



CATALYST DIALOGUE ON HEALTH AND CLIMATE CHANGE

A holistic understanding of health strengthens climate action

A Catalyst Dialogue on why this is so and what it means for policy and practice.

Emerging suggestions

The following suggestions for German policy-makers surfaced over the course of the Catalyst Dialogue.

Put a holistic vision of health, in the sense of One Health or planetary health, into practice, through the following:

- Make use of the recognition that **'health can shift the discussion'** by communicating to decision-makers and the public the concrete health implications of all policies, measures or programmes that impact, positively or negatively, on climate change (see p. 3).
- In all policy-making, be guided by the insight that **caring for the environment is caring for human health** – and vice versa (see p. 7).
- Realise **'primary prevention at the source'** by preventing transmission of pathogens from animal hosts to humans in order to avoid epidemics and the need for costly, logistically challenging and often only partially effective vaccination campaigns (see p. 9).
- Commission health and climate experts to develop **climate-sensitive guidelines for 'net zero' medical and public health interventions** (see p. 11).
- **Consult and collaborate with health and climate champions**, such as KLUG (German Alliance for Climate Change and Health) or Health for Future, to inform and mobilise the public for holistic health and climate action (see p. 12).
- Provide interdisciplinary funding streams and workspaces to encourage and enable government and civil society actors, researchers and students working on health- and climate-related topics to move out of their 'silos' and **work together to rise to the 'imagination challenge'** (see p. 13).

Why a Catalyst Dialogue on health and climate action?

Worldwide, human-induced climate change is increasing the frequency and severity of floods, droughts and fires, famine, neglected tropical diseases and outbreaks of zoonotic diseases¹ that can explode into pandemics, as became clear with COVID-19. There is ample evidence that these processes are putting millions of lives at risk, while whole regions that are currently highly populated will soon become uninhabitable, and competition for vanishing resources sparks conflict and migration. It is too late for some of these trends to be fully reversed.

Humanity is over-stressing many of the Earth systems on which all human, animal and plant life depends. Climate scientists have identified nine **planetary boundaries** including land-system change, biosphere integrity and ocean acidification that, when overstepped, create a 'tipping point' of no return. Health emergencies of unprecedented proportions are on the horizon. In such a situation, one would expect that human and planetary health would move up on the political and social agenda and take priority over other, competing interests. But is this the case?

To inform the German government's position on the linkages between health and climate action, the **Global Health Hub Germany**, in cooperation with **Healthy DEvelopments**, co-sponsored by the German Federal Ministries of Health and of Economic Cooperation and Development, convened a high-level 'Catalyst Dialogue' among seven distinguished representatives of academia, development cooperation, foundations, civil society, youth and international organisations, including from the Global South. The participants gathered on July 12 and 13, 2022, for two virtual debates to discuss the overarching question '**How can a holistic understanding of health guide a holistic response to the climate crisis?**' and in August and early September² contributed reflections in individual interviews.

The objective of this paper is not to present a consensual statement of all Dialogue participants, but to trace central lines of argument from the Catalyst Dialogue as it unfolded. It illustrates policy-relevant positions and presents a range of complementary perspectives, all of which promise to enrich Germany's policy dialogue on health and climate action.

How do Catalyst Dialogues work?

Catalyst Dialogues focus on one overarching question, combining virtual debates and individual interviews governed by the **Chatham House Rule**. This gives discussants the space for open and frank conversations 'on the record' while protecting the identities and affiliations of the speakers. Quotes cited in this paper are attributed to individual Dialogue participants with their express permission.

¹ Diseases transmitted from animals to humans.

² The dialogues and interviews took place 2-3 months before COP27. The publications mentioned by Dialogue participants reflect the state of their knowledge and reading at that time.

Catalyst Dialogue participants:

- **Sabine Gabrysch**, Head of Research Department 2 on Climate Resilience at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK) and Professor for Climate Change and Health at *Charité-Universitätsmedizin* Berlin
- **Sophie Gepp**, Board Member of the German Alliance for Climate Change and Health (KLUG), Research Associate at the Centre for Planetary Health Policy (CPHP)
- **Christian Griebenow**, Managing Director, *Vétérinaires sans Frontières* Germany (VSFG)
- **Kim Grützmacher**, Senior Advisor One Health, Biodiversity and Health, International Alliance against Health Risks in Wildlife Trade, *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH* (GIZ) and Planetary Health Lead, *Museum für Naturkunde Berlin / Leibniz-Institute for Evolution and Biodiversity Science*
- **Melvine Anyango Otieno**, Founder, Planetary Health Eastern Africa Hub
- **Michael Succow**, Founder, Michael Succow Foundation
- **Elena Villalobos Prats**, Technical Lead, Capacity Building and Country Support, and Lead for Alliance on Transformative Action on Climate and Health (ATACH), Climate Change and Health Unit, World Health Organization (WHO)

