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## Ocean Health and COVID-19: Environment-Health Nexus



Littered beach, Bali, Indonesia

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IN YEAR TWO of the COVID-19 pandemic, while countries are still responding to or preparing for new waves of cases, efforts to address other global challenges resumed and are moving forward. On June 8, the UN organised a global virtual [celebration](#) for the 13<sup>th</sup> World Oceans Day. This year's theme was "The Ocean: Life and Livelihoods", resonating with the UN's COVID-19 response and recovery plan. The convergence reflects the connection of the two agendas and the need to synergise global action to deal with different challenges.

The global health crisis has prompted extensive reflections on public health and the notion of [planetary health](#) has received increasing public and policy interest. Planetary health essentially refers to an approach to public health that links the health of people with the state of surrounding

natural ecosystems. Evidence of this linkage is plenty. Examples include the correlation between environmental pollution and human health problems as well as the zoonotic origin of coronavirus diseases, such as SARS and MERS. One hypothesis of the origin of COVID-19 is that the virus originated from the nature and transmitted to humans from animals.

As part of the ecosystems, the state of the marine environment has important bearing on human health too. The oceans are crucial for many people's [food security](#), supporting source of nutrition for over three billion people. The quality of fish and seafood concerns food safety.

The inextricable links between human activities and oceans caused serious consequences on the marine environment. [About 40 per cent](#) of the ocean suffers from pollution, depleted fisher-

ies, and loss of coastal habitats. Degradation in the marine environment threatens human health. One example is [Mina-mata](#) disease in Japan, which was caused by consumption of fish and shellfish contaminated with methylmercury.

Action to restore and protect ocean health began to gain momentum globally a few years ago. The UN convened the first Ocean Conference in 2017, during which governments adopted the [declaration](#), "Our Ocean, Our Future: Call for Action". This year marks the beginning of the United Nations [Decade](#) of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030).

Southeast Asia has also seen the same trend, with a particular focus on dealing with marine plastic debris. This region faces a [daunting challenge](#) from marine plastic pollution, with Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand

and Vietnam as among the biggest contributors of marine plastic waste in the world. To combat this growing threat, ASEAN adopted the Bangkok Declaration on Combating Marine Debris in ASEAN Region in June 2019 and launched the [Regional Action Plan](#) (2021-2025) last month.

The COVID-19 pandemic was viewed by some people as a window of opportunity for addressing environmental and climate challenges, including [marine environmental pollution](#). Containment measures such as temporary shutdown of activities and travel restrictions substantially [reduced](#) emissions of various pollutants.

Nevertheless, other forms of pollution have increased as a result of the pandemic response, many of which have [added stresses](#) on the marine environment. Lockdowns resulted in a [surge](#) in plastic packag-

ing, which would most likely end up in the oceans. As most governments prioritise pandemic response over other issues, previous environmental gains could be [reversed](#) during the pandemic, such as campaigns to reduce single-use [plastics](#).

As social and economic activities are gradually getting back to normal in several countries, it is important to make sure that environmental initiatives will resume and stimulus packages take strongly into account the environmental impacts of economic recovery. The COVID-19 pandemic is a powerful reminder to care for the health of our surrounding environment, including the oceans, as it is closely linked to our health.

## Suggested Readings

- Nsikak U. Benson, David E. Bassey, and Thavamani Palanisami, 2021 COVID pollution: impact of COVID-19 pandemic on global plastic waste footprint, *Heliyon*, Vol.7, Iss.2, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e06343>.
- Ankit, Kumar, A., Jain, V. et al., 2021, Environmental impact of COVID-19 pandemic: more negatives than positives, *Environmental Sustainability*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42398-021-00159-9>.
- Nguyen Thi Xuan Son, 2020, Policy on Marine Plastic Waste in Asean and Viet Nam, *Environmental Claims Journal*, Vol. 33, Iss.1, pp.41-53, DOI: 10.1080/10406026.2020.1775347.
- UNCTAD, 2020, COVID-19 offers opportunity to save our ocean, 8 June, <https://unctad.org/news/covid-19-offers-opportunity-save-our-ocean>.

