Locked Down: Global Mobility and COVID-19

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ABOUT PERRY WORLD HOUSE

Perry World House is a center for scholarly inquiry, teaching, research, international exchange, policy engagement, and public outreach on pressing global issues. Our mission is to bring the academic knowledge of the University of Pennsylvania to bear on some of the world’s most pressing global policy challenges, to foster international policy engagement within and beyond the Penn community, and to prepare students to be well-informed, contributing global citizens.

Located in the heart of campus at 38th Street and Locust Walk, Perry World House draws on the expertise of Penn’s 12 schools and numerous globally oriented research centers to educate the Penn community. At the same time, Perry World House connects Penn with leading policy experts from around the world to develop and advance innovative global policy proposals.

Through its rich programming, Perry World House facilitates critical conversations about global policy challenges and fosters interdisciplinary research on these topics. It presents workshops and colloquia, welcomes distinguished visitors and scholars, and produces content for global audiences and policy leaders, so that the knowledge developed at Penn can make an immediate impact around the world.

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For more than a year, governments around the world desperately have sought to halt the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic through various measures to limit human interaction and prevent or otherwise restrict human movement. In a short amount of time, hundreds of millions of people stopped going to work and school, visiting family members, vacationing, and traveling for work. It was perhaps the most dramatic and global reduction in human mobility in modern history.
From March 11, 2020, to October 26, 2020, governments around the world adopted over 96,000 movement restrictions. As of June 1, 2021, governments had closed 20 percent of the world’s land border crossings, 9 percent of the world’s airport border crossings, and 11 percent of the world’s blue (water) border crossings. This was a slight improvement from January 20, 2021, when countries had closed 23 percent of the world’s land border crossings, 14 percent of the world’s airport border crossings, and 11 percent of the world’s blue border crossings. Simultaneously, international tourist arrivals were 83 percent lower from January to March 2021 than during the same period of 2020.

This year’s Global Shifts Colloquium, “Locked Down: Global Mobility and COVID-19,” convened academic and policy experts from across the world to examine whether border closures or other mobility restrictions were effective in curbing the spread of COVID-19 in the first place, the impacts on those who were trapped within and beyond borders by these restrictions, and how governments, industries, and NGO stakeholders can work together to mitigate the harm to disadvantaged communities during future inevitable pandemics and related lockdowns.

Broadly, participants addressed what policies governments and other actors should implement to recover from the effects of curtailed mobility over the next one to two years. Additionally, they identified what policies should be enacted or included in emergency plans to respond more efficaciously to future crises—both from a public health perspective and to minimize the raft of negative consequences the restrictions themselves created. These recommendations highlight:

- The importance of nuance in the implementation of travel restrictions and border closures, paired with comprehensive containment strategies, compliance considerations, contingency plans for nonadherence, and iterative feedback loops in policy processes;
- The need to shape the future direction of the travel and tourism industries through relief funding and regulatory policies to encourage more sustainable and equitable practices;
- The inclusion of non-citizens—including migrant workers, asylum seekers, and refugees—in national plans for healthcare, economic relief, vaccination programs, and other support; and,
- The role of multilateralism and cooperation among countries and within the international system to foster flexibility and collaboration in mobility regimes and pandemic responses.

This report summarizes the most important colloquium highlights in further detail and recommends policy changes and avenues for further research based on the participants’ discussions and written pieces.

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1 Defined as restrictions that prohibit or place new conditions, such as medical measures or new requirements on visa/travel documents, on entry to a country. Migration Data Portal, “Migration Data Relevant for the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Migration Data Portal, accessed January 20, 2021, https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/migration-data-relevant-covid-19-pandemic
BORDER CLOSING AND REOPENING: NATIONAL AND REGIONAL POLICIES

The colloquium opened with a panel on “Border Closing and Reopening: National and Regional Policies,” moderated by Beth Simmons, the Andrea Mitchell University Professor in Law, Political Science and Business Ethics at the University of Pennsylvania. It featured experts from the fields of epidemiology, public health, political science, and public policy, including Karen Grépin, Associate Professor, School of Public Health at the University of Hong Kong; Tana Johnson, Associate Professor of Public Affairs and Political Science at the University of Wisconsin–Madison; Claire Kumar, Senior Research Fellow at the Overseas Development Institute; and Annelies Wilder-Smith, Professor of Emerging Infectious Diseases at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Experts from Hong Kong to London to Wisconsin discussed the efficacy of border closures on curbing the spread of COVID-19 and their recommendations for re-opening international travel.
They discussed the scope, scale, impacts, and efficacy of the travel and border restrictions implemented globally as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the colloquium, participants were surveyed on several questions relating to the pandemic’s impact on mobility and the responses of governments and international actors around the world.

