating effects on their grantees and communities. But the long-term threat is not just another pandemic, but a far worse one.

“This is a category two out of five. It could have been much worse. Groceries are still being stocked.

Electricity is on. Doctors and nurses are still showing up for work,” Greger said. “This may just be kind of a dress rehearsal for an even greater threat waiting in the wings.”

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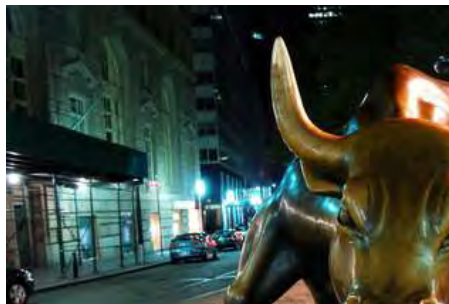
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