

Panorama Perspectives

Conversations on Planetary Health

The Planetary Health Landscape

From Concept to Action

Report II · September 2017



PANORAMA

The *Panorama Perspectives: Conversations on Planetary Health* report series aims to inspire new thinking, conversations, and engagement with planetary health and other integrated concepts. Collaboration and open knowledge sharing across sectors are necessary to solve the complex global health and development problems of today.

The *Conversations on Planetary Health* series is comprised of five reports:

- Planetary Health 101: Information and Resources
- The Planetary Health Landscape: From Concept to Action
- Global Policy Opportunities for Planetary Health: A Review of Existing Policy Frameworks
- Planetary Health Science and Policy Intersections
- The Funding Landscape for Integrating Health and Environment

These reports are intended as practical tools, presenting actionable opportunities to advance planetary health. Each report expands on knowledge gathered from many sources, including analysis of publicly available reports and data; forums and events; group discussions; and individual conversations. All content represents Panorama's opinion unless otherwise noted.

We welcome continued dialogue on the report topics. To receive the reports directly, please write to info@panoramaglobal.org or visit us at panoramaglobal.org/planetary-health.

Panorama is an action tank working to solve global problems through audacious thinking and bold action. We bring together diverse perspectives to spark new ideas that create change. We partner with ambitious leaders to strengthen their organizations and achieve their goals, and we initiate projects when we see gaps that need to be filled. Our work on planetary health is supported by a grant from The Rockefeller Foundation.

The Planetary Health Landscape

From Concept to Action

Introduction

As a nascent concept, planetary health is growing among a core group of like-minded people. However, for the concept of planetary health to have a role in addressing the complex and interconnected health and environmental issues the world faces today, it must gain greater traction.

The concept of planetary health is broad reaching and aspirational, as exemplified by its stated definition, “the health of human civilization and the state of the natural systems on which it depends.”¹ It calls urgent attention to the extensive degradation of our planet for human advancement and aims to reverse this trend by better balancing human needs with the preservation of the Earth, thereby sustaining the health and well-being of future generations. To accomplish this, the concept also calls for a multidisciplinary, cross-sector, and transborder approach to change mindsets and behaviors at every level, from global to local.

If the planetary health community hopes to achieve these ambitious goals, then the concept of planetary health needs to quickly translate from a vast concept into a practical roadmap that guides decision making.

All levels of society and government will ultimately need to be engaged to make lasting change. However, to make substantial progress quickly, the planetary health community should first focus on decision makers in the public and private sectors, at the global and national levels, who have the power and resources to affect the mindsets and behavior of large numbers of people.

At this time, the concept of planetary health has not been socialized among these decision makers. While other leaders in the health, environment, and development communities view the concept as amorphous and insubstantial. To start shifting from concept to action and attract the attention of decision makers, the planetary health community should focus on five key steps:

1. Clarify the concept
2. Build the evidence base
3. Include all viewpoints
4. Embrace change
5. Balance preparation and action

These steps were formulated through numerous conversations with the planetary health community,² including a convening by The Rockefeller Foundation in February 2017, which brought together leading

¹ Sarah Whitmee et al. “Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene epoch: report of The Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission on planetary health,” *Lancet* 386, 10007 (2015).

² See Appendix I

minds on planetary health and other integrated human health, animal health, environment, and development approaches.

This report builds on these conversations to help the planetary health community take advantage of available opportunities and address central challenges needed to quickly strengthen and expand.

1. Clarify the Concept

While still relatively new, the concept of planetary health offers potential value to decision makers on multiple levels; however, to fully realize this value the concept must be more clearly defined.

Practically, planetary health presents a new way to approach and solve problems. For example, there is alignment at the highest levels with global policy frameworks – primarily the Convention on Biological Diversity Aichi Biodiversity Targets, the Paris Climate Agreement, and the Sustainable Development Goals – which will require collaboration across sectors to make progress. While this alignment validates integrated concepts like planetary health, it also highlights the need for these concepts to be much more actionable, so that they can be easily taken up by government decision makers as a way to achieve goals.

The concept of planetary health may also prove valuable to national and global economic growth. Both human health and the environment are fundamental to economic productivity, and as planetary health integrates them, instead of staying within traditional silos, there is opportunity to make greater economic gains, as well as avoid losses. The forthcoming work undertaken by The Rockefeller Foundation Economic Council on Planetary Health at the Oxford Martin School³ will quantify this potential benefit.

