

A contribution the thematic review of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) from the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.

Background

This submission is made on behalf of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). CITES is an “international agreement that stands at the intersection between trade, the environment and development, promotes the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and should contribute to tangible benefits for local people, and ensures that no species entering international trade is threatened with extinction” (para. 203 of A/RES/63/288 *The Future We Want*).

The Earth is home to over 13,000 known species of mammals and birds, tens of thousands of reptiles, amphibians and fish, some 250,000 flowering plants, and millions of insects and other invertebrates. Together these wild animals and plants form an integral part of the natural ecosystem and are of aesthetic, scientific, cultural, recreational and economic value to humankind. From an economic perspective, they contribute to human well-being by providing food, timber, fiber, fuel, pharmaceuticals, clothing, cosmetics, horticultural specimens and companion animals, amongst many other things.

Concerned about the over-exploitation of species as a result of unregulated international trade, governments adopted on 3 March 1973 the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) that entered into force on 1 July 1975. It now has 183 Parties. The Convention places a joint responsibility on producer and consumer Parties for managing international wildlife trade sustainably and preventing illegal and unregulated trade in wildlife. CITES has developed into one of the world’s most powerful tools for ensuring sustainable use through the regulation of international trade in over 37,000 species of wild animals and plants. CITES-listed species are used by people around the world in their daily lives for food, health care, furniture, housing, tourist souvenirs, cosmetics and fashion. Since CITES entered into force, the human population has virtually doubled, the global economy has grown nearly fourfold, global trade has grown tenfold and technology has developed enormously. Together these factors have driven up the demand for species used by humans. CITES seeks to ensure that international trade in such species is sustainable, legal and traceable and contributes to both the livelihoods of the communities that live closest to them and to national economies for a healthy planet and prosperity, which supports achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, in particular goals 2, 8, 12, 14, 15, 16 and 17.

Legal wildlife trade for a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic

The global COVID-19 pandemic has caused immense human suffering and economic distress and prompted strong calls for a new relationship with nature in order to reduce the risk of future zoonotic spillovers. To help reduce risks and build an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in a post-pandemic future, CITES can contribute with its experience and knowledge of international wildlife trade, developed over close to 50 years.

Zoonotic diseases emerge when natural pathogens carried by animals – wild or domesticated – spill over to humans, and subsequently adapt for human-to-human transmission. Points of interaction between humans and animals include hunting and farming, markets, transport and processing. They also include non-commercial activities where humans and animals come into contact. Drivers of zoonotic disease emergence are a complex mix of habitat and biodiversity loss, increasing human population densities, changing food systems, land conversion and deforestation for intensive agriculture, globalized trade and travel, climate change, and other factors.

International trade in specimens of CITES-listed species is one of the human-animal interfaces through which animals and animal products are introduced to new environments, along with the pathogens they might carry. International trade is also the interface through which the global community can consider taking measures to help reduce the risks of zoonotic diseases. The Convention regulates cross-border transactions with its strict permitting system that ensures that international trade in wild fauna and flora is legal, sustainable and traceable. CITES trade can only happen if it meets the following three conditions. First, the trade will not be detrimental to the survival of that species. Second, the traded animal or plant specimens were not obtained in contravention of the laws of the exporting State for the protection of fauna and flora. Third, for any living specimen, the transport is organized so as to minimize the risk of injury, damage to health or cruel treatment. To ensure that these conditions are met, a variety of actors at the national level need to work together. This could provide a solid basis for measures that could help mitigate the risks of diseases spreading and make international trade in CITES-listed species safer from a health perspective. In short, a strengthened and well-regulated international wildlife trade can contribute to reduce the risks of future pandemics and contribute at the same time to a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fighting illegal wildlife trade to prevent future zoonotic diseases

