THE ONGOING COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented change for global society. As we witnessed throughout 2020, the pandemic brutally exposed gaps and frailties in the global health system. For instance, the disruption of supply chains and sudden spike in coronavirus cases during the initial stages of the crisis led to a scarcity of essential medical equipment such as ventilators and medical-grade oxygen. Overstretched bed capacity and staff also meant that many COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients were not getting the treatments they needed.

While the world spends approximately US$7.5 trillion each year on health, we have yet to plug large public health gaps in rural and conflict-stricken areas. Lack of access to healthcare services and poor infrastructure are major issues that vulnerable populations living in these areas face. A World Health Organisation report indicates that based on current trends, universal health coverage will still not be achievable by 2030. If anything, this pandemic has provided a clarion call for significant improvements in the way societies and governments approach public health. Current policies and practices need to be relooked, and if necessary, revamped.

This global health crisis calls attention to the need for clearer division of labour and well-defined responsibilities during pandemic responses. This is evident when we look at the experiences of some Southeast Asian states such as Singapore, Vietnam and Thailand which have had relatively more...
success in containing the virus as compared to many other countries. The governments from these countries were quick to implement strict containment measures and enforce the mandatory use of masks. They also carried out rigorous contact tracing and quarantine measures to prevent the spread of the virus within their borders. While there is no perfect system of governance, it cannot be denied that a swift and decisive response is needed in the event of any disease outbreak.

The building up of resilient health systems is essential not just for coping with the current coronavirus pandemic; it also acts as a bulwark against other types of diseases that people face daily. There is a need to invest in strong primary health care, with increased emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention. While curative care should not be neglected, preventive-centred initiatives and systems can help to increase the efficiency of health spending by targeting the root causes of disease outbreaks.

Increased engagement with new or emerging technologies can also improve the robustness of healthcare systems. For instance, the use of telemedicine could be a way to link patients with medical personnel without the need for travel or physical contact. While this is not a new practice in the healthcare industry, it has gained more attention in recent times due to social distancing measures arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. It allows for more access and helps to amplify the capacity of healthcare professionals. 2020 has been a huge training ground for people in the use of digital technology; the future of healthcare seems to be headed in this direction as well.

It is important to note that spending on improving healthcare infrastructure alone will not be sufficient. Resources also need to be allocated to public initiatives, which can help to raise public awareness of infectious disease outbreaks. This can include educating the public on good hygiene practices, the need for social distancing during an outbreak, as well as how to avoid succumbing to pandemic misinformation. Particularly with the rollout of the vaccine, the need to curb misinformation becomes even more pressing. Governments should provide citizens with accurate updates from trusted sources in a timely and transparent manner. This will go a long way in convincing the public of both the efficacy and safety of the vaccine.

The sheer scale and impact of COVID-19 might be the impetus needed to spur reform in the healthcare sector and push the world towards achieving its goal of universal health coverage. As we attempt to navigate this ‘new’ world, the need to innovate and adapt takes on paramount significance.

Suggested Readings

Battling marine plastic waste: Nuclear technology’s role
Marine plastic pollution has worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic. Nuclear technology provides a sustainable and scientific approach to tackling this environmental problem. Can it help Southeast Asian countries battle plastic pollution?
Julius Cesar Trajano
RSIS Commentaries
3 February 2021

Climate change may have had 'key role' in Covid-19 pandemic: Study
The virus is thought to have originated in bats in Southeast Asia. The changing climate and habitat destruction in Asia had driven virus-carrying species into ever closer contact with human populations.
AFP
The Straits Times
5 February 2021

Opening of 4th desalination plant a boost to water security
Singapore took another step towards boosting its water security in the face of climate change by opening its fourth desalination plant - the only one capable of treating sea and reservoir water.
Audrey Tan and Ng Keng Gene
The Straits Times
5 February 2021

Paris Agreement emission cuts must nearly double to slow climate change, new research shows
Nations need to increase the average rate of decline in planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions from 1% to 1.8% per year to meet the Paris climate agreement limit.
Gina Heeb
Forbes
9 February 2021

Singapore unveils Green Plan 2030, outlines green targets for next 10 years
It is a “whole-of-nation movement” to advance the national agenda on sustainable development. New car registrations are required to be cleaner-energy models from 2030.
Ang Hwee Min and Matthew Mohan
Channel News Asia
10 February 2021

Climate change: China’s energy regulator proposes target of 40 per cent renewables by 2030
This is up from 28.2 per cent last year. The National Energy Administration also called for the share of power generated from non-hydro renewable sources to be raised to 25.9 per cent by 2030 – from 10.8 per cent last year.
Echo Xie
South China Morning Post
10 February 2021