On an existential level, planetary health also represents a brighter future for generations to come, as well as an opportunity to achieve a more just and equitable society. This optimistic message of hope is highly appealing and exciting for people new to the concept of planetary health. Yet to secure the long-term engagement of decision makers, the concept must be combined with feasible, practical actions.

However, backing up the concept of planetary health with concrete action is a challenge at this time. To begin overcoming this, more work is needed to clarify what planetary health is, or should be, in practice. Today, the terms used to describe planetary health are diverse and at times contradictory. These include describing planetary health as a “paradigm shift,” “scientific paradigm,” “moral imperative,” “movement,” “field,” “practice,” and “discipline,” each of which represent a specific mindset and a different approach, especially when it comes to implementation.

There is also uncertainty about how planetary health differs from other efforts, both in definition and operation. For example, is it an umbrella concept encompassing similar approaches, such as One Health or GEOHealth? Or is it a distinct concept that sits alongside these existing concepts? Planetary health

³ [The Rockefeller Foundation Launches Economic Council Focused on Planetary Health](#), February 2017

would be most powerful as an umbrella concept and it is trending in that direction. If the planetary health community continues to draw together related ideas and approaches, it will have greater potential to become a strong, credible voice that attracts decision makers.

Overall, while it is challenging to clarify nascent concepts, it is critical that the community agrees on a focus for planetary health so that the concept becomes more distinct, tangible, and appealing to decision makers.

2. Build the Evidence Base

Building the evidence base for planetary health goes hand-in-hand with clarifying the concept and is critical to convincing decision makers to take up the concept of planetary health.

A strong case already exists for the links between human health and natural systems, as well as for anthropogenic changes. However, major evidence gaps still exist around the concept of planetary health. Therefore, a measured approach is needed. On the one hand, moving too quickly and promoting an untested planetary health concept could undermine its legitimacy. On the other hand, scientific and data gaps cannot excuse inaction.

While it will take time to fill the evidence gaps, there are many opportunities now to encourage the cross-discipline and cross-sector collaboration needed for meaningful results. This includes straightforward activities, such as creating opportunities for scientists and researchers from different sectors to meet each other, like Future Earth's Health Knowledge-Action Network;⁴ openly sharing scientific and research findings, as seen through journals like *The Lancet Planetary Health*⁵ and *GeoHealth*,⁶ as well as setting common scientific principles that help align efforts.

Two examples of organizations driving this type of activity are Wellcome Trust and the Bridge Collaborative. Through its Our Planet Our Health⁷ priority area, Wellcome Trust created unique, integrated health and environment research partnerships around the issues of urbanization, global food systems, and climate change. Also, The Bridge Collaborative⁸ is working to set common principles and guidance across the health, environment, and development sectors to better integrate efforts.

Together, encouraging collaboration in the near term⁹ while building the overall evidence base in the long term, will hone the concept of planetary health and demonstrate its benefits to decision makers.

⁴ [Future Earth Health Knowledge-Action Network website](#)

⁵ [The Lancet Planetary Health](#)

⁶ [GeoHealth](#)

⁷ [Wellcome Trust Our Planet Our Health website](#)

⁸ [Bridge Collaborative website](#)

⁹ See *Panorama Perspectives: Conversations on Planetary Health Report I*

3. Include All Viewpoints

The concept of planetary health is envisioned to be inclusive of all geographies and perspectives. To fulfill this goal and become more credible and relevant to decision makers, the planetary health community must diversify from its Western, academic, and health roots.

Stronger representation is needed from people and organizations outside of the United States and the United Kingdom, especially from countries in the Global South that disproportionately bear the brunt of health and environmental challenges. A better balance of perspectives will improve collaboration and learnings within the community, and help planetary health move from concept to action in a way that is meaningful and useful to decision makers at the global and national levels.

The planetary health community must also expand beyond academia and science to better integrate not only public- and private-sector decision makers, but also impact-focused practitioners and civil society. To make real inroads with these groups, the planetary health community should be mindful of engaging both from the top down and the bottom up. They can accomplish this in a variety of ways, such as continuing to interact individually with people from outside the usual circles, ensuring a diverse set of speakers at events and forums, and including new voices on advisory councils or other influential bodies.