Why a holistic understanding of health can strengthen climate action

'Health can shift the discussion'

For many people, the notion of climate change has tended to be abstract, something that might happen far away in some indefinite future – and therefore not a compelling impetus to change existing behaviours. But over the last two years, images of devastating floods and huge wildfires have propelled climate change to the very heart of everyday life. Dialogue participants agree that now is the 'moment of momentum' that must be seized, where the impact of climate change on health has been brought home to a critical mass of people worldwide through their personal experience.

Health is a wonderful lever for bringing the urgent nature of global environmental changes home to people and making it personal. Global environmental changes seem far away to many people: Someday, somewhere, it will affect someone – but not me. But when it comes to health issues, it becomes concrete and can create personal concern. We feel it all of a sudden: It affects me, my family, my country, it affects people I know.

Kim Grützmacher

Dialogue participants believe that perceiving climate change as a concrete threat to one's own health and well-being can give ordinary people the jolt needed to mobilise them for climate action – be it in their daily routines (e.g. diet, transport, waste management, use of energy), or in joining with others in coalitions (e.g. for climate justice) aiming to keep temperatures low and to stay in planetary boundaries, which will have a good effect on health. Participants agree that the health narrative is a concrete argument for the general public, less abstract than climate change or climate justice, and that it can convey the necessary urgency.

“ I often try to emphasise climate protection with narratives from the health sector. For example, with the question: ‘What do you do in a medical emergency?’ You don’t do a long literature search, you start responding immediately.

Sabine Gabrysch

Likewise, on the level of national governments and international agencies, ‘health can shift the discussion’ (see quote box) in the context of climate change negotiations.

WHO has been taking a leading role in these negotiations, reminding countries of the high societal and financial cost of neglecting environmental issues that result in ill health, e.g. globally, seven million deaths are caused each year by exposure to air pollution from fossil fuel emissions. On the governmental level, the health argument also becomes an economic argument: to lower negative climate change impacts on health because

“ In preparation for the UN Climate Change Conferences, each sector – forests, oceans, water, food and agriculture – is pushing its own agenda. Changing any wording takes months of negotiations. We think that health can shift the discussion and that it is the right argument to get increased ambition on the climate change negotiations: Governments know that they need to protect the health of their population.

Elena Villalobos Prats

it creates a productivity gain, or it reduces societal costs of healthcare. Villalobos Prats explained that for over 25 years WHO has been promoting a holistic approach to health in line with what today is called ‘One Health’ with partners in different sectors, motivating them to pursue policies that maximise health ‘co-benefits’, such as improved air quality, technological innovation, or employment creation. WHO is itself leading the way with new initiatives such as its ‘Road map to a carbon-neutral WHO by 2030’ (currently in preparation) and its recently inaugurated [Hub for Pandemic and Epidemic Intelligence](#) in Berlin. According to Villalobos Prats, WHO worked intensively with the UK as president of COP26, to closely link health and climate action. As of today, over 60 countries have committed at Minister of Health level to the COP26 Health Initiatives on Climate Resilient and Low Carbon Sustainable Health Systems. Building on this success, the Alliance on Transformative Action on Climate and Health ([ATACH](#)) was launched in June 2022 in collaboration with the UK to support countries implementing their commitments.

Losing sight of humans' dependency on 'this house Earth'

“ Nature is our planet's `capital' and starting point: Everything else is connected to it. If I have healthy soils, I have healthy food, drinkable groundwater and thus healthy people. That is the fundamental connection within `this house Earth'. To preserve the basis of our existence, we need nature-based climate protection. We must organise agriculture in such a way that we preserve nature's ability to function, otherwise we ourselves will perish. Unfortunately, an ever-greater part of our society is no longer aware of these connections. Climate change appears abstract to humans, particularly those living in cities, who no longer interact directly with the natural environment to feed, clothe and shelter themselves. Many people have lost their connection to nature and the recognition that it is a fine-tuned system which provides for the needs of all living beings, including humans. Changing any element of this system threatens its existence – and the survival of all life.