## CLIMATE CHANGE

### NEWS & COMMENTARIES

#### Biden's fossil fuel moves clash with pledges on climate change

Despite President Biden's pledge to aggressively cut the pollution from fossil fuels that is driving climate change, his administration has quietly taken actions this month that will guarantee the drilling and burning of oil and gas for decades to come.

**Lisa Friedman**

**The New York Times**

28 May 2021

#### Lower Mekong Basin project underway to ensure water security

A US\$15 million project to enhance cross-border groundwater management and strengthen water security in the Lower Mekong Basin is being developed by Cambodia and Vietnam.

**Lay Samean**

**Phnom Penh Times**

28 May 2021

#### Filipino scientist takes first ever journey to third deepest ocean trench on Earth, finds plastic

The discovery of plastic in the trench was shocking. The transboundary nature of plastic spread in the oceans is having unknown but profound consequences on marine ecosystems, and in effect, on the very foundations of life on the planet.

**CNA/jb**

**Channel News Asia**

29 May 2021

#### Restoring degrading lands can help us mitigate climate change

One in every five hectares of land is unusable. Restoring just 350 million hectares of the degraded land by 2030 could remove greenhouse gases roughly equal to half the world's annual emissions from the atmosphere.

**Inger Andersen and Ibrahim Thiaw**

**Al Jazeera**

2 June 2021

#### Climate change could ignite a financial crisis, IMF official says

Climate change poses serious risks to the stability of the financial system. It could absolutely ignite a financial crisis as economic and financial risks can amplify one another.

**Matt Egan**

**CNN**

3 June 2021

#### Summit wraps up with Covid, China, climate takeaways: G-7 update

G-7 leaders face calls to spell out how much money they will commit to help developing countries move away from fossil fuels and tackle climate change.

**Bloomberg**

13 June 2021

### SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

#### The burden of heat-related mortality attributable to recent human-induced climate change

About a third of warm-season heat-related deaths can be attributed to anthropogenic climate change and that increased mortality is evident on every continent.

**A.M. Vicedo-Cabrera, et al.**

**Nature Climate Change**

2021

#### State of finance for nature

If the world is to meet the climate change, biodiversity, and land degradation targets, it needs to close a US\$ 4.1 trillion financing gap by 2050. Investments in nature-based solutions must triple by 2030 and increase four-fold by 2050 from the current level.

**UN Environment Programme**

2021

### EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

#### Asia-Pacific Climate Week 2021

The event will focus on partnering for whole-of-society engagement in implementation, managing climate risks, and seizing transformation opportunities. It will include workshops, virtual exhibitions and side events.

**Virtual Event**

6-9 July 2021

#### 14th International Coral Reef Symposium

This symposium will be a key event to develop science-based solutions addressing the present and future challenges of coral reefs, which are globally exposed to unprecedented anthropogenic pressures.

**Virtual Event**

19-23 July 2021

## ENERGY SECURITY

### NEWS AND COMMENTARIES

#### Biden administration eyes cybersecurity funding after hacks

The security of the U.S. energy grid has long been a concern for cybersecurity experts. Regional blackouts in 2003 and 2011 exposed the vulnerability of the power system. Cybersecurity in the energy sector was highlighted in the wake of the attack on Colonial Pipeline Co which shut a critical fuel conduit and triggered panic-buying in some sections of the US East Coast.

**Reuters**

18 May 2021

#### Concerns grow over China nuclear reactors shrouded in mystery

Two reactors being built to generate nuclear power will also produce plutonium. That plutonium could be reprocessed and used as a fuel source for other nuclear reactors. It could also be used to produce nuclear warheads. No one outside Chinese oversight mechanism can confirm if the reactors are solely for peaceful use of nuclear energy.

**Al Jazeera**

19 May 2021

#### Nuclear energy cooperation will power China-Russia partnership: China Daily

For China, the development of nuclear energy is essential to help it fulfil its carbon neutrality goal before 2060. While Russia is steadily moving ahead with plans to expand the role of nuclear energy, including the development of new reactor technologies, it is also keen to export its technology to other countries.

