JOINT STATEMENT

Promoting plant-rich diets for resilient food systems and planetary and human health

June 4th, 2020

Inger Andersen
Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme
United Nations Avenue
Nairobi, Kenya

Dear Ms Andersen,

Today, on the eve of the 48th anniversary of the foundation of UNEP, we write to you to express our strong support for the work and mandate of the United Nations Environment Programme. Ahead of World Environment Day, with 'Time for Nature' as the theme for 2020, the manifesto[1] published on the UNEP website notes the need to reimagine our relationship with nature. The Practical Guide,[2] published on the same occasion, also states that "Twenty-six per cent of the planet's ice-free land is used for livestock grazing and 33 percent of croplands are for livestock feed", while dietary changes towards "more environmentally friendly foods, especially your main protein sources" are part of the solutions to "act for nature".

As a coalition of civil society organizations that have been working for many years on ensuring sustainable, equitable food systems, both at UNEA and through other international processes, we are ready to help UNEP fulfill its commitment to promoting more resilient and sustainable plant-rich diets.

The dramatic impact of the industrial-livestock sector on climate change, as well as deforestation, land degradation and biodiversity loss, has been acknowledged by experts for many years[3] and even more so recently with the massive forest fires in the Amazon, Australia, and elsewhere. Meanwhile, the current Covid-19 pandemic has shown the numerous connections between food systems and the outbreak of zoonotic diseases and how transformative change is imperative for our interactions with the non-human world. In its 2016 Frontiers Report[4], UNEP highlighted five factors that are increasing the risk of zoonotic emergence. Four out of five of these are a direct consequence of resource-intensive diets that have meat and dairy at their centre:

- deforestation and other land use changes
- antimicrobial resistance
- intensified agriculture and livestock production
- climate change

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[1] https://www.worldenvironmentday.global/campaign-manifesto
[2] https://p.widencdn.net/e2n0wj/WED_SimpleToolkit
[3] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2019. Special Report on Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security and Greenhouse gas fluxes in Terrestrials Ecosystems. https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/
[4] https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/six-nature-facts-related-coronaviruses

In this context, we urge UNEP to further advocate for plant-rich diets and truly sustainable food systems. This is essential to tackling environmental degradation and climate change, while mitigating the risks of pandemics and moving towards more resilient societies and economies.

The current crisis has demonstrated that decisive and tangible political action is both necessary and possible. UNEP is in a unique position to inspire coordinated institutional actions regarding food-systems change. We see three important opportunities to accelerate this shift next year: through the fifth United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5) in February, the UN Food System Summit later in the year, and the start of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.

UNEA-5

During UNEA-5, we hope to see food and agriculture at the heart of the discussions, as proposed in '*Action Area 4: Nature for sustainable food systems*'. **Our organisations would like to partner with you in the preparation of those discussions in order to establish effective and concrete recommendations for plant-rich food systems.**

The UN Food System Summit

At the UN Food System Summit, we hope to see a transparent, inclusive, and fair summit that will allow civil society to participate actively in the debates. **As the topic of animal agriculture has recently gained traction in global climate negotiations, we would like to work with UNEP and other stakeholders to trigger a transformational systemic shift towards resilient, plant-rich food systems.**

UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration

2021 will also mark the start of the *UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration*, which we see as an important opportunity to start moving away from ineffective policies. Systemic change is necessary if we are serious about achieving both the SDGs and the goals of the Paris Agreement. **We cannot do either without shifting to more sustainable food systems that do not disrupt or destroy ecosystems, fuel deforestation, or pose severe risks to wildlife and human societies – as the Covid-19 pandemic has shown us.**

In conclusion, the ongoing Covid-19 crisis reminds us that the clock is ticking and business as usual is no longer an acceptable outcome. It also demonstrates that collective, ambitious global action is possible and, indeed, necessary. Billions of people in almost every country around the world have dramatically changed their habits by staying home, limiting social interactions, and reducing their travel to a minimum. We believe that this is the perfect moment to change the global food system as doing so would greatly mitigate the risk of the next zoonotic outbreak, while making significant progress on urgent global priorities such as biodiversity protection, slowing and reversing climate change, and ensuring food security. **With a noticeable increase in public demand for alternative proteins since the inception of the crisis, we are now witnessing the emerging potential of a paradigm shift in our food systems - and this is the moment for accelerating it.** UNEP's voice and leadership on these crucial issues is urgently needed and will be crucial to achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to your reply, and to developing a shared agenda.

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