Michael Succow

Some Dialogue participants note that humanity could be seen as a victim of its own 'success'. In 'harnessing' nature, especially since the start of the industrial era, dramatic economic growth and

often beneficial shifts in life quality have been achieved globally but at the cost of destroying the natural balance of the environment on which, ultimately, all life depends. Without adjustment, these unsustainable living standards are doomed to be short-lived.

This contrasts with the more holistic perception of humankind as part of nature in many indigenous societies. Dialogue participants Succow and Griebenow give examples from animistic communities in Mongolia, Ethiopia and East Africa, where living beings, including plants and animals, are credited with having a soul and are treated with respect and gratitude for their contribution to human well-being and survival.

“ From one of my earliest missions in Ethiopia, I remember an encounter with a farmer who worked his field with a hook plough pulled by his two Zebu cattle. At the end of the day, he unhitched the cows and his son carried the plough back home. The son explained to me that he did this gladly because his father and the cattle had worked hard all day to prepare the field for the next harvest. In those communities I often encountered this respect and gratitude towards the family's animals and the land. In our society this feeling of connectedness has been lost.

Michael Succow

“ For many pastoralists in East Africa, every animal, many plants and some places have a soul. And the herders feel connected with them and treat them with dignity. Yes, they slaughter and eat their cattle, too, but the way they slaughter them shows their respect and gratitude towards them. This is a totally different mindset, a mindset that we can learn from.

Christian Griebenow

This sense of respect for and solidarity with all living beings, however, is fast being eroded by factors outside the control of indigenous communities: macroeconomic shifts, including wars, fuelled by a hunger – often of faraway actors – for resources, money and power. The agro-industry and a globalised economic system destroy the health and balance of the natural environment through intensive livestock farming and cash crops’ replacing food crops, leading to soil depletion and destruction and compromising communities’ capacity to feed themselves.

Such threats to the foundations of their very existence are leading many indigenous societies to progressively replace the former awe and respect that protected against over-exploitation of their natural environment with a more utilitarian perspective on land and livestock as resources to be used for short-term survival, losing sight of the long-term negative effects. Griebenow describes how nomadic herders in Eastern Africa, under pressure to feed their own expanding populations, have begun to maximise their use of fragile pasturelands, running into conflicts with governments which want to preserve forested areas as national parks.

Otieno mentions the disarray of indigenous communities in Kenya’s Rift Valley, whose traditional living space is shrinking due to flooding caused by climate change. Landmarks, trees, wildlife and sacred places essential to their nomadic culture and way of life are fast disappearing under the rising waters, forcing the population to introduce major lifestyle changes that are detrimental to their mental and physical health (sedentary lifestyle, diet).

“ We interviewed indigenous communities who are affected by flooding in several regions. We asked them how they are adapting to the frequent flooding and how it affects them, socioeconomically and in relation to their health. Their responses show that they feel completely overwhelmed and left alone by their governments. Their communities have been displaced, and they don’t understand what’s happening. They think God is angry at them and punishing them.

Melvine Otieno

In industrialised countries the situation is different but equally precarious: Large swathes of once-fertile soil are smothered under asphalt and concrete, while wetlands are drained for intensive agriculture. Succow cites as one example Germany’s beloved tourist destination Rügen Island, where moors have been drained to make space for largescale production of – hard to believe but true – fodder for racing camels in Saudi Arabia.

Succow describes the negative spiral of intensive agriculture with excessive use of fertiliser destroying the natural balance of the soil, which in turn kills the essential plant and animal organisms that give it life and enable the formation of healthy groundwater. This disaster, compromising the very foundations of human existence, proceeds almost unquestioned, as in industrial societies an ever-greater proportion of the population 'has forgotten nature, has no sense of needing it, and is unaware of these intricate relationships' and their vital importance for human health and survival on this planet.

Dialogue participants see the present moment as a potential tipping point for the future of our planet, sharing feelings of concern, but also of hope, as summed up by Griebenow:

/// I hope for three things:
1) *That humankind understands that we need to act now and commits 100% to renewable energies. Because the pressure and the resulting understanding are so strong that people are willing to implement comprehensive measures for climate protection themselves and to participate in the necessary social changes.*
2) *That we are able to limit the damage, and 3) That our planet's power of recovery will be sufficient to save us. Over the last billion years the ecological systems on Earth have solved lots of issues!*

Christian Griebenow

Caring for the environment is caring for our health – and vice versa

The optimistic worldview of 'humankind as master of nature' that flowered into the industrial revolution has proved to be short-sighted, saddling us two centuries later with an entrenched fossil fuel industry which is just one of many vested economic interests that are destroying our environment, menacing the foundations of our health and survival.

