

How To Create Pandemics: The Unpalatable Truth

Sibylle Frey



Covid-19 has drawn back the curtains: We witness a real-time case study on the vulnerability of a once normal lifestyle, including the way we produce food. What has largely been ignored so far is animal welfare and its crucial role in such pandemics.

Perfect ingredients

For [decades](#), scientists have warned that we are creating ideal conditions for disease to evolve and spread. [Among them](#) are deforestation and habitat destruction, global warming, more people, poor health policies, and intensive farming.

[75% of emerging infectious diseases](#) are from wildlife and livestock. Now [for the third time in thirty years](#), after [SARS](#) (from civets and raccoons) and [MERS](#) (camels), a coronavirus has jumped from animals to humans. This time probably from bats, with [pangolins](#) as an intermediate host, sold at a Chinese wet market. Not only is the wildlife trade a threat to biodiversity and biosecurity, it also fuels criminals as wildlife products are normally [expensive](#). Worldwide, the legal wildlife trade often shrouds the [\\$23bn black market](#) for protected species.

Live (wet) animal markets have long been known as epicenters for zoonotic diseases. As [Professor Andrew Cunningham](#) from the Zoological Society of London points out, “these animals have been transported over large distances and are crammed together into cages. They are stressed and immunosuppressed and excreting whatever pathogens they have in them. With people in large numbers in the market and in intimate contact with the body fluids of these animals, you have an ideal mixing bowl for [disease] emergence. If you wanted a scenario to maximize the chances of [transmission], I couldn’t think of a much better way of doing it.”

Western media has often done a bad job of [portraying](#) Chinese wet markets. [Most of](#) them do not sell wild animals but meat, fruit and vegetables, and are a staple for many. A blanket ban on these markets would be impossible and unjustified. However, some of these markets have a wild animal section selling live and slaughtered species. China closed these sections when it [banned the trade and consumption of wild animals](#) for food but not for [other purposes](#).

When will I see you again?

However, Covid-19 could equally have come from a factory farm elsewhere. These intensive systems, where animals are densely stacked, suffer chronic stress, depressed immunity, and live transport not only invite pandemics, [they can create them](#). A deadly strain of [avian or swine flu virus](#) could become highly infectious to humans and trigger the next pandemic. In factory farming, giving low-dose antimicrobials is usual business: they make animals grow faster without having to feed more and produce [cheaper meat, eggs, and milk](#). While for most people [meat is cheaper](#) than ever before, [resistance](#) to antimicrobial drugs has become one of the biggest threats to global health and food security. Antimicrobials overuse in factory farming is one of the [main causes](#) and we are fast running out of [treatment options](#) for common infections.

The ugly face of a broken food system

What has barely entered the spotlight in the Covid-19 coverage is another human disease: The unspeakable animal cruelty inflicted to satisfy our taste for meat. Yet animals [feel](#) pain and [experience emotions](#) ranging from joy and happiness to deep sadness, grief, and post-traumatic stress disorder, along with empathy, jealousy, and resentment.

Across Asia, [live wolf pups, foxes, civets, hedgehogs, salamanders](#), cats, and dogs (often stolen [pets](#)), suffer enormously before dying a [horrific death](#). In markets, many different species are crammed on top of each other. They are thirsty, often dying, may have missing limbs or open wounds from their capture and long transport, and rough handling as Peter Li, Professor of East Asian politics at the University of Houston-Downtown, and China policy specialist at Humane Society International [explains](#). Eels are cut into two halves alive,

leaving them wriggling in pain to attract customers [to show how fresh](#) they are. Many investigations have shown that dogs, cats, and other animals are being [boiled](#) and skinned alive to satisfy an appetite for meat flushed with stress hormones - perceived to taste better the more terrified the animal is, and the more it suffers before death. Dogs are therefore [typically killed](#) in full view of other dogs.

