

# Toward Health-Environment Policy: Beyond the Rome Declaration

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## Highlights

- Critical commentary of the 2021 Global Health Summit's Rome Declaration provided.
- Health-environment framework proposed placing human and natural well-being at its core.
- A paradigm shift from 'cost-benefit' to 'co-benefits' is called for.
- Six (6) key pathways proposed for societal transition towards sustainability.

## Abstract

*We offer here a brief commentary of the Rome Declaration (May 21, 2021) in light of a recent Report on the Health-Environment Nexus released by the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEALL). Although the Rome Declaration promotes at the highest level a new health philosophy, we argue this vision is still incomplete as it fails to include a constructive criticism of current growth-driven economic systems. To add to the Declaration's principles, we offer a holistic health-environment framework and six (6) key pathways to place human and natural well-being – rather than continuous growth in production and consumption – at the heart of our development model. We call for the urgent need to recognize the health-environment nexus as the core of planetary health and thus evolve – in our societal transition towards sustainability – from usual cost-benefit analyses to the recognition of 'co-benefits' among health, the environment, and the economy.*

On May 21<sup>st</sup> 2021, Heads of State and Government convened at the “Global Health Summit” co-organized by the Italian Presidency of the G20 and the European Commission and signed the “Rome Declaration”, which consists in an opening statement and 16 principles aimed at orientating “current and future action for global health to support the financing, building, and sustaining of effective health system capabilities and capacities and Universal Health Coverage to improve preparedness, early warning of, prevention, detection, coordinated response, and resilience to, and recovery from, the current pandemic and future potential public health emergencies.” We offer here a brief commentary of the Rome Declaration in light

of a recent Report on the Health-Environment Nexus (Laurent et al., 2021) written within and for the Well-being Economy Alliance (WeALL).

The Rome Declaration appears to us as an important and significant document because it promotes at the highest level a new health philosophy that updates both the 1946 WHO Constitution and the 1986 Ottawa Charter with 21<sup>st</sup> century aspirations. This new philosophy can be described as a holistic approach to health, where health is embedded in social and natural systems and especially connected to environmental degradation and social inequality.

Yet, in our view, the above holistic vision is incomplete as it does not include a constructive criticism of current growth-driven economic systems: indeed, while the damaging consequences of such systems are highlighted in the Rome Declaration, their dysfunctional roots are not. The emphasis put on the need for preparedness to future global pandemics, also highlighted at the seventy-fourth World Health Assembly (24 May - 1 June 2021), should have thus been accompanied by an equally strong emphasis on the need to prevent global pandemics in the first place, which in our view entails a rethinking of economic means and finalities, including a fundamentally different relationship between human habitat and natural ecosystems.

It is neither efficient nor sustainable or just to deal with the symptoms rather than cause, for instance by trying to fix or limit the environmental and social damages of the relentless pursuit of economic growth after they have occurred. In this respect, while we welcome the fact that the Rome Declaration makes explicit reference to the SDGs, we consider such reference incomplete: the Declaration recognizes that the pandemic has had a negative impact on our societal capacity to deliver on the SDGs, yet it fails to mention (or perhaps to recognize) that progress on achieving the SDGs – as well as the Paris Agreement (Rogelj et al., 2016) or the Aichi Targets (Tittensor et al., 2014) for that matter – was slow long before the pandemic (Wackernagel et al., 2017; UN, 2019) mostly due to the incompatibility between our economic goals and the biophysical sphere all living beings operate.

The very simple fact that we cannot have an infinite growth on a finite planet, one in which scientists say key boundaries and thresholds have already been passed (Steffen et al., 2015) and tipping points have been already approached possibly destabilizing the stability of the Earth System (Steffen et al., 2018), is far from recognized and factored in our decision making and governance processes. Unfortunately, the Rome Declaration is no exception. Going beyond the Rome Declaration also means going beyond the key notions of “environmental health” and “health co-benefits” put forth in the 2019 WHO Global Strategy on Health, Environment and Climate Change. The need to consider - and thus deal with - climate, biodiversity and human society as coupled systems is increasingly perceived of essence for successful policy interventions, as key is the promotion of social tipping interventions to modify the ways society and nature interact (Pörtner et al., 2021).

Against this backdrop, we believe that ex-post compensation should be complemented by a fundamental shift ex-ante, putting the Health-Environment Nexus at the very core of our social and economic goals. In our view, this would be possible if human and natural well-being was placed at the heart of our development model, rather than continuous growth in production and consumption (Fioramonti 2017; Laurent, 2021). Common to many cultures and traditions globally, the concept of well-being is perfectly

suites to reveal the inherent interconnectedness between psychological, physical, social and natural health, especially after the Covid pandemic, which has highlighted the profound dependence of our personal wellness on the quality of social relations and ecosystems.

