

## **Our best vaccine: biodiversity**

During the last months, our lives have changed in ways we had imagined before; the way we work and relate to each other is different. A virus, COVID-19, has generated an unprecedented crisis, with important economic, social and environmental consequences. On an economic level, many companies had been forced to stop their activity while others have reinvented or transformed their operations to adapt to the needs of the moment: masks, gloves, cleaning gels, ventilators. Socially, this crisis has highlighted the importance of some aspects, which have not received the necessary attention and resources: family care, health, education. Moreover, this crisis is widening the social gap, making it clear that many resources, such as technology, are not available to everyone.

What is the relationship between the COVID-19 emergence and the environment? The origin of the problem is our relationship with the environment. This crisis caused by the coronavirus, which appeared more than 9,000 km from our homes as if by magic, has been a direct consequence of the exploitation of nature by humans. In this case, an exotic practice, such as the use of pangolin for human consumption, has been the trigger for an unprecedented pandemic. This is not something new, similar situations related to different viruses that crossed between species and reached people, already has occurred with SARS (2003), H1N1 (2009) and MERS (2012), although with less geographical impact.

Diseases transmitted by animals more and more frequently, as a result of the increasing exploitation of natural resources and the growing incursion of humans into wild areas. More than half of the infectious diseases during the last century have their origin in human contact with species, resulting from the loss of ecosystems and biodiversity. The overexploitation of natural resources, such as the extraction of fossil fuels, the indiscriminate use of land for intensive agricultural use, the cutting down and burning rainforest, the use of pesticides, the replacement of animal and vegetable species, etc., have significantly altered the environment. One of their most tragic effects is the elimination of natural buffer zones, which normally delimit areas between humans and wild species. When these barriers are removed, corridors are established for the transmission of pathogens from animals to humans. However, this is not all: global warming is another serious consequence of the overexploitation of the planet.

Most countries had as one of their main objectives for 2020 to fight against global warming. In fact, at the beginning of this year, there had a big concern from citizens to public and private organizations on the need for change and to deal with the increase of temperature and the loss of biodiversity worldwide, as shown at the sessions on Climate Change (COP25) in Madrid last December. During the same month, the European Commission announced the "Green Deal", a roadmap for making the EU's economy sustainable by turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities, which aims to make Europe the first carbon-neutral continent by 2050. The COVID-19 pandemic has put all these good intentions on hold for almost three months, but it has also taught us that human species is no less vulnerable than others are and, in order to take care of ourselves, we must take care of nature, of the environment. On the other hand, we have experienced that, when needed, we are able of slowing down our activity and prioritizing what is important: the people and the planet. Now it is time to return to a "new normality" and we have the opportunity to do things in a different way and to take seriously the ecosystem in which we live.

Nature is sending us a clear message. We have the possibility to respond to it by putting life in the centre and changing the way we do things. These months we have been able, as a community, to work together to save lives and reduce the economic consequences of this pandemic. Now is the time to apply what we have learned to change our relationship with nature.