The One-Health, a disciplinary system which is intended to address major healthcare governance of humans, animals and the environment is critical for Africa to prevent zoonotic diseases commonly known to be transmitted from animals to people, a senior Zambian scientist said in an interview.

“We need to find a mechanism to convene all sectors and put the issue (One health) in their faces (…) the ecosystems is interlinked,” said Prof Roma Chilengi, Director General of Zambia National Public Health Institute.

Currently, reasearchers say African countries are locked in an epidemiological transition from communicable diseases to an increasing non-communicable disease burden. “The shift of strategy is to fill the gaps in in developing animal and environmental surveillance systems,” Prof. Chilengi said.

Latest estimates by scientists show that Climate change will have an impact on common neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) such as leishmaniasis as its distribution is changing due to increased geographical range especially in east Africa where the rate of infection is predicted to increase by 20% over the next 20–50 years due to climate change.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there has been a 63% increase in the number of zoonotic outbreaks in the region in the decade from 2012-2022 compared to 2001-2011.

While these numbers have increased over the past two decades, estimates show there was a particular spike in 2019 and 2020 when zoonotic pathogens represented around 50% of public health events. Ebola Virus Disease and other viral hemorrhagic fevers constitute nearly 70% of these outbreaks; with dengue fever, anthrax, plague, monkeypox and a range of other diseases making up the remaining 30%.

The increase in zoonotic cases, according to researchers may be due to several reasons especially because Africa has the world’s fastest-growing population and there is a growing demand for food derived from animals including meat, poultry, eggs, and milk. The population growth is also leading to rising urbanization and encroachment on the habitats of wildlife. Road, rail, boat and air links are also improving across Africa increasing the risk of zoonotic disease outbreaks spreading from remote areas where there are few inhabitants to large urban areas, it said.

According to Prof. Chilenge, there is a pressing need to have a sober conversation in Africa and take resposibility of our environment and our people.

“The impacts climate change are hitting us and that we are having direct impact on our health systems,” he said.

While it is still challenging for researchers to identify environmental, socioeconomic, and cultural factors that boost the emergence and transmission of epidemic-prone diseases, the Zambian researcher emphasizes the need to take care of everything: Animal, plants and human being.

“Preventing and controling zoonotic diseases such as Ebola, monkeypox and even other coronaviruses remains crucial”