Report by EU advisor: Pandemic signals breaching of planetary 'tipping point' by global economy

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A new study by a top advisor to an EU-backed scientific research programme concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic is a symptom of global industrial civilisation's breach of key planetary boundaries, which are critical to maintaining a safe operating space for human survival on the planet.

The global economy, the study warns, has now entered a volatile new phase of chronic instability which can only be resolved through a transition to a 'lifeboat economy'. This must involve debt-free financing for the renewable energy transition, nationalisation and winding down of fossil fuel industries, as well as ecological restoration for clean manufacturing and agriculture.

But most of all, we have to roll back the dangerous trajectory of deforestation through a radically different approach to commodities like palm oil to transition to sustainable production. That requires a new global pact on deforestation premised on ensuring that major commodities from beef to soy are produced within planetary boundaries based on consistent global standards.

The new report 'Deforestation and the Risk of Collapse: Reframing COVID-19 as a Planetary Boundary Effect', is published in the journal *System Change* by the Schumacher Institute for Sustainable Systems, an independent think tank in the UK which has led the European Commission's Converge research programme.

Report author Dr Nafeez Ahmed, Research Fellow at the Schumacher Institute, said: "The COVID-19 pandemic is not just a pandemic. When looked at in the context of a wide-range of scientific data about the escalating human footprint on the planet, the pandemic represents the passing of a major civilizational tipping-point into a dangerous new era of converging ecological emergencies. The COVID-19 crisis is an urgent early warning signal for how industrial civilization is rapidly eroding the very conditions of its own existence."

Dr Nafeez Ahmed sits on the Board of Stakeholders of the European Commission's Horizon 2020-funded MEDEAS research programme, 'Guiding European Policy toward a low-carbon economy.' A world-renowned systems theorist and environment journalist, Dr Ahmed is Executive Director of the System Shift Lab, a transdisciplinary network of natural and social scientists working on strategies for system change, and is a Commissioner for Cambridge University Press' Sustainability Commission on Scaling Sustainable Behaviour Change.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed structural fragilities and interdependencies across global systems, the new report says. But at the heart of these fragilities is the increasing dependence of industrial consumption on processes that are accelerating deforestation. That requires both enforcing sustainable practices by producers in the South while curtailing demand in the North.

The probability of a global pandemic was dramatically increased by relentless and unregulated industrial expansion, which has destabilized ecosystems critical for planetary life-support. The same processes are driving other ecological crises which threaten to permanently undermine the health of the global economy.

The report concludes that without a transition to a 'lifeboat economy' where markets are "recalibrated" to protect public health and natural systems, humanity faces a heightening risk of cascading breakdowns across interconnected social, economic and political systems.

According to Dr Ahmed:

"Policymakers need to pay attention to the fact that the public health crisis is a symptom of a deeper crisis: a civilization degrading the very conditions of its own existence. There is now a clear body of scientific data suggesting that industrial civilization has crossed a major tipping point by simultaneously driving interlinked crises across climate change; our fossil fuel dependent energy system; industrial agriculture; the rate of species extinction; and deforestation. The COVID-19 pandemic is an early symptom of these increasing dangers we face. The synchronicity between all these crises threatens to overwhelm our institutional capacity to respond. Unless we draw back our economies to operate within planetary boundaries, we will face a future of deepening economic crisis and social upheaval." [END]

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NOTES FOR EDITORS

The new report will be launched on 12th November 4-6pm UK GMT at an exclusive online event hosted by The Schumacher Institute where Dr Ahmed will explain his findings. Journalists can register for the event here.

The report's Executive Summary & Policy Recommendations can be downloaded here, and the full report is available here.

For any further information or to arrange an interview with Dr Nafeez Ahmed please email iprdoffice@gmail.com or call +44(0)7824 441044.

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