

A photograph of a brown monkey perched on a metal wire fence, eating a snack from a blue and yellow packet labeled '7 DAYS'. In the background, a woman with reddish hair, wearing a white t-shirt with green text, is holding a pink smartphone and taking a photo of the monkey. The scene is outdoors, with other people and a red and white patterned cloth visible in the background.

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– Jairam RAMESH, former Minister of Environment of India

Image Source: The Hindu sanctuary dedicated to Ramayana at the Batu Caves in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Photography by Nicolas J.A. Buchoud, 2018, all rights reserved ©.



Jairam RAMESH
former minister of
environment of India

A note on health and the future of sustainability

The issue of sustainability should be understood through the notion of planetary boundaries, which was developed by scientists at the Stockholm Resilience Centre. These dimensions are known as critical for humanity's survival, and humankind must remain below the implications caused by them. They are: climate change, ocean acidification, ozone depletion, the phosphorus cycle, freshwater use, deforestation and land use changes, biodiversity loss, aerosols and particulate matter pollution in the atmosphere, chemical pollution and contamination.

In the case of some of these planetary boundaries, such as climate change, deforestation land degradation and biodiversity loss, we have already crossed the tipping point. On the contrary, it seemed that ozone depletion had been successfully tackled by the 1985 Montreal Protocol, one of the rare success stories on the planetary boundary issue. And yet, it appeared that the Hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) used

as substitutes to the Chlorofluorocarbons that harmed the ozone layer are much larger GHG emitters. This led to the adoption of the Kigali modifications to the Montreal Protocol in 2016, meant to phase out HFCs after CFCs. What was once a solution turned out to be a problem at a later point in time, exemplifying what we are collectively confronted with yet at a more massive scale and across many problems at a time.

As the very components of sustainability are bound to change along growingly intertwined challenges, the notion that sustainability is something for future generations is misleading. Sustainability is about making compromises about consumptions patterns and standards of living now, for future generations to be able to meet their consumption needs.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also illustrated dramatically how ecological perspectives on sustainability need to be complemented by public health. Building political alliances and coalitions, raising interest from the general public, should go through health issues, beyond health emergency. It's a reflection of ecological imbalance and the environmental crisis we've been facing for decades, as represented in the way that the planetary boundaries have been crossed. So it is time for us, environmental and sustainability organizations, to change our focus from environmental and ecological elements to public health dimensions. This calls for greater collaboration among public health pro-

fessionals, epidemiologists, environmentalists, ecologists, and sociologists. We should all approach them as fundamental issues affecting public health now, not in the future. Because the one issue that governments will focus on, regardless of political belief systems, is how these environmental changes are affecting their population's health.

We are at a critical moment. We recognise that planetary boundaries have been crossed; these planetary boundaries require continuous measurement at the international, regional, and national levels to assess the impact of these planetary boundaries and the effects they have on local populations, particularly in terms of public health.