/// *Currently, our society is addicted to fossil fuels, which harm the health of planet and people. Much like the tobacco industry, the fossil fuel industry pursues strategies and tactics that try to prevent withdrawal and regulation.*

Sophie Gepp

Several Dialogue participants caution against the arrogance of a 'mechanical' or 'technical' attitude of 'fixing' immediate problems such as taking a pill or seeding clouds to produce rain. Such attempts at quick fixes reflect the same utilitarian perspective which is at the heart of the world's current relentless exploitation of the environment for short-term gains. In the case of both the environment and human health, the focus should instead be on restoring balance through prevention and conservation rather than on cure.

“ Prevention is often not prioritised in health policy-making, even though it would make so much sense. Investing in treating and curing diseases is important, but implementing measures that may protect people from getting them in the first place is often underfunded. Climate action is early-stage disease prevention – and this is what we need to communicate to patients and to policy-makers.

Sophie Gepp

Dialogue participants agree that for effective action a paradigm shift to a more holistic and interlinked perception of human and environmental health and climate change is required. Gepp points at the example of the recently updated [Berlin Environmental Justice Map](#). Depicting the spatial distribution of environmental pollutants, it shows local lawmakers in which zones green policies and interventions are most needed. Gepp notes that the five factors the Map is monitoring – namely noise pollution, air pollution, bioclimatic (abnormal heat, cold etc.) load, supply of green spaces and social disadvantage – are all highly relevant for public health. In this sense green policy-making, or caring for the environment and climate justice, is also a very effective public health intervention – in Berlin as in the rest of the world.

How a holistic understanding of health can strengthen climate action

Holistic health paradigms are gaining traction

Dialogue participants agreed that a new paradigm linking climate change and health is needed to guide decision-making by governments as well as individuals. What would be the most constructive conceptual model to replace the outdated – and perilous – perception of humankind at the centre of the universe? Two holistic models were championed – and ardently discussed – by different Dialogue participants:

‘One Health’, envisioning human health as one angle of a triangle including the health of animals and of the environment, has been adopted among others by WHO and by several German ministries including the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and is included in the [coalition agreement](#) of the German government.

'One Health is an integrated, unifying approach that aims to sustainably balance and optimize the health of humans, animals, plants and ecosystems. It recognizes the health of humans, domestic and wild animals, plants and the wider environment (including ecosystems) are closely linked and interdependent. The approach mobilizes multiple sectors, disciplines and communities at varying levels of society to work together to foster well-being and tackle threats to health and ecosystems, while addressing the collective need for clean water, energy and air, safe and nutritious food, taking action on climate change, and contributing to sustainable development.'

Definition of [Quadripartite One Health Joint Action Plan 2022-26](#)

'Planetary health', on the other hand, sees humanity as one element of the biosphere that encompasses all living beings, which can only thrive together. The model has attracted broad attention in academic and scientific circles. It relies on the concept of planetary boundaries that must not be crossed in order to ensure the continuity of life, a concept that is actively promoted by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK).

'Our definition of planetary health is the achievement of the highest attainable standard of health, wellbeing, and equity worldwide through judicious attention to the human systems—political, economic, and social—that shape the future of humanity and the Earth's natural systems that define the safe environmental limits within which humanity can flourish. Put simply, planetary health is the health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends.'

Definition of the [Rockefeller Foundation–Lancet Commission on planetary health](#)

Griebenow appreciates the One Health approach with its three dimensions as a concrete principle of action, illustrating its practical usefulness, for instance in understanding and curbing the Ebola epidemic. The One Health approach led researchers to analyse the respective contributions of animals (fruit bats), of the environment and of humans to the outbreak and spread of the fearsome disease, in order to choose the best option for combatting it. Since logistically and due to the great variance in the pathogens, it was unrealistic to vaccinate either the highly mobile fruit bats (and there is no animal vaccine yet against Ebola) or the potentially affected human population, the epidemic was brought under control by convincing the local communities to change their funeral practices. One Health can guide collaboration with the environmental sector, e.g. in mapping human and animal disease outbreaks, and studying anti-microbial resistance (AMR). Otieno agrees on the relevance of One Health for understanding the East African context, where wet market butchereries abound, and humans live in close proximity with their animals.