**China Daily**

**The Straits Times**

20 May 2021

#### Bill Gates' next generation nuclear reactor to be built in Wyoming

Small advanced reactors, which are powered different fuels than traditional reactors, are seen as a critical carbon-free technology that can supplement intermittent power sources like wind and solar as states strive to reduce their CO2 emissions.

**Timothy Gardner and Valerie Volcovici**

**Reuters**

3 June 2021

#### The potential of behavioural interventions for optimising energy use at home

This article focuses on the potential for enhancing energy efficiency with policies and programmes designed to educate consumers and encourage them to alter their daily habits – without resorting to large-scale structural improvements.

**International Energy Agency**

4 June 2021

#### Global supply chain squeeze, soaring costs threaten solar energy boom

Among the biggest challenges to solar companies is a tripling in prices for steel, a key component in racks that hold solar panels, and polysilicon, the raw material used in panels. Rising shipping freight rates along with higher costs for fuel, copper and labour are also pushing up project costs.

**Reuters**

**Channel News Asia**

9 June 2021

### SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

#### Cyber resilience in the oil and gas industry: Playbook for boards and corporate officers

The White Paper presents six principles to help boards at oil and gas companies govern cyber risk and strengthen their organisation's cyber resilience. Adopting them will support the industry in its efforts to continue delivering safe, affordable and low-carbon energy for decades to come.

**World Economic Forum**

2021

#### A decade of progress after Fukushima-Daiichi: Building on the lessons learned to further strengthen nuclear safety

The IAEA Bulletin contains short articles that discuss new safety measures that have been promoted and adopted by the IAEA, operators, regulators, and countries, building on the lessons learnt from the Fukushima accident.

**Rafael Grossi, et al.**

**Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency**

2021

### EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

#### Advancing Buildings Energy Efficiency in Southeast Asia Webinar

This webinar explored some of the key questions around advancing energy efficiency in buildings in Southeast Asia. It marked the official launch of the International Energy Agency's (IEA) new online course on Energy Efficiency in Buildings.

**Recorded Webinar**

20 May 2021

#### Launch of Thailand power system flexibility study

This report launch event, organised in collaboration with Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), was intended to share the key findings of the IEA report on Thailand Power System Flexibility Study and recommendations on enhancing power system flexibility.

**Recorded Webinar**

4 June 2021

## FOOD SECURITY

### NEWS & COMMENTARIES

#### Philippines cuts rice tariffs to ensure food security, fight inflation

Over 90% of the Philippines' imported rice is from one source (Vietnam). To diversify its rice sources while keeping rice affordable, the government has announced a reduction in tariffs for imported rice on 15<sup>th</sup> May, from 40% to 35%.

**Reuters**

**The Star**

16 May 2021

#### China learns to stop worrying and embrace GMO crops

China is loosening its restrictions on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) to meet its food and feed consumption needs through domestic production, buffer against the risk of trade wars, and increase resilience to climate change and emerging pest diseases.

**Yusuke Hinata**

**Nikkei Asia**

25 May 2021

#### Ministry says national food security action plan can ensure Malaysia's preparedness during a crisis

Malaysia's Agriculture Ministry released its 2021-2025 National Food Security Policy Action Plan, to increase the country's preparedness should it face a food security crisis. It aims to increase the availability of safe and affordable food, among others.

**Bernama**

**Malay Mail**

9 June 2021

#### GT Voice: Inflation, speculation factors behind global food price rises should not be neglected

The article warns against playing down global price inflation as resulting simply from growing Chinese grain/soybean imports. Instead, it warns of impacts of expansionary monetary policy on food price inflation and potential financial market turbulence.

**GT Voice**

**Global Times**

6 June 2021

#### Trade and food security: When an agreement delayed becomes a human right denied

The globalisation of food trade has led to farmers shifting to higher-value export crops, in place of cheaper food staples. This increases the risks to domestic consumers, thus necessitating a revisit of commitments to the 1995 Agreement on Agriculture.

**David Bicchetti, Carlos Razo and Miho Shirotori**

**United Nations Conference on Trade and Development**

7 June 2021

#### UAE launches food security project to train youth to become agriculture entrepreneurs

The United Arab Emirates' Ministry of Climate Change and Environment is launching a food security project that targets its youth. This complements its "whole-of-nation" approach to significantly increase production of selected food items by 2051.