Most panelists agreed that a return to pre-COVID-19 mobility is likely years away. When surveyed, almost half of the colloquium participants expected that COVID-19 is somewhat likely or very likely to continue to alter the nature of global human mobility for the next decade.⁵

**Figure 1**: How likely is COVID-19 to fundamentally alter the nature of global human mobility over one and ten years?

![Diagram showing survey results](http://global.upenn.edu/perryworldhouse)

Based on lessons learned from the past year, the panelists started to chart a path forward and provide guiding principles for governments and international agencies to consider in mitigating the consequences of these changes to human mobility and to recommend best practices for policy responses during future pandemics.

**Efficacy of Border Closures and Travel Restrictions**

The panel first discussed the efficacy of national border closures and the travel restrictions governments imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19. Grépin summarized the methods that countries used during the early stage of the pandemic to prevent COVID-19’s spread. Many countries initially targeted travel from China, the source of the outbreak, but expanded to include other early hotspots around the world over time. Countries imposed general restrictions on international travel as well, sometimes for broader geopolitical reasons that extended beyond public health.

Grépin went on to remind participants that quarantines and travel restrictions are some of the world’s oldest strategies for fighting disease. From the plague to cholera to more recent epidemics, such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), countries restricted mobility as one of their first lines of defense. The efficacy of these measures can be extremely high, but it depends on the nature of the disease, the timing of the implementation of the measures, and whether they are paired with other interventions to contain transmission and spread. For COVID-19, these travel restrictions proved incredibly effective in some instances, largely when paired with proven containment measures within the country as well. New Zealand and Vietnam, for example, have kept their national infection rates extremely low through a combination of strict travel restrictions, mandatory quarantines for incoming travelers, and a comprehensive testing campaign.

Overall, evaluating the efficacy of these restrictions remains complicated. Knowledge of COVID-19 has evolved, and with it, global strategies to contain it. Panelists agreed that nuanced and flexible travel policies best equip countries in reducing the spread of COVID-19, while complete border closures should be considered carefully, as they carry extreme consequences, and their benefits only apply when accompanied by additional protocols.

Panelists also questioned the legality of many of the border closures that governments implemented worldwide. Signatories of the International Health Regulations have agreed to follow World Health Organization (WHO) guidance during international health emergencies, especially regarding travel and trade. Under these guidelines, signatories are permitted to impose additional, evidence-based restrictions on travelers, but must avoid measures that cause “unnecessary interference with international traffic.” Despite widespread implementation, multiple panelists argued that many closures, especially the broadest ones, violated international law per these regulations.

Finally, compliance with public health guidance, and especially with travel and border restrictions, has been exceptionally challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic. Grépin remarked that on the international level, countries have largely ignored WHO’s guidance against the imposition of travel restrictions. Wilder-Smith added that as vaccines have been rolled out, WHO has advised against the use of vaccine passports until equitable distribution is achieved. Despite this, many countries have already released plans to implement vaccine passports when reopening their borders.

On an individual level, some people inevitably will not adhere to COVID-19 policies and guidance. Johnson argued that when devising policies, governments must plan for nonadherence. Often those left to enforce the policies of the government do not have governmental authority to do so. For example, a store owner asking a customer to wear a mask as part of a state mandate is just a private citizen without any direct enforcement power. As societies move away from strict border closures and into more nuanced policies to contain COVID-19, incorporating these considerations into policy design will become even more important.

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6 The International Health Regulations (2005) “are an instrument of international law that is legally-binding on 196 countries, including the 194 WHO Member States.” They “provide an overarching legal framework that defines countries’ rights and obligations in handling public health events and emergencies that have the potential to cross borders.” World Health Organization, “International Health Regulations,” WHO, accessed May 13, 2021, https://www.who.int/health-topics/international-health-regulations#tab=tab_1.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- National governments and international actors must craft more nuanced travel restrictions and border closures, and must pair them with comprehensive containment strategies, such as measures for quarantining arriving travelers, testing, and contact tracing.

