



Letter to the Editor

The African continent needs to prioritise planetary health

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Africa has played a significant role in creation of the Anthropocene era due to the human impact on, and exploitation of, Earth's geology and ecosystems, which has led to severe environmental consequences [1]. The burden of infectious and non-communicable diseases in Africa has been attributed to unhealthy environments that arise because of anthropogenic activities [2]. Therefore, it is essential to prioritise planetary health in Africa in order to preserve the region, protect lives and repress the emergence of disease outbreaks. The global population is estimated to reach 9.73 billion by the year 2064 and decline to 8.79 billion by 2100 [3]. Africa is projected to lead the global population growth during this period and is one of only two regions to have higher estimated population in 2100 than in 2017 [3]. This predicted population growth in Africa raises concerns for the well-being of future generations because of the sheer amount of material resources required to support and sustain this size of population.

The current exploitation of natural environments and ecosystems, together with weak economic and technological capability of the continent, predicts a bleak future for the stability and survival of Africa and the African population. Health effects from changes to the environment, including climatic change, ocean acidification, land degradation, water scarcity, overexploitation of fisheries and biodiversity loss, pose serious challenges and are likely to become increasingly dominant during the second half of this century and beyond [4]. The current coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has already exposed the vulnerability of Africa's healthcare systems. The dire consequences of not urgently adopting a planetary health approach to living could lead to exacerbating the impact of future pandemics and utilising health systems to breaking point because of excess disease and illness burden.

We still have a unique window of opportunity to change the future by enacting and implementing policies that ensure we remain in tandem with nature and are able to leave a sustainable home for generations to come. During disease outbreaks, human populations suffer great losses in terms of life, properties and sources of livelihood [5]. These losses to human life and living, ironically, can lead to positive changes in the balances of natural ecosystems. For example, reduced consumption of gasses and exploitation of Earth's resources is seen as a result of population inactivity during pandemics [6]. However, there remains an eminent need to assess strategies employed in combatting disease

outbreaks and the consequences this has on planetary health. Africa has employed different strategies to mitigate the effect of pandemics [7]. For example, increased education on infection risk control and management, and research on zoonotic diseases are popular approaches in many African countries. Political approaches involving interdisciplinary and international collaborations, such as 'One Health' [8] and 'One Welfare' [9], have considered the importance of existing relationships between humans, animals and natural systems, while putting health and welfare at the core of these strategies. However, addressing planetary health issues in Africa is not without challenges, some of which include population explosion, lack of political will and urbanisation [4].

Prevention and control of future pandemics can be achieved through effective knowledge exchange, multi-sectorial collaboration, improved education, and research funding directed at studying the interaction between environmental changes and animal-derived human diseases. It is also important for Africa to leverage its younger populations to advance advocacy and actions on issues pertaining to planetary health. The concept of planetary health is crucial in understanding Africa's future by linking human health to the environment. Not only will this create desired results, but Africa will also become better equipped to tackle future outbreaks in the post-COVID-19 era. We urge African stakeholders to consider planetary health as a priority in political agenda towards creating a sustainable future for everyone.

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