Thus, we propose to widen the lens of our societal approach to society-nature interactions by designing a *Health-Environment Policy* capable of yielding co-benefits for health, the environment, and the economy to avoid illusory trade-offs, such as putting the economy against the environment or saving lives vs. saving the economy. The real trade-off we face is choosing between the joint preservation of these three valuable dimensions of human existence (environment, health, and economy) or all three degrading into irreparable loss. Our approach to Health-Environment Policy relies on a holistic rather than separatist approach to human prosperity on Earth, moving from a cost-benefit approach in which everything is monetized (and thus devalued) to fit with the “economy”, to a co-beneficial approach in which ecosystems and social systems are treated as interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

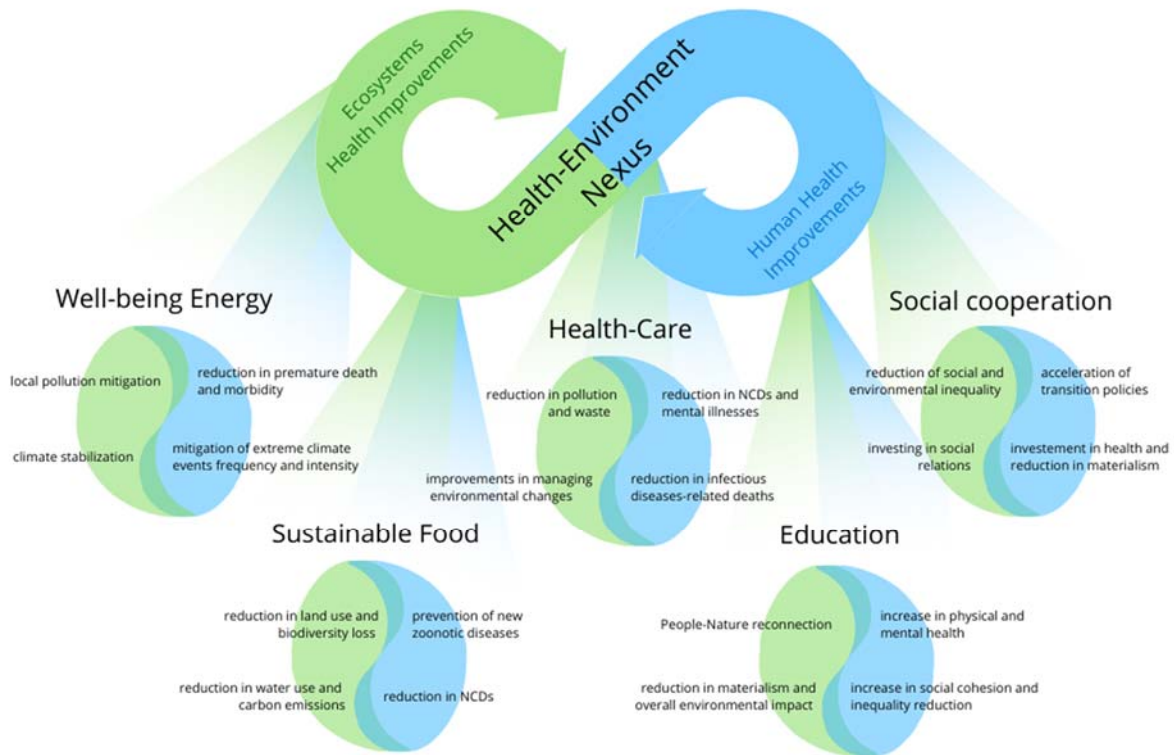


Figure 1: the health-environment nexus for a new approach to public policy. The interconnections of our social systems and natural systems are here represented as a ‘social-ecological feedback loop’, which reproduces the mathematical symbol of infinity, but also evokes a Möbius strip, a figure that has inspired the design of the recycling logo and by extension, evokes the circular economy.

Under the proposed approach, health and environment are inextricably linked in a “nexus”, which we represent in the form of a feedback loop (Figure 1): preserving life on Earth means preserving human life on Earth. Five key policy areas connecting ecosystems to social systems are here identified, ranging from the natural foundations of our well-being (Food, Energy, Health) to the key pillars of our social systems (Education and Social Cooperation). A co-beneficial approach can be used to improve social and ecological synergies within these five key areas, in which co-benefits are both substantial and within reach (Laurent et al. 2021). To recognize and act upon the fruitful interdependencies among health, the environment and the economy, we propose the following 6 key pathways:

1. Recognize the Health-Environment Nexus as the core of planetary health and evolve from cost-benefit analysis to recognition of ‘co-benefits’.
2. Prioritize prevention and mitigation within and outside the healthcare system – through improving the health literacy of citizens – positively affecting health, environment and the economy by reducing the number of ill people, environmental damage and public spending.
3. Rethink food production and consumption by promoting agroforestry practices and healthier dietary patterns associated with both lower environmental impacts and lower costs for national healthcare systems.
4. Shift towards strategies of global and national energy transition, linking health, employment, sustainability and safety co-benefits, as they provide compelling and robust evidence of short- and long-term gains.
5. Invest in social co-operation as the main source of human prosperity and the mean to shared human and planetary wellbeing, with many co-benefits for both people and planet.
6. Rethink education for the short- and long-term health of communities, by focusing on the attainment of critical thinking (rather than on the accumulation of knowledge) to be achieved via experiential learning, in connection with and learning from nature.

We acknowledge that these principles do not cover all the areas where health, the environment and the economy intertwine. They do however provide a good foundation upon which to build policies that aim for healthy people on a healthy planet. The health and environmental crises of our time are not inevitable, but rather a by-product of our contemporary economic systems, which fortunately is something we can change. The fact that we chose to do it will be key to translate the principles of the Rome Declaration into actual policy.

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