On the other side of the coin, while strengthened international wildlife trade can contribute to the global recovery, a renewed sense of urgency is necessary in the fight against illegal wildlife trade. Illegal wildlife trafficking has grown significantly over the past few decades as improved communications and transport systems have made it easier to advertise and ship wild animals and plants and their products anywhere in the world. Illegal trade in wildlife has become a sophisticated transnational form of crime, comparable to other serious organized crimes, such as trafficking of drugs, persons, arms and counterfeit goods. It is driven by rising demand and is often facilitated by corruption and weak governance. There is strong evidence of the

increased involvement of organized crime groups and non-State armed groups. Illegal wildlife trade undermines the rule of law, threatens national security, and degrades ecosystems. Criminals often exploit impoverished local communities by encouraging them to engage in illegal harvesting in exchange for a small payment, which exposes them to the risk of injury or disease from dangerous or sick animals or arrest by the authorities. Specimens of wildlife that could be carriers of zoonotic diseases can be smuggled across borders by traffickers avoiding sanitary measures that have been put in place. Illegal wildlife trade is therefore a factor in the spread of zoonotic diseases and is also a major obstacle to sustainable development and the efforts of rural communities and indigenous peoples striving to manage sustainably their natural resources.

Strengthened CITES regulations of international wildlife trade and renewed fight against wildlife trafficking are two sides of the same coin and a two-pronged approach for a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Guiding principles for a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic

Policy decisions affecting the use, consumption and trade in wildlife species and other biodiversity-based resources are an important element in the development of an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.. As part of the Collaborative Partnership on Sustainable Wildlife Management, the CITES Secretariat subscribed to four guiding principles offering policymakers a solid factual basis with which to steer decision-making towards actions that would work to reduce the risks of the rise and spread of new zoonotic diseases, while also contributing to the conservation of species and ecosystems, and the preservation of the livelihoods necessary for a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

These principles can be summarized in the following points:

- Recognize the importance of the use of wildlife for many communities, including Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs), in policy responses.
- Maintain and restore healthy and resilient ecosystems to reduce risks of zoonotic spillovers and future pandemics.
- Persecution including killing of wild animals suspected of transmitting diseases will not address the causes of the emergence or spread of zoonotic diseases.
- Regulate, manage and monitor harvesting, trade and use of wildlife to ensure it is safe, sustainable and legal.

CITES encourages stakeholders to first act towards the effective enforcement of existing regulations on the use, consumption and harvesting of wildlife. Efforts to respond to the new challenges of the post-COVID-19 world should be grounded in fact, science and taking into account the needs of the most vulnerable groups, so that the deeper factors that affect the health of global ecosystems, as well as human health, are effectively and efficiently tackled.

Indigenous and local communities can play a significant role in establishing patterns for the sustainable use and conservation of wildlife through the traditional knowledge of their environments, making plain the need to meaningfully involve these groups in crafting future solutions to these challenges.

Contributing to the 'One Health' approach

An integrated approach can contribute to restoring damaged ecosystems and preserving essential services that keep nature, including humans, safe from the spread of disease, while also ensuring the development of sustainable livelihoods for all those who live close to nature. The call for an integrated approach is commonly called the 'One Health' approach and means *inter alia* that the authorities managing wildlife use, public and veterinary health, food safety and nature conservation (which include CITES authorities) need to work together to tackle the issue of future pandemics.

CITES aims to contribute to this integrated approach by reinforcing its partnerships in order to strengthen better collaboration along the whole value chain and with all the actors involved. For instance, CITES has forged strategic partnerships with the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the International Air Transport Association, who oversee aspects of international wildlife trade that specifically pertain to public and animal health, in order to better integrate sanitary measures and CITES provisions for trade in wild animals and products thereof. The CITES Secretariat is contributing to the development of OIE's Wildlife Health Framework, which includes promoting collaboration between national veterinary and wildlife management authorities, awareness-raising, and capacity building for all stakeholders.

At another level, the automation of CITES procedures can help enforcement agents verify other trade requirements, including those related to biosecurity. These partnerships help support CITES Parties in designing and implementing multisector policies, legislation, and research for better public health outcomes by indicating how and where better regulation of the wildlife trade sectors could be considered – and therefore play a role in the 'One Health' approach. If all these actors work together, exchange their knowledge and tackle the trade of wildlife in a coordinated and holistic way then there is a better chance of preventing future zoonotic pandemics.

The main challenge for CITES, within the broader framework of the SDGs, but also a key element for a sustainable and resilient recovery, is to make species conservation, the preservation of humanity from zoonotic diseases and the promotion of prosperity mutually supportive. As a Multilateral Environmental Agreement, CITES is ready to play its part.