Additionally, the planetary health community must create ways to attract new people to the table from the environment, animal health, and development sectors to ensure the concept is not perceived as “owned” by one sector over another. Incorporating an even broader range of disciplines, including behavioral science, anthropology, economics, and computer science, will further help the concept of planetary health reach its full potential.

Cross-sector, multidisciplinary integration is inherently difficult; but, without active diversification across geographies, disciplines, and sectors, there is a risk of creating an insular community that stagnates quickly instead of expanding and reaching decision makers.

4. Embrace Change

The concept of planetary health embodies a sense of urgency to act, which comes at a time when there are some entrenched and growing pockets of skepticism in the Western world toward science and globalization. This skepticism poses a threat to advancing the concept of planetary health. However, the community should seize these threats as opportunities to rally new people from all disciplines and sectors to the cause and share messages of hope for the future.

Current events and crises are often the entry points to impart knowledge and implement new ideas and approaches. For example, the groundswell of resistance in the United States to the Trump Administration has revitalized many social and environmental issues, and could potentially encourage more grassroots engagement on planetary health.

To leverage these opportunities, individuals in the community should be ready and willing to share their perspective and insight. These efforts should reach beyond academic levels toward broader calls to action around the need for systems change, new mindsets, behavior change, and collaboration.

For example, the recent, severe natural disasters – landslides in Sierra Leone, flooding from monsoon rains in South Asia, wildfires in the Western parts of Canada and the United States, and Hurricanes Harvey and Irma – are opportunities to inject planetary health into conversations with public- and private-sector decision makers, and make the case for uptake of the concept. There may be opportunities to engage in policy discussions after the emergency response ends and government leaders have turned toward finding ways to better prepare for natural disasters and protect their citizens in the future.

The pathway to change is long and arduous, so the planetary health community should seize every opportunity to reach influential decision makers to advance the concept and help balance the health of humans and the environment.

5. Balance Preparation & Action

Honing the concept of planetary health, while strengthening and expanding the existing community, is essential; but taking the time to lay this groundwork can feel at odds with the need for urgent action to preserve human health and our planet.

Therefore, it is important for the planetary health community to strike the right balance between an inward focus, where there is the risk of becoming mired in nomenclature and semantics, and an outward focus, where there is the risk of leapfrogging the strategic foundation that will enable and guide the transition from concept to action.

Since making tangible progress on planetary health will require deep commitment over many years, the community should continue to err on the side of external action. For example, resources are already being developed to raise broader awareness of the concept of planetary health and engage new people. These include the development of core planetary health messages,¹⁰ a review of global policy frameworks relevant to planetary health,¹¹ and ongoing efforts to develop a shared consensus statement on planetary health.

Intentionally creating a culture of openness to new ideas, perspectives, and dialogue that reaches additional people will help expand and diversify the existing planetary health community and build more momentum around the concept. In this way, it will most effectively develop and grow, and has the best chance to reach and influence decision makers worldwide.