In the same vein, Grützmacher notes that for preventing the emergence of new infectious diseases, which can lead to epidemics and pandemics, interventions must begin before pathogens jump from animals to humans – starting e.g. not with vaccination but with 'primary prevention' at the source. Two effective and cost-efficient ways for reducing the risk of disease emergence originating from wildlife, for example, are the protection of tropical forests and improved regulation of wildlife trade and consumption. Grützmacher cites [Andrew Dobson](#), who calculates that this approach would cost less than 2% (over a period of 10 years) of what the COVID-19 pandemic will have cost the world. Unfortunately, these highly effective early interventions – which

also come with considerable co-benefits for climate mitigation, adaptation and biodiversity conservation – lie outside the mandate of the health sector. Grützmacher sees this as a challenging systemic ‘disconnect’ and a strong and urgent argument for cross-sectoral collaboration: for many institutions and experts to communicate and work together on a common problem across their respective ‘silos’.

“ For pandemic prevention, we need to understand that the majority of new pathogens originate from wildlife. Sometimes the pathogens jump from wild animals to farm animals and then infect humans, but sometimes they jump directly from wild animals to humans. This has to do with the encroachment on their habitats and with the poor regulation of the wildlife trade, but also with the fact that wild animals have so far hardly been mapped in animal health systems. However, all these factors are rarely considered in the prevention of human diseases. Furthermore, once a pathogen has jumped to humans and an outbreak has occurred and spread, containment measures are expensive and carry a high risk of failure – as was and is evident with COVID-19. Accepting the leapfrogging of new pathogens and emergence of new outbreaks as inevitable is also unfair and accepts that it is mainly poor people who get sick and die. They are often the first to be affected, but the last to have access to health care and vaccination.

Kim Grützmacher

While recognising its practical applicability in some areas and its importance for cross-sectoral collaboration, Gabrysch and Grützmacher warn that the One Health approach, in contrast to the planetary health perspective, often lacks a meaningful integration of the environment and is in many ways still too centred on human and veterinary health and infectious diseases at a time when the well-being of the planet as a whole is at stake.

“ In my lectures I always try to convey to people that we are part of nature. We are one living being among many other living beings on this planet. And we can only be well if all other living beings are well.

Sabine Gabrysch

Gepp notes that both the One Health approach and the planetary health concept are useful in their own right. She is concerned, however, that the controversy between some of their proponents could distract from actually grappling with the challenges: ‘We need a holistic understanding of health, and we urgently need policies and implementation that protect the environment and the natural systems on which the health of humans and animals depends. For this, we need all hands on deck!’

The healthcare sector can set an example

The relation between health and climate change is complex: On the one hand, climate change is a threat to human health. On the other hand, the health sector itself – with all the infrastructure and human and material resources devoted to our health – creates enormous

amounts of waste and emits considerable amounts of CO₂³ and therefore has itself a role to play in curbing climate change⁴. Several Dialogue participants pointed out that climate resilience of the health sector is a specific issue within the overarching challenge of climate change.

The goal, as summarised by Gepp, is ‘having climate-neutral and climate-resilient health systems’. This is in line with the [COP26 health programme](#). Overburdened with its response to the COVID-19 pandemic – in addition to the pre-existing nursing shortage and now the energy crisis – Germany’s health sector, as elsewhere, suffers from a lack of human and financial resources needed for profoundly changing the system.

Gepp argues that climate action should not be the responsibility of individual health workers, but a system-wide approach. Members of the [German Alliance for Climate Change and Health \(KLUG\)](#) are advocating for the government to add a criterion of sustainability in the health sector to ensure continuity of quality care. In addition, KLUG is part of a project that is currently mapping German laws that inhibit an environmentally friendly health system.

“ We have to take the impact of climate change on our health seriously and we therefore need to consider and reduce the environmental impact, from production to prescription, while maintaining high quality of care.

Sophie Gepp

Participants evoke spill-over of climate activism from the vibrant healthcare sector to other sectors such as urban planning and the formation of citizen movements such as [Health for Future](#) (health professionals against emissions in the health sector). These coalitions and partnerships raise awareness, encourage reform, and mobilise people to change climate-impacting behaviour.