**Salaam Gateway**

14 June 2021

### SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

#### Impacts of COVID-19 on trade and economic aspects of food security: Evidence from 45 developing countries

The authors examined the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on 45 countries with the worst undernourishment levels in the World Food Programme's database. They found that higher-income countries were gravely affected through food trade restrictions and currency depreciation, while lower-income countries were impacted through food price inflation.

**Vasilii Erokhin and Gao Tianming**

**International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health** 17, 5775

2020

#### COVID-19 and food security: Panel data evidence from Nigeria

This study finds that in the case of a developing country (Nigeria), COVID-19 has had disproportionately larger impacts on households relying on non-farm businesses relative to those relying on farm businesses, and that it has worsened food insecurity in the case of those living in areas that had pre-existing vulnerabilities (conflict-affected/remote areas).

**Mulubrhan Amare, et al.**

**Food Policy, Volume 101, 102099**

2021

### EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

#### Launch Event : 2021 Global Report on Food Crises

During this launch, the UN FAO's Director for Emergencies and Resilience shared about a significant increase in the number of people affected by acute food insecurity. Of the 155 million people, 65% of which were from 10 countries in Africa. Across these countries, over 60-80% depend on agriculture/farming income even amid the pandemic.

**Recorded Webinar**

6 May 2021

#### Transforming Food Systems after COVID-19: Implications of the 2021 Global Food Policy Report for Eurasia

This meeting discussed how COVID-19 is disrupting agri-food value chains, and the opportunity that 2021 presents to re-think and renew efforts to transform food systems so that they are resilient, inclusive, and healthy in the long term.

**Recorded Webinar**

27 May 2021

## HEALTH SECURITY

## NEWS &amp; COMMENTARIES

**Leading biologist dampens his ‘smoking gun’ Covid lab leak theory**

A Nobel prize-winning US biologist, who has been widely quoted describing a “smoking gun” to support the thesis that COVID-19 was genetically modified and escaped from a Wuhan lab, has said he overstated the case.

**Peter Beaumont**

**The Guardian**

9 June 2021

**What Covid-19's long tail is revealing about disease**

Many months after their initial infection, some COVID-19 patients are still suffering a baffling constellation of symptoms. More than a year since the pandemic began, scientists are starting to unravel what is causing long Covid and how they can treat it.

**David Cox**

**BBC**

10 June 2021

**Commentary: How COVID-19 lab-leak theory went from conspiracy theory to politically accepted possibility**

The conversation around COVID-19's origins has shifted markedly in recent weeks. Suddenly, the idea that the virus could have come from an accidental lab leak, once dismissed as a “conspiracy theory”, is considered a possibility – even a likelihood, by some.

**Jemima Kelly**

**Channel News Asia**

11 June 2021

**Japan city uses tsunami lessons for COVID-19 vaccinations**

The 2011 earthquake and tsunami disaster taught Soma, a rural city 240km north of Tokyo, the importance of laying out and communicating clear plans, working closely with local medical professionals, gathering affected people in concentrated places - and not waiting for a plan to come down from Tokyo.

**Reuters**

**CNA**

11 June 2021

**G-7 to donate 1 billion Covid-19 vaccine doses to poorer countries**

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson expects the Group of Seven (G-7) to agree to donate 1 billion COVID-19 vaccine doses to poorer countries during its summit, and help inoculate the world by the end of next year.

**Reuters**

**The Straits Times**

11 June 2021

**Indonesia's dengue fever study offers hope in disease battle**

Dengue fever infections dropped dramatically in an Indonesian study where a bacteria was introduced into disease-carrying mosquitoes, offering hope in the battle against an illness that sickens millions annually around the world.

**AFP**

**The Straits Times**

11 June 2021

## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

**COVID-19-related misinformation on social media: a systematic review**

Social media play an increasingly important role in spreading both accurate information and misinformation. The findings of this review may help health-care organisations prepare their responses to subsequent phases in the COVID-19 infodemic and to future infodemics in general.