- International institutions, such as WHO, must work with national and subnational governments to develop a more iterative process for policy design, implementation, and revision.

- Policymakers of all levels must design policies with nonadherence in mind and develop contingency plans and relevant enforcement mechanisms for recommended measures.

- WHO must rebuild its credibility, legitimacy, and authority as a source of global public health expertise with national governments and the global public.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- How can WHO re-establish its authority and credibility as a trusted global leader in pandemic response?

- How can governments create more responsive policy systems to adapt guidance as information rapidly changes?

- What characteristics of governance systems and institutions are most suited to these types of iterative policy processes?

- What public health communication strategies are most effective to inform the public of changes to recommended behaviors and practices in responding to new diseases?
RECOVERING INDUSTRIES: GLOBAL TOURISM AND TRANSPORTATION

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated mobility restrictions have devastated the travel and tourism industries, which contribute 10.3 percent to global GDP. The United Nations World Tourism Organization reported a 74 percent net decrease in 2020 from 2019’s annual total international arrivals. Every region experienced a substantial drop in international tourist arrivals, with Asia and the Pacific hit hardest by an 84 percent net decrease over the same period. Although these trends bottomed out in April 2020 and travel has been increasing, the safety and ethics of some travel options remain in question and a full recovery is still far away.

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This panel analyzed the extent of the pandemic’s impact on the industry and proposed strategies for not just a recovery but a transformation of the industry for a more sustainable and equitable future. Moderated by Michael Useem of the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, the panel featured Megan Ryerson, UPS Chair of Transportation and Associate Professor of City and Regional Planning and Electrical Systems Engineering at the University of Pennsylvania; Erinn Tucker, Faculty Director of the Global Hospitality Leadership Program at Georgetown University; Naciye Güliz Uğur, Assistant Professor of Management Information Systems at Sakarya University; and Lola Uña Cárdenas, Vice President of Government Affairs at the World Travel and Tourism Council.

**PANDEMIC-INDUCED INDUSTRY DECLINE**

All panelists recognized the devastating scope and scale of the pandemic on the travel and tourism industry. Citing World Travel and Tourism Council’s statistics, Uña Cárdenas reported that over 174.4 million jobs were impacted globally, of which 13.8 million were in the United States. In a broader economic context, this job loss is especially meaningful as global travel and tourism made up 10.3 percent of global GDP and one-quarter of all new jobs in 2019. Emphasizing the importance of the industry to the global economy, she emphasized that “without international mobility, there is no recovery.”

**Figure 2:** How long will it take the travel industry to recover to pre-COVID-19 levels?
Uğur predicted that the industry will remain in survival mode until 2022 and that a return to normal is unlikely before 2023.\textsuperscript{10} When Perry World House surveyed participants prior to the colloquium as to how long it would take for the global travel industry to recover to pre-COVID-19 levels, just over 46 percent thought three to four years, while 20 percent thought at least five years, and an additional 20 percent thought that it would likely never recover.\textsuperscript{11}

CHANGING TRENDS
While severely damaged, the travel and tourism sectors were able to survive the pandemic through a series of major industry shifts and government relief. Travelers have become much more risk averse during the pandemic, and at the time of the colloquium, many had shifted their travel patterns to stay closer to home. Directly associated with this, travelers have also altered their preferred mode of travel from plane to car or train.\textsuperscript{12} Additionally, travelers have shifted to outdoor and nature destinations, and they value cleanliness and hygiene more than ever.\textsuperscript{13}

Uña Cárdenas and Uğur highlighted two additional trends that have emerged and are likely to remain. First, the pandemic has pushed the travel and tourism sectors to adopt more digital innovation, such as mobile boarding passes and contactless check-ins to reduce the risk of exposure from person-to-person contact. Second, to grapple with increased risk and customer anxiety, industry practices have shifted to prioritize better customer communication, with increased transparency around safety and hygiene standards and crisis management.

SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE RECOVERY
All the panelists strongly agreed that the pandemic has also presented an opportunity to redesign the industry to be more sustainable and equitable. Ryerson argued that instead of focusing on a return to pre-COVID-19 practices, the transportation sector, especially airlines, needs to prioritize environmental sustainability. To make this shift, governments should invest in research and technology to make planes more fuel efficient, include airports and air transportation in local government sustainability and environmental planning efforts, and incentivize shifting local and regional travel to a multimodal approach to use trains and buses (and eventually electric buses) over planes. The billions of dollars provided by the federal government in relief funding is a powerful tool that could be used as leverage to achieve these goals.\textsuperscript{14} Uğur also emphasized utilizing the recovery process to build new partnerships and more resilient systems to achieve these more sustainable industry practices.

Ryerson advocated for making equity a priority in the recovery process, including through fair and decent treatment of those who work in the industry and those affected by its externalities. The aviation industry lacks diversity, and Black employees disproportionately hold the low-wage jobs at airports, with little room for career growth.\textsuperscript{15} Only three percent of pilots are Black, five percent are Hispanic/Latino, and four percent are women. Airports tend to be in majority minority neighborhoods, yet are hardly an economic engine for these communities. They also create large amounts of air and noise pollution in the local community, with implications for environmental justice. To counter these inequities, subsidies should be tied to airports and airlines that support racially disadvantaged communities, non-aeronautical revenues should be used to mitigate airports’ environmental harms, and multimodal planning should be utilized to create more equity in the ability to travel.\textsuperscript{16}

Additionally, Tucker added that the COVID-19 economic recovery presents an opportunity for equitable workforce development. The tourism industry is an incredible economic driver and has the potential to create good-paying jobs for many. To ensure that these economic benefits are equitable, the industry must make investments to equip communities, especially women and youth, with the skills needed to perform well in the industry. Investments in workforce training in the domestic travel market, where there has been a surge of tourism and a demand for trained labor, will bring about immediate benefits.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
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KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR POLICYMAKERS

• As relief funding may continue to be needed in the short-term to bolster the travel and tourism industries, policymakers and industry leaders must align their goals to leverage this relief and recovery funding to make major changes that will move the industries’ practices to be more sustainable and equitable in the long-term.

• To adapt to new traveler preferences, businesses should continue to increase transparency, improve customer relations, and adopt relevant new technologies.

• National governments should invest and incentivize private-sector investment in more sustainable domestic travel infrastructure, including outside urban hubs.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

• What role can, or should, the travel and tourism industries play in ethical decisions around renewed travel given global disparities in COVID-19 prevalence and vaccine availability?

• How can the travel and tourism industries prioritize environmentally sustainable goals and practices in recovery efforts?

• What policy frameworks or regulations are best suited to shifting industry practices to be more environmentally sustainable?

• What specific indicators should policymakers use to measure progress toward more equitable and inclusive policies in the travel and tourism industry? What actions should they take in service of that progress?
The third panel, “Moving for Work: Migrant Workers and International Labor,” focused on how COVID-19 and government responses—including internal lockdowns and limits on movement within and among countries—affect the 164 million international migrant workers worldwide today. Panelists proposed ways that governments can protect and improve the health and safety of migrant workers as the pandemic continues. They also discussed how policymakers can reform labor regulations to reduce migrant workers’ vulnerability and precarity to future shocks, such as COVID-19, and to build resilience within the migration system.

The University of Pennsylvania’s Michael Jones-Correa moderated a conversation on COVID-19’s effects on international labor systems, particularly the challenges faced by migrant workers.
Michael Jones-Correa, the President’s Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania, moderated the panel, which featured Francesco Fasani, Associate Professor (Reader) at the Queen Mary University of London’s School of Economics and Finance; Michelle Leighton, Chief of the Labor Migration Branch at the International Labor Organization; Rebekah Smith, Executive Director of Labor Mobility Partnerships; and Huso Yi, Assistant Professor at the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

**COMPOUNDED PRECARITY**

During the pandemic, migrant workers have been overrepresented in essential labor sectors and have helped to ensure continuity of these services during lockdowns and other pandemic-related disruptions. The very nature of many migrants’ work put them at greater risk of exposure as their work had to be performed in person and did not allow for social distancing. Panelists noted that paradoxically, although many countries around the world depend on migrant labor to thrive, governments have ignored, demonized, and exploited migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Leighton highlighted how governments’ responses to the pandemic also threatened many migrant workers’ immigration status. Border closures have prevented some migrant workers from gaining access to a country for work and others from being able to return home. Job losses have resulted in deportations as many countries link visa status to employment. Leighton added that increased xenophobia paired with instability in housing, immigration status, employment, and healthcare has resulted in rising rates of violence toward migrant workers, especially female workers.