Asian water development outlook 2020
Asian Water Development Outlook (AWDO) 2020 reveals how national water security has been improving across Asia and the Pacific since water security was first quantified in AWDO 2013
Asian Development Bank
Manila: ADB
2020

Adaptation gap report 2020
While nations have advanced in planning, huge gaps remain in finance for developing countries and bringing adaptation projects to the stage where they bring real protection against climate impacts. Nature-based solutions must become a priority.
United Nations Environment Programme
Nairobi: UNEP
2021

Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development 2021
The Forum provides a regional perspective on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda by identifying regional trends as well as consolidating and sharing best practices and lessons learned.
Bangkok, Thailand
23-26 March 2021

International Mother Earth Day
The Mother Earth Day, coinciding with the Super Year of Biodiversity, is focused on its role as an indicator of the Earth’s health.
Worldwide
22 April 2021

Background Image: Free Vectors via Freepik.
Governments across Southeast Asia accelerate renewable energy investment to revive the pandemic-hit economies

To improve the renewable energy capacity and revive the pandemic-hit economies, ASEAN governments have laid out an aspiration-al five-year sustainability plan under the second phase of ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation (APAEC) 2021-2025.

Power Technology
21 January 2021

PHL ready for shift to clean-energy regime—DOE

An official of the Department of Energy claimed that they are strongly pushing for the development of renewable energy (RE) sources and low- and no-carbon sources like natural gas, hydrogen and nuclear to create a cleaner, more sustainable future for the Philippines.

Lorenz Marasigan
Business Mirror
22 January 2021

Asia’s record gas prices underline the need to make its markets more resilient

While milder weather will alleviate the immediate pressure on Asian gas markets, policy reforms are needed to improve market resilience and flexibility, especially given the role of gas in balancing the growing share of variable renewable energy sources.

Jean-Baptiste Dubreuil and Gergely Molnar
International Energy Agency
25 January 2021

Villages in Japan are competing to become a nuclear waste site

Two fishing villages in Hokkaido are vying to host the final storage facility for more than 19,000 tonnes of high-level nuclear waste that have accumulated since Japan started generating nuclear power in 1966. They hope that the expected revenue from hosting the facility can reverse their economic decline.

Bloomberg
The Straits Times
3 February 2021

World’s largest battery to be built in Australia coal-mining hub

Australia is planning another giant grid-scale battery to store energy for the grid as it raises its share of renewable power. Companies aim to build bigger batteries to maximise Australia’s vast potential for wind and solar power generation.

Bloomberg
The Straits Times
5 February 2021

China’s carbon trading market hobbled by unanswered questions

China has, for the first time, required local firms to shoulder the responsibility for mitigating the country’s greenhouse gas emissions by buying and selling emission quotas on a unified national carbon market.

Du Caicai and Chen Xuewan
The Straits Times
8 February 2021

IAEA Bulletin: 10 years of Peaceful Uses Initiative

This IAEA Bulletin celebrates the 10th anniversary of the Peaceful Uses Initiative. It highlights the peaceful applications of nuclear energy and the role of nuclear technology in helping countries achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) targets.

International Atomic Energy Agency
Vol. 61, No. 4
2020

Small modular reactors and advanced reactor security: Regulatory perspectives on integrating physical and cyber security by design to protect against malicious acts and evolving threats

How can future nuclear technologies and Small Modular Reactors deter and prevent malicious actors from attempting to steal or sabotage nuclear materials and facilities? This paper presents the benefits of Integrating Security by Design into a regulatory framework.

Raphael Duguay
International Journal of Nuclear Security
Vol. 7, No.1
2020

SIEW Energy Insights Webinar - Asia's Role in the Energy Transition

This webinar featured a panel of industry experts who discussed Asia’s role in the clean energy transition. This webinar was hosted in partnership with the Atlantic Council Global Energy Forum and supported by the British Chamber of Commerce in Singapore.

Recorded Webinar
22 January 2021

2nd Cleaner Energy Future Initiative for ASEAN (CEFIA) Forum- ASEAN Centre for Energy Webinar

At the 2nd CEFIA Forum, ASEAN+3 government officials, international organisations, universities, and private companies gathered online to share progress on activities and discuss future activities aimed at energy transition and the realisation of a low-carbon society in the ASEAN region.