**Elia Gabarron, et al.**

**Bulletin of the World Health Organization, Vol. 99, No. 6**

2021

**Ten scientific reasons in support of airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2**

This study lays out ten streams of evidence that collectively support the hypothesis that SARS-CoV-2 is transmitted primarily by the airborne route.

**Trisha Greenhalgh, et al.**

**The Lancet, Vol. 397, No. 10285**

2021

## EVENTS &amp; ANNOUNCEMENTS

**Webinar: Coping during COVID, Strategies on Managing Stress**

To address the stress and the social and emotional impacts associated with COVID-19, subject matter experts on mental health provided perspectives that included communities of color and various faith traditions. The webinar presented strategies and/or resources that will be applicable to all participants.

**Recorded Webinar**

25 May 2021

**Webinar on COVID-19 Vaccination and International Travel**

This webinar was on the role of the vaccination passport and immunity certificate in reviving the tourism economy in the Eastern Caribbean.

**Recorded Webinar**

9 June 2021

## HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF

### NEWS & COMMENTARIES

#### Aid agency security is a disaster waiting to happen

A growing phenomenon is the use of private security companies by aid agencies. These companies that provide night guards and X-ray scanners may not seem as problematic as military-style operators, but they present a package of human rights and reputational risks that is all too often underestimated

**Jamie Williamson**

*The New Humanitarian*

18 May 2021

#### Shining a spotlight on country-based humanitarian reform: Have we been looking in the wrong places?

In the lead up to the next iteration of the Grand Bargain, it is particularly important to explore the relationship between local, national and global processes to understand how reform has occurred.

**Eleanor Davey, Jesse McCommon, and Puji Pujiono**  
*Humanitarian Advisory Group*

25 May 2021

#### Data-driven environmental decision-making and action in armed conflict

This article outlines how remote environmental data collection and field research are used and incorporated in international advocacy to boost the momentum for mainstreaming a robust environmental, peace and security agenda and ultimately reduce environmental damage in conflict.

**Wim Zwijnenburg**

*Humanitarian Law and Policy*

1 June 2021

#### Finding a new approach to water security in Southeast Asia

Framing and addressing water-security challenges using a disaster governance lens can create alternative pathways for pooling resources, building political will, preventing conflicts and promoting transboundary cooperation to secure water and build resilience.

**Angelo Paolo Trias**

*The Interpreter*

4 June 2021

#### UK ends bilateral aid to more than 100 countries, territories

The British government has ended direct bilateral aid to more than 100 countries and territories. Individual countries and territories that will apparently no longer receive development assistance directly from the U.K. include Iraq, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, and Lebanon — all of which are dealing with crippling humanitarian crises.

**William Worley and Raquel Alcega**  
*Devex*

7 June 2021

#### Renewing the Grand Bargain, Part 1: Old goals, a new path

The Grand Bargain, a sweeping reform deal between donor nations and the main international aid organisations, was intended to allow a more efficient and effective response to emergencies around the globe. But five years on, the plan is due for a rethink, and signatories are preparing to hammer out version 2.0 this month.

**Jessica Alexander**

*The New Humanitarian*

10 June 2021

### SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

#### Accountability to affected populations in times of the pandemic

This report looks at the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the accountability of humanitarian, development and risk reduction sectors. With pandemic having caused the global economy to slow down, leading to a funding crunch for civil society organisations, these organisations have had to re-negotiate the meaning of accountability.

**All India Disaster Mitigation Institute**

2021

#### Grand Bargain annual independent report 2021

This report analyses the progress that has been gained since the Grand Bargain was established in May 2016. It examines the challenges faced and the longer-term outcomes achieved in 2020, as well as provides recommendations for the Grand Bargain 2.0.

**Victoria Metcalfe-Hough et. al**

*London: Overseas Development Institute*

2021

### EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

#### Learning from COVID-19 to Strengthen Gender-responsive Disaster Risk Reduction

With COVID-19 having affected all of society, it is extremely important that the responses to the pandemic too have a similar “whole-of-society approach”, particularly in terms of gender. This webinar brought together stakeholders to discuss how a gender-responsive approach to COVID-19 recovery can build resilience and reduce future disaster risk.