Panelists agreed that COVID-19 and responses to it have further exacerbated migrant workers’ disadvantages. Citing statistics for multiple regions around the world, panelists confirmed that migrants were more susceptible to negative economic impacts due to the pandemic. Early data suggested that migrants experienced a particularly steep decline in employment during the pandemic. Many migrants work in low-wage industries, such as hospitality and food service, which lost more jobs than middle- and high-income industries. This economic instability only further exacerbated other economic vulnerabilities that migrants often grapple with, including lower wages and savings and a need to send remittances home.

Migrants also faced a slew of other vulnerabilities during the pandemic. In many countries, they live in crowded conditions, which has made them more susceptible to contracting COVID-19. Yi illustrated how this was especially true in Singapore’s migrant dormitories, where infection rates among migrants were substantially higher than for the rest of the country.

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20 Ibid., 1–2.
22 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
Fasani added that migrant workers have been at greater risk due to a lack of access to adequate healthcare and exclusion from social safety nets.

When Perry World House surveyed participants prior to the colloquium, they indicated that migrant workers were most severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic’s effects on worker protections and health, as well as the overall precarity or loss of the right to work caused by the pandemic and associated mobility restrictions.

**REFORMS NEEDED**

All panelists strongly urged that pandemic recovery must be used as an opportunity to improve protections for migrants and better integrate them into economies and countries’ social fabrics. Smith summarized the problem: “While migrant workers are famously resilient, migrant systems are famously not.” Migration systems around the world are often inflexible and may prohibit migrants from filling jobs where needed. Such a prohibition hurts both the migrant workers and the economies that they work in. A stark example of this is that 263,000 trained and qualified foreign-born healthcare workers were prohibited from contributing to the COVID-19 response in the United States because of the rigidity of the migrant labor policies.

Reform would benefit both migrants and the host country, and immediate action would likely aid in the economic recovery of the pandemic. Kumar shared that some countries—particularly in Europe as well as in Mexico, Peru, and Argentina—adapted credentialing and immigration policies to fast-track foreign-born healthcare workers’ medical credentials, and also grant emergency visas to allow them to contribute to the pandemic response. These policies should not end with the pandemic, as they can increase the resilience of labor, as well as healthcare and other systems, if they were more widely implemented. Additionally, the vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic must be addressed. To ensure migrants’ health and well-being, governments, from municipal to national, must provide migrants with accessible information, protection, and government services, including healthcare, education, and housing.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR POLICYMAKERS

• National governments must expand recovery plans and social safety nets to include migrant workers by providing information, economic security, healthcare, and other support for those hurt by the COVID-19 pandemic. National governments must also actively consider the needs and well-being of migrant workers in national disaster preparedness plans, including for future pandemics.

• National governments must reform their immigration policies and visa restrictions to allow for greater flexibility in labor markets, which will benefit both migrant workers and the host-country economies in which they work.

• International organizations, such as the International Organization for Migration and International Labor Organization, must continue to plan for and advise governments on how sudden shocks to labor and migration systems might affect migrant workers and how to best prepare for these events, using lessons learned throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

• How do narratives about the economic contributions of migrants, particularly “essential workers,” interact with those of xenophobia and nationalism in public discourse and politics?

• What are the economic consequences of shocks to systems of migrant labor, both for countries of origin and destination?