“ I am impressed with how strongly the health professions are now committed to the climate issue: KLUG (the German Alliance for Climate Change and Health), the Health for Future campaigners, and now also the Centre for Planetary Health Policy, in coordination with similar initiatives in Europe and worldwide. At present, for example, we are working on a heat protection alliance, together with municipalities and urban planners. So our involvement is not just limited to hospitals and medicine – rather, we are trying to support the transformation process that stands before us as much as possible.

Sabine Gabrysch

Dialogue participants agree that climate change ‘champions’ are important, and that health professionals, as trusted and highly regarded members of their community, are particularly suited to the role of sensitising the general public to the urgency of climate action.

³ Editor’s note: Globally, the health sector contributes 4 to 5% of greenhouse gas emissions (Tennison et al. Lancet, Planetary Health 2021)

⁴ Editor’s note: For concrete suggestions, see [Resources | Health Care Without Harm \(noharm-global.org\)](#)

Mobilising people for the health of the planet

It is not easy to get people to give priority to curbing climate change. Until recently, the problem rarely made the news: Now no day goes by without information and warnings on how drastically the earth is already changing and menacing humans' present and future well-being. To many people the problem is so big and scary that they feel helpless to do anything about it. Others, more sceptical, tune out the bad news and proceed with their existing endeavours. How can one counteract these self-defeating attitudes and mobilise members of the public to 'do their bit' for the health of the planet, and for some maybe even to become climate activists?

Dialogue participants have suggestions for instilling courage and motivation to tackle the problem of climate change and other detrimental global environmental changes. Several mention the importance of empathetic interpersonal communication. Grützmacher evokes the example of participatory approaches such as 'deep listening', coined by 'Health in Harmony', which respects local communities, their knowledge and needs, and takes the time to understand their experience and perspective as a concrete basis for joint planning.

Although the climate problem is urgent and severe, participants agree that it is more effective to inspire people with the positive vision of a better future than to scare them with a vision of gloom and doom, which could reinforce their sense of helplessness, or lecturing them on how to behave. Instead, people should be encouraged with the message that everyone has a role to play. It is important to break individuals' isolation by bringing them together, reminding them that there is strength in numbers, and creating joy

and pride in working jointly on preparing a better tomorrow.

“ Eckart von Hirschhausen, for example, avoids talking down to people and lecturing them in the sense of 'you should do without' or 'you should do this or that'. Instead, he describes a healthier, more sustainable and fairer world that we can create together. And that's what it's all about: We need to encourage people in a way that it doesn't come across as a daunting task, but as something that can be joyful. A chance to create something good for the next generation and for ourselves.

Sabine Gabrysch

Gepp points out that knowledge is necessary, but it is not enough to spark positive action. For this, it is important to help people develop a sense of self-efficacy. KLUG aims at promoting 'transformative action', inspiring people with a positive vision of the future and what they can do, e.g. in the context of 'Health for Future' groups.

“ We must move from knowledge to transformative action. People often feel overwhelmed and powerless in the face of climate change. This is why, at KLUG, we are trying to inspire people to get involved and become change agents. So that they develop a sense of self-efficacy rather than powerlessness. We want to spark transformative action.

Sophie Gepp

For effective action in favour of a healthy planet, Dialogue participants agree that governments and citizens have to work in synergy: Each of them can influence the other. Gabrysch mentions the potential that could arise with activists using scientific knowledge and proactively seeking scientific advice to sway national policy. Villalobos Prats cites legal pressure from citizens on their national governments to properly protect their lives and health against climate risks.

Grützmacher, on the other hand, evokes the dilemma faced by forward-thinking politicians seeking an appropriate ‘lever’ to mobilise their population for environmental responsibility and justice, in particular when it comes to mobilising support for unpopular, yet climate-responsible measures.

Rising to the imagination challenge

In their [seminal paper of 2015](#), The Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission on planetary health made a useful distinction between three urgent challenges that humanity needs to meet in order to safeguard the health of the planet and its inhabitants: the **information, implementation and imagination challenges**. In every situation one must ask what is lacking: Is it knowledge, the capacity to act, or the capacity to reframe our existing approaches?

Clearly, meeting the implementation challenge – climate action by governments and individuals – is the crucial step required to save the future. But something is holding us back: Is it insufficient knowledge on what should be done to curb climate change (information challenge)? Yet many solutions are known but not applied: Why? Are we going about things the wrong way?