**Recorded Webinar**

23 April 2021

#### Digital Dilemmas Debate #5: From Food to Wifi - Connectivity as Aid

In this roundtable, experts will discuss the opportunities granted by increased digital connectivity in humanitarian settings. Looking at examples of how establishing connectivity can help people better access information and opportunities, they will tackle what considerations can be applied to make sure that the most vulnerable sectors are not excluded.

**Webinar**

30 June 2021

## MIGRATION

## NEWS &amp; COMMENTARIES

**Indian migrant workers at risk of being left out of vaccine drive**

Despite calls for prioritising India's migrant workers, they are being left out of national vaccination campaigns. Reasons include a shortage in doses as well as a lack of awareness as to where and how to get vaccinated.

**Anuja**

**Al-Jazeera**

24 May 2021

**A perfect storm – when conflict and climate collide**

While 2020 was a year of government-mandated movement restrictions, over 40 million people were forced to leave their homes – the highest in a decade – for reasons ranging from conflict to natural disasters. As climate change may worsen the occurrence and intensity of future disasters, learning how to address overlapping conflict and disaster displacement crises is increasingly vital.

**Alexandra Bilak and Barbara Essig**

**Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre**

28 May 2021

**Migrants, refugees will face digital fortress in post-pandemic EU**

Technology is being used to prevent migrants and refugees from crossing the EU borders. This aggressive migration strategy, which includes the use of digital technologies such as AI-powered lie detectors and virtual border-guard interview bots, is being tested during the 'quiet' months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**AP, Al-Jazeera**

31 May 2021

**IOM strengthens preparedness efforts ahead of Cyclone and Monsoon season in Cox's Bazar**

As monsoon season looms, the refugee camps in Cox's bazaar are being prepared to deal with cyclones, a regular feature of the monsoon season. Already facing a rise in COVID-19 cases and still recovering from the devastating fire that destroyed parts of the camps, this year's monsoon season is especially worrying.

**International Organization for Migration**

4 June 2021

**On COVID vaccinations for refugees, will the world live up to its promises?**

The increase in COVID-19 cases in the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh exemplifies the continued danger faced by displaced populations, further illustrating the importance of including them in national vaccination campaigns. The reasons behind the low rate of vaccinated refugees include lack of supplies and social discrimination.

**Eric Reidy**

**The New Humanitarian**

8 June 2021

**Taiwan activists slam 'discriminatory' COVID-19 migrant curbs**

A local county government in Taiwan has come under fire for imposing a 'discriminatory' stay indoors order on all migrant workers unless they are commuting to work. The local government has defended its position by pointing out the significantly higher number of cases among migrant workers, as compared to domestic workers.

**AFP**

**Channel News Asia**

10 June 2021

## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

**COVID-19 and the state of global mobility in 2020**

This report analyses the travel measures and border closures that were implemented by governments worldwide as a response to COVID-19 in 2021. It also examines the humanitarian impacts for different groups of people, including migrants, as well as the effectiveness of these responses.

**Meghan Benton, et al.**

**Geneva and Washington DC: International Organization for Migration and Migration Policy Institute**

2021

**Labour migration in Asia: Impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and the post-pandemic future**

This report analyses labour migration trends in Asia in the context of the disruption wrought by COVID-19. By examining the policies in the major origin and destination countries of labour migrants, it provides recommendations for building back better post-pandemic.

**Asian Development Bank Institute, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and International Labour Organization**

2021

## EVENTS &amp; ANNOUNCEMENTS

**The effects of refugee policy externalisation on target countries and international institutions: Diluting or diffusing international norms?**

With a focus on norm diffusion, this webinar examined externalisation policy and its potential as a trigger for the indirect diffusion of refugee protection norms to institutions not connected to the international refugee regime.

**Recorded Webinar**

2 June 2021

**COVID-19 and Forced Displacement in the Global South | Economic Well-being and Integration**

This webinar brought together a panel of experts who shared their insights on the economic well-being and integration of forcibly displaced populations in the context of COVID-19.

**Recorded Webinar**

2 June 2021