¹⁰ See *Panorama Perspectives: Conversations on Planetary Health Report I*

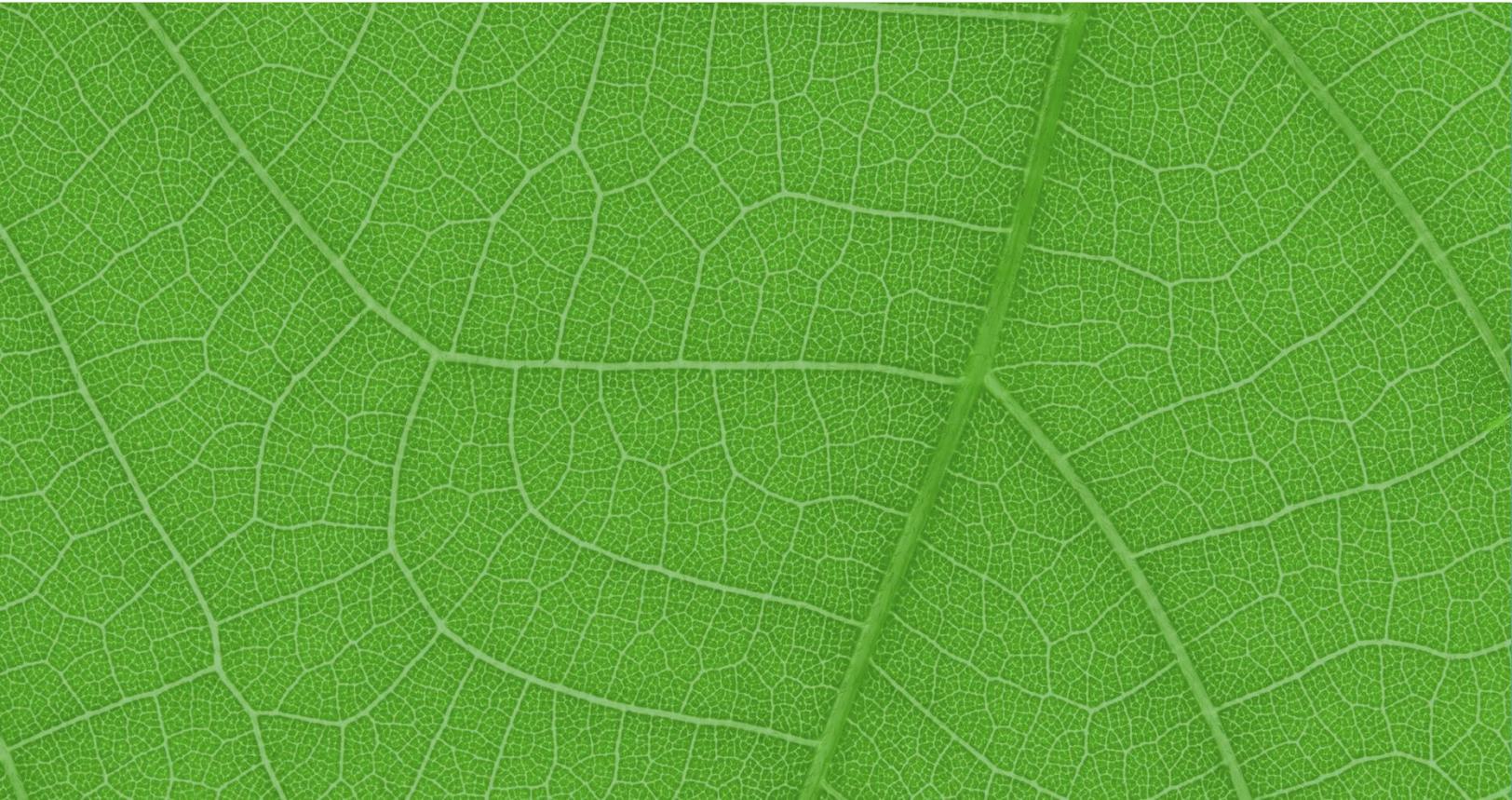
¹¹ See *Panorama Perspectives: Conversations on Planetary Health Report III*

Conclusion

In today's world, there is growing recognition of the need for holistic approaches to solve complex and interrelated global issues. The concept of planetary health has the potential to develop into a tangible roadmap for action, leading to sustained human health and preservation of the Earth. Taking advantage of near-term opportunities and addressing key challenges to increase engagement with decision makers is a critical part of this process.

To achieve this, the planetary health community should rise above the day-to-day and focus on long-term success by implementing these five key steps. By honing the concept, building the evidence base, welcoming all ideas and perspectives, embracing change, and balancing preparation and action, the concept of planetary health can fulfill its potential and create tangible, positive change in the world.

Appendix



Appendix I: Organizations that Participated in Planetary Health Discussions

African Population Health Research Centre
American Geophysical Union
Columbia University
Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
Consortium of Universities for Global Health
Convention on Biological Diversity
Cornell University
EcoHealth Alliance
Future Earth
Global Health Corps
Harvard University
KYNE
Lampert-Byrd Foundation
Landesa
Ocean Conservancy
One Health Commission
PATH
Planet
Planetary Health Alliance
The Lancet
The Lancet Planetary Health
The Nature Conservancy
The Prince of Wales' International Sustainability Unit
The Rockefeller Foundation
Tsinghua University
United Nations Environment
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
University of California
University of Edinburgh
University of Oxford
University of Sydney
University of Washington
Washington Global Health Alliance
Washington State University
Wellcome Trust
World Bank Group
World Federation of Academic Institutions for Global Health
World Health Organization



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