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One Health embraces interconnectedness, yet we are still divided

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In response to the coronavirus pandemic, the proposal of creating a COVID-19 One Health Research Coalition has been launched (1). The pandemic shows how our complex modern societies are increasingly unable of living in equilibrium with nature. In order to ensure a sustainable future, One Health highlights the importance of recognizing a basic interconnectedness of human, animals and the environment, and the possibility of symbiotic relationships between them.

Actually, the magnitude of the crises we are facing, i.e. climate change and the global pandemic, cannot be addressed through surface changes, i.e. relying on the same frame of reference. A substantial change of direction is instead needed.

These crises have multiple causes, some of which are visible, others more hidden. For example, with regard to the global pandemic, it is not enough to eradicate the specific virus; it is also important to consider the conditions that made possible its emergence, which likely lie at the human–environment–animal interface (2).

At a deeper level, what also matters is how we conceive the man–nature relationship. This is imbued with a profound sense of separation, which is also projected on the relationships between everything in the universe. All this originates in a conceptual background rooted in a dualistic and atomistic worldview, and a view of science as a means of mastery of nature for human benefit (3).

These ideas form the very roots of modernity. They influence almost every aspect of contemporary societies, including social habits and economical models, and we have deeply internalized them. Even our current idea of sustainability is based on a utilitarian attitude toward nature, and mostly concerned with human wellbeing (3).

Establishing a healthier relationship with nature will not only require radical transformations in human behaviour (e.g. decarbonizing the economy and reverting the tendency towards progressive ecological simplification and urbanization), something whose implementation may still require decades (4).

As sensed by One Health, it would also require a change in the mindset, questioning the above sense of divide and rebuilding an ecosophic awareness (5). We must create the conditions for a deep cultural rethinking, seeking also inspiration in the lifestyles of other traditions, e.g. indigenous ideas of an overall interconnectedness and interdependence (6). Of course, this is not something that one might obtain at once. However, unless we take the burden of this challenge, we risk that those ideas will remain only rhetorical claims.

References

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