• How can international legal regimes be modified to provide more flexibility for labor migration as well as greater protections and security for migrant workers?
The fourth panel of the colloquium addressed the pandemic’s effects on refugees and asylum seekers, and was moderated by Sarah Paoletti, Practice Professor of Law and Director of the Transnational Legal Clinic at the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School. It featured T. Alexander Aleinikoff, Director of the Zolberg Institute on Migration and Mobility and University Professor at the New School; Amanda Coffie, Research Fellow at the Legon Center for International Affairs and Diplomacy at the University of Ghana; Andrés Felipe Cubillos-Novella, Professor at the Institute of Public Health at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana; and Rebecca Hamlin, Associate Professor of Legal Studies and Political Science at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Researchers, lawyers, and advocates analyzed how countries changed their asylum regimes during the COVID-19 pandemic and how refugees and asylum seekers have been affected.
The panelists addressed how COVID-19 affected international asylum policies, how governments can meet their human rights obligations to refugees and asylum seekers, and how governments and the UN Refugee Agency should prepare for future pandemics to reduce disruption to their mandates and prevent the reduction of humanitarian aid to refugee populations. They also focused on how to address the public health crises created by mobility restrictions, such as the spread of COVID-19 in immigrant detention centers and refugee camps.

**VULNERABILITIES**

Panelists agreed that COVID-19 made refugees and asylum seekers more vulnerable, but not only due to the pandemic’s health impacts. At the onset of the pandemic, many experts and human rights advocates feared that it would devastate refugee camps, especially in the Global South, with their crowded conditions and limited healthcare. Fortunately, the worst expectations have been avoided thus far, but other vulnerabilities have emerged from the circumstances brought on by the pandemic.

Aleinikoff stated that these non-disease-related impacts include job losses due to the economic downturn brought on by the pandemic and the resulting decreases in remittances, loss of educational opportunities through school closures, an increase in gender-based violence and risks of early pregnancy in girls out of school, and increased xenophobia. He also asserted that mobility

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restrictions, border closures, and changes in immigration policies have substantially threatened refugees and asylum seekers. Fifty-seven countries, including the United States, suspended their refugee admission and asylum programs during the pandemic, resulting in asylum seekers being turned away at the border and denied an opportunity to file claims.32

Border closures have also physically divided refugee communities in many places. Coffie described how communities that spanned across the border between Togo and Ghana were cleaved when borders were closed to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This resulted in refugees becoming separated from their families and stripped of the economic opportunities on which they depended for survival. As many refugee communities around the world often live on one side of a border and work on the other, the most stringent border closures implemented in response to the pandemic hit these vulnerable communities particularly hard.

The impacts of the pandemic on refugees and asylum seekers may be long-lasting. When Perry World House surveyed participants prior to the colloquium, 46.67 percent said they expected it would take three to four years for durable solutions for refugees to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, 26.7 percent predicted it would take over five years, and 20 percent expected they will likely never recover.33

POLITICIZED AGENDAS

Hamlin emphasized the role that politics has played in defining refugee and asylum policies during the pandemic in many countries in the Global North. She argued that the exclusion of refugees and asylum seekers was motivated more by political interests and xenophobia than by public health concerns, adding, “Many states used COVID as a pretext to facilitate and expedite work to exclude refugees [that had already begun] before COVID.” This was especially true in the United States, with the Trump administration’s decision to use a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention order to reject asylum seekers at the border, overriding the practice of admitting asylum seekers to evaluate the validity of their claims, in violation of international law.34

While the Biden administration has begun to reverse these policies, some criticize it for not taking greater steps to ensure the safety and health of asylum seekers, and for being so slow to restart screening and resettlement programs for refugees. This controversy over refugee admission and asylum seekers illustrates the political weight of public opinion, especially during the pandemic, in advancing the rights of refugees and asylum seekers.35

DISCRIMINATION AND EXCLUSION

The panelists also described the spectrum of discrimination and exclusion of migrants, particularly refugees, from national pandemic responses. While xenophobic, anti-immigrant policies are not always as conspicuous in the Global South as in many parts of the Global North, they are present and often emerge most strongly during moments of political or economic crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Coffie argued that exclusion of refugees and migrants exists in many African countries but is not always explicit: “Silence is the problem. Policies are given without considering groups that may not have access.”

To this end, many restrictions on mobility were made without concern for the rights and active inclusion of migrants and refugees. Government aid, healthcare, and stimulus packages have not included the migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers who desperately need assistance.36 This tacit exclusion of refugees will likely continue through the recovery. In Ghana, for example, plans to distribute the vaccine have made a federal identification card a requirement, thus excluding non-citizens, refugees, and asylum seekers.37 Cubillos-Novella added that governments and humanitarian organizations in Latin America have provided some resources to migrants and refugees, especially at the Colombia–Venezuela border. Nevertheless, most governments continue to exