

PANDASIA PRESS RELEASE

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How can prevention be a key to avert new pandemics?

The scientific community agrees that the world will face new pandemics that are potentially even more damaging than COVID-19. The emerging infectious diseases known as zoonoses, which are caused by viruses, parasites, and bacteria that are transmitted between animals and humans, pose an increasing threat to global health. In view of climate change and the rapid loss of biodiversity, the risk of another pandemic cannot be ruled out.

"The current focus in combating pandemics is on preparedness, response, and containment of infections. However, prevention at the source is underprioritized and underdeveloped. We need innovative upstream measures in the form of One Health surveillance and interventions," said Dr. Hans Overgaard, lead researcher of the project from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, during the Norwegian Life Science 2024 conference held in Oslo in February.

The PANDASIA project puts a spotlight on how countries should prepare for future pandemics. The PANDASIA project aims to find out when and under what circumstances viruses are transmitted from wild animals to humans. This involves knowledge about human and animal behaviors that lead to increased and sustained human-animal contact at interfaces. To understand this complex process, the PANDASIA consortium collaborates with local stakeholders, community members, and other health professionals in Thailand. "Utilizing the One Health approach, we recognize the connections between the health of humans, animals, and the environment and their impact on overall health. This includes bringing together our team of researchers from several disciplines as a way to find answers to difficult and important questions about spillover processes. PANDASIA is on the right track." Dr. Overgaard further added.

There is "a need to optimize our understanding of spillover risk in Southeast Asia. We are trying to predict when, where, and why, among the millions of wildlife viruses, some spill over, and are sufficiently virulent for onward transmission.

We are studying very complex and fascinating relationships that really require transdisciplinary teamwork,” said Dr. Kyrre Kausrud from the Norwegian Veterinary Institute.

The European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) are jointly funding PANDASIA from 2023, a transdisciplinary scientific project looking into the causes of the pandemic risk in Thailand. Implemented through several component work packages (WPs), the project aims to improve the health literacy of different target groups and communities to prevent the emergence or spillover that contributes to new pandemics. The results of this project will inform the Southeast Asian region on how to avert pandemics.

Southeast Asia (SEA) is considered a biodiversity hotspot where contact between humans and animals poses increased risks for spillover processes in the region. In Thailand, the PANDASIA project operates in selected rural areas with potential risk for new zoonoses due to their location and population structure. The knowledge and habits of rural communities in Chanthaburi and Chiang Rai provinces are being studied with regard to their practices in animal husbandry, hunting, and the preparation of wild animal meat. This is important to identify potentially risky and preventive behaviors for zoonoses.

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