Trying to solve new challenges with old approaches? Maybe we need to radically rethink our ‘tried and true’ approaches as we shift to the new, more holistic paradigms. Reframing the problem and adjusting our approaches and solutions to this new way of framing the issues is what the imagination challenge is about – and this is also the challenge on which Dialogue participants had the most to say.

“Why is it going so slowly with the great transformation? How can we more quickly reach the social tipping point where everyone really understands that their contribution is required? This is about the ‘imagination challenge’, the ability to imagine that things could be completely different.”

Sabine Gabrysch

Ultimately, the **imagination challenge** is about conceiving of and realising new ways to plan, budget and implement in line with a more holistic understanding of health and climate change.

A holistic vision is interdisciplinary and requires the confluence of a multitude of different technical, social, and economic perspectives. There is already widespread acknowledgement of the need for different sectors to ‘break out of their silos’ – but what could this look like in practice?

For one, new ways of doing research are part of this. To force researchers out of their silos, Gabrysch evokes fostering interdisciplinary work groups and special funding lines, with shared spaces for interdisciplinary co-working, as is already practiced at PIK.

On the level of national governments and international organisations, Villalobos Prats recommends ‘mainstreaming’ planetary health along the model of the 1992 UNFCCC treaty that, among other commitments by countries, asks to consider health in all their adaptation and mitigation policies and programmes:

‘Take climate change considerations into account, to the extent feasible, in their relevant social, economic and environmental policies and actions, and employ appropriate methods, for example impact assessments, formulated and determined nationally, with a view to minimizing adverse effects on the economy, on public health and on the quality of the environment, of projects or measures undertaken by them to mitigate or adapt to climate change.’

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 1992, Article 4.1.f

/// *This holistic understanding of health should be factored in by all policies and funding streams, e.g. environmental and health impact assessments should be systematic when planning a new climate change adaptation or mitigation programme to avoid waste. This challenge of ensuring a comprehensive approach is a priority: we all have our own methods and ways of doing it, but I am positive about the current momentum and the opportunity for change.*

Elena Villalobos Prats

In Eastern Africa, Otieno’s Planetary Health Hub is lobbying researchers and governments to start talking to rural, indigenous communities and to young people about how their habitats have changed and will continue to change – and how to work together to reduce harm. To help close this communication gap, the Eastern Africa Hub supports young researchers who are members of the community they are studying.

/// *There is too often an information gap left by researchers who neglect to communicate their findings to the communities they study, thus depriving them of insights that could enable their target group to improve their situation. Research on climate change and health should not remain in the ‘silo’ of institutions, but be shared with policy-makers and communities to enable action: Coalitions and partnerships are needed to synergise education, research and community-building.*

Melvine Otieno

In Germany, a striking example of rising to the imagination challenge is the interdisciplinary, mixed citizen-government [Zukunftsrat \(Future Council\)](#) of the federal state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Convened in 2020, the Council’s watchword is ‘sustainability’ in all senses: economic, social, cultural and ecological. 49 experts from a vast variety of backgrounds, representing science, business, culture and civil society, were hand-picked for both their technical expertise and their practical experience.

To ensure objectivity and an unwavering orientation towards the common good, the Future Council is a non-partisan advisory body, and includes no politicians, representatives of political parties or of commercial interests. Its interdisciplinary and multi-perspective process generated a holistic vision and new allegiances for Mecklenburg-Vorpommern as 'health land', that is a haven for nature and sustainable tourism rather than an expanse of soils ravaged by intensive agro-industry.

/// We link the vision of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern as a 'health state' with that of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern as a 'tourism state'. We bring land use, the health economy and the tourism economy together by becoming a state that, for example, moves away from high levels of fertiliser and again strengthens the natural fertility of the soil. For this we need people who still have a relationship with the soil and with nature and who teach children sensitivity, a thirst for knowledge and caring for nature.

Michael Succow

The Council's example is already inspiring the creation of similar initiatives elsewhere. In the same vein as the transdisciplinary innovation spaces and funding streams of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and the Planetary Health Eastern Africa Hub cited by Gabrysch and Otieno, it highlights the generative potential of interdisciplinary and intergenerational collaboration formats for the design of holistic transformation processes in the interest of human health and climate action.

The participants in this second Dialogue brought a wealth of knowledge, experiences and innovative suggestions to the table, both challenging and building on each other's viewpoints. The seriousness and urgency that characterised the discussions was matched by participants' shared conviction that what is called for at this point is the courage to try out new ways of collaborating for a healthy planet: Now is the time to rise to the imagination challenge.

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