Not much better in other parts of the world: In America and Europe, for example, un-weaned calves are [shipped over long distances](#) for slaughter, without food in crammed trucks. Hundreds of millions of farm animals are spending their lives [in cages](#). Sows have to nurse their piglets in [gestation crates](#) through bars, with no room to move. Ducks and geese are [force-fed](#) to make [foie gras](#). Undercover footage reveals the barbaric, routine [abuse of farm animals](#). Male piglets are castrated without any pain relief or are killed by smashing their heads against the ground. [Fish](#) too feel joy, pain, fear, and stress. They are often left to suffocate in air or on ice, or gutted while still alive. Reduced capacity in meat plants from Covid-19 had producers [mass culling their animals](#), including the vacuum- [grinding](#) of live chicks.

What does this say about our species? Is this what we want to be - and is this how we really want to produce our food? Except for a minority of people, we don't even need to kill an animal to meet our [nutrient](#) requirements.

The hidden costs of meat - who pays?

We inflict immense animal suffering, with high economic, social, and environmental costs, that are not even included in the price of meat. Regardless of whether these actions are intended to tickle our palate, make money, or produce more cheap meat at all costs, they come at a [high price](#) for us all.

Everywhere, Covid-19 impacted slaughterhouses and meat plants disproportionately because of crowded housing conditions for cheap labor, poor workers' safety, and labor [shortages from closures](#). Drug-resistant infections could cost the economy [\\$100 trillion in lost output by 2050](#). Deaths from antimicrobial resistance could rise to [10 million people per year by 2050](#), dwarfing those from cancer, cholera, diabetes, and road accidents.

Our taste for meat is growing in step with our [population numbers, obesity, and wealth](#). Red and processed meat bears a higher risk of chronic [illnesses](#). By 2050, treating diet-related illnesses could climb to [\\$1.2trn](#) per year. To this, we need to add the [high environmental costs](#) from meat production.

Animal welfare: more than meets the eye

Yet good animal welfare is not just better for animals [but for us too](#). Animals who can express their natural behavior have a lower biosecurity risk and [don't rely on routine antibiotics](#). More infant animals survive and they can live longer reproductive lives. There are also fewer losses from injuries and illness and [fewer unproductive animals](#). Removing [stress](#), reducing bruises, pain, and fear during [handling, transport, and slaughter](#) can drastically improve the [quality of meat](#).

Every crisis has a silver lining

Many believe that the meat industry is in crisis. The sector had already its feathers ruffled by concerns over the high [environmental impacts](#) from meat consumption, factory farming, and more people eating vegetarian or vegan.

According to the \$20trn [FAIRR investor network](#), 73% of the world's largest meat producers - worth \$224bn - have a high pandemic risk. In contrast, plant-based proteins are more resilient to pandemics and other threats. To reduce risk, 25% of the largest meat, fish, and dairy manufacturers are already turning towards plant-based proteins. Because of Covid-19, California's plant-based egg start-up, *JUST*, has reported [record sales in China](#), and companies like *Beyond Meat* are [to compete directly with beef on price](#) for the first time. Depending on [consumer trends](#), adoption of [new technologies](#), and a [carbon tax on meat](#), plant-based burgers and Co. could grab half of today's meat market [by 2050](#).

"The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated. I hold that the more helpless a creature the more entitled it is to protection by man from the cruelty of humankind." - Mahatma Gandhi

Animal cruelty is one of the most obscene faces of our society. Our blind anthropocentrism has numbed our senses for the plight of the most vulnerable. It is the disrespect for animals that has created this pandemic, and we only have ourselves to blame. Covid-19 has reminded us how interconnected nature is, and that if we don't change our ways upfront we will have to pay up later. Change will require education, action by governments, businesses, and individuals. As individuals, the most powerful thing we can do is to consider what we eat and buy. Not everyone may be giving up meat. But if we do use animals, the least we can do is to make their lives worth living. It will improve our lives, too.

For further information or getting involved:

- [World Animal Protection](#)
- [Compassion in World Farming](#)
- [Humane Society International](#)
- [International Fund for Animal Welfare](#)
- [TRAFFIC](#) - Action on wildlife trade
- [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals](#)
- [Mercy for Animals](#)
- [Animal Equity](#)
- [No to Dogmeat](#)

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The [MAHB Blog](#) is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org