Recorded Webinar
2 February 2021

Background Image: Courtesy of Flickr account of Consumer Energy Alliance and used under a creative commons license.
Global food fraud rising as result of pandemic, report finds
A 37% rise in global food fraud cases has been recorded, including a 30% rise in adulteration and a 47% rise in counterfeits. Vigilance and law enforcement are critical in dismantling the criminal networks behind food fraud.
George Nott
The Grocer
28 January 2021

Prevent the next food crisis now
Stretched government budgets in battling the COVID-19 pandemic are creating the potential for a food crisis through the inability to support domestic food consumption. Approaches are needed to address short-term as well as longer-term causes of food insecurity.
Mark Lowcock and Axel Van Trotsenburg
The World Bank Blogs
2 February 2021

Cash injection urged to help poor fight COVID-19 during vaccine wait
A steep rise in COVID-19-induced food insecurity has been reported among children, with potential lasting impact on their health, education and future earnings. Amid fears that poorer countries may not get vaccines until 2024, cash transfers are urgently needed.
Emma Batha
ABS CBN News
7 February 2021

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food fraud vulnerability in food supply networks
According to the Routine Activities Theory, disturbance in routine practices affect crime and criminal behaviour. This study finds this relevant to fraud in the food sector, which makes pre-COVID control measures inadequate.
Saskia M. van Ruth
Wageningen Food Safety Research Report No. 2020.017
2020

Poverty, food insecurity, and social protection during COVID-19 in Myanmar: Combined evidence from a household telephone survey and micro-simulations
This study assesses the welfare impacts of COVID-19 on households in Myanmar, providing insights on both the on-the-ground impacts of COVID-19 in recent months and the potential poverty reduction impacts of social protection measures in 2021.
Derek D. Headey et al.
Myanmar SSP Policy Note 35, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)
2020

EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

RECOVR Webinar Series | Using Evidence to Inform Social Policy in the Time of COVID-19: RECOVR Survey Results from the Philippines
This webinar presented shared findings from a survey in the Philippines on how policymakers are using evidence-based policy making to adapt their responses to changing demands and to plan for long-term strategies.
Recorded Webinar
1 September 2020

Advancing Equitable Livelihoods in Food Systems
The United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs’ Global Policy Dialogue highlighted agricultural and non-agricultural technologies or tools to ensure sustainable productivity, nutrition and livelihoods in rural settings.
Recorded Webinar
16 December 2020

Committee on World Food Security kicks off calling for comprehensive transformation of agri-food systems
The 47th Session of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) called for joint action towards a comprehensive transformation of global agri-food systems, in inclusivity, resilience and sustainability, in the fight against all forms of malnutrition.
Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations
8 February 2021

Covid-19-induced crises of hunger and poverty require bold, effective international response
Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) has called on the international community, including governments and multilateral organizations, to take action to mitigate the crises of hunger and poverty, through cash transfers and aid in recovery from the crisis.
Poverty Action Lab
8 February 2021

How commodity exchange may ensure food security, jobs
Commodity food exchanges have the potential to address post-harvest wastage and marketing challenges. These close the gap for manufacturers/processors in-between production and off-seasons, thus contributing to employment creation too.
Femi Ibirogba
The Guardian
8 February 2021
Covid-19: Study showing Oxford vaccine slows virus spread 'superb' - Hancock
Results that show the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine might reduce the spread of coronavirus have been hailed as "absolutely superb" by the UK health secretary.
BBC
3 February 2021

Japan says its world-class health system is buckling under Covid
Coronavirus infections in Japan are at a fraction of major western countries, yet the island nation is signaling increasing concern that its highly rated medical system faces impending collapse.
Bloomberg
The Business Times
9 February 2021

Has the pandemic really caused a 'tsunami' of mental health problems?
Governments can help preserve the population's mental health by protecting people from the economic consequences of the pandemic and by providing practical support to parents of young children.
Richard Bentall
The Guardian
9 February 2021

Smartphones could help manage chronic cardiopulmonary disease, predict next pandemic
Smartphones with sensors and apps could significantly enhance remote monitoring due to their ubiquity, and do not require patients to have additional expensive gadgets.
Emily Henderson
News Medical
10 February 2021

Parkinson’s disease: Scientists take ‘vital step’ towards finding a cure
Scientists have made a ‘vital step’ towards finding a cure for Parkinson’s disease. Their research breaks new ground in understanding the role of a key protein called alpha-synuclein, which is present in the brain and plays a number of important roles.
Ivor Bennett
Sky News
10 February 2021

What the WHO COVID-19 experts learnt in Wuhan
A World Health Organization (WHO) team left China after gaining some new insights into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic that has now killed more than 2.3 million people worldwide, but with the major questions still unanswered.
AP
Channel News Asia
11 February 2021

Intergovernmental engagement on health impacts of climate change
This study aims to examine countries' engagement with the health impacts of climate change in their formal statements to intergovernmental organizations, and the factors driving engagement.
Nihar Dasandi et al.
2021

Government trust, perceptions of COVID-19 and behaviour change: Cohort surveys, Singapore
This study aims to evaluate how public perceptions and trust in government communications affected the adoption of protective behaviour in Singapore during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Vanessa W Lim et al.
2021

COVID-19 Vaccines: Now, Later or Never?
Are COVID-19 vaccines safe? Will there be long-term side effects? What are the differences between the different vaccines? With Singapore’s vaccination programme underway, this webinar discussed the public’s concerns over the safety and potential side effects of the vaccines.
Recorded Webinar
7 January 2021

Reimagining Public Health: Global Leadership Perspectives for a Post-COVID World
The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed our lives and may define a generation. This webinar discussed how best to sustain advances, build durable health infrastructure, and leverage effective public-private partnerships to manage the challenges posed by the pandemic.
Recorded Webinar
4 February 2021
Climate-fueled disasters killed 475,000 people over 20 Years
Nearly a half-million people, mostly from the world’s poorest countries, died over the past two decades from conditions associated with climate disasters, according to new findings from the nonprofit Germanwatch.
Daniel Cusick
Scientific American
27 January 2021

How advertisers defund crisis journalism
Hard news about humanitarian and social issues is being treated as toxic by overzealous ad technology, undermining corporate social responsibility and effectively punishing publishers for reporting on international crises.
Ben Parker
The New Humanitarian
27 January 2021

Re-evaluating the military’s role in disaster response
With the potential constraints on funding leaving governments more inclined to focus on the domestic context, disruptions to defence policy seem unavoidable. For militaries to adapt to the challenges of COVID-19, they must shift their focus to better suit the changing circumstances.
S. Nanthini
The Interpreter
27 January 2021

You can’t talk about disaster risk reduction without talking about inequality
Socio-economic inequality is likely to continue to increase and with it disaster risk for those countries, communities, households and businesses that have only limited opportunities to manage their risks and strengthen their resilience.
Dale Dominy-Howes
The Conversation
1 February 2021

Myanmar’s political crisis could spell humanitarian disaster if aid groups are restricted
Following the political crisis in Myanmar on 1 February, aid organisations are concerned about the impact on the humanitarian situation and relief operations in the country.
Norwegian Refugee Council
4 February 2021

ITU to advance AI capabilities to contend with natural disasters
The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) – the United Nations specialised agency for information and communication technologies – has launched a new Focus Group to contend with the increasing prevalence and severity of natural disasters with the help of artificial intelligence (AI).
International Telecommunication Union
9 February 2021
World migration down 30% due to Covid-19 pandemic: UN
According to the UN report entitled International Migration 2020, global migration has slowed by nearly 30 percent, with around two million fewer people than predicted migrating between 2019 and 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic.
AFP
The Straits Times
16 January 2021

Relocations, reduced services leave Rohingya communities at breaking point in Bangladesh
Already restricted by harsh conditions, the COVID-19 pandemic added even more stress to their life. With life in the camps showing no signs of improving and efforts to relocate some refugees to address the overcrowding, the Rohingya communities in Cox’s Bazaar seem to be reaching a breaking point.
Médecins Sans Frontières
21 January 2021

The pandemic is no excuse to shut the door on refugee resettlement
COVID-19 has increased the vulnerability of refugees as countries use the pandemic as an excuse to reduce the number of refugees allowed to resettle in 2021 – even as refugee needs continue to climb.
Evans Jones and Najeeba Wazefadost
The New Humanitarian
25 January 2021

Migration not seen as solution by those in flood zone
Despite frequent flooding in coastal regions in the Philippines, most residents do not yet consider migration as a short-term solution. Reasons for this lack of permanent migration include a strong sense of place and occupational attachment.
Megan DeMint
Cornell Chronicle
2 February 2021

Migrants play key role in disaster response, IOM explores diaspora’s engagement in humanitarian assistance
Contributions of migrants to their home countries do not just stop at remittances. Highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, diasporas have forged creative, transnational responses to support their communities including providing supplies to hospitals.
International Organization for Migration
5 February 2021

UNHCR and IOM welcome Colombia’s decision to regularize Venezuelan refugees and migrants
Colombia has started an initiative to provide ten-year temporary protection status to Venezuelans in the country. The Temporary Protection Status will also provide access to basic services including the national health system and COVID-19 vaccination plans.
International Organization for Migration and United Nations Refugee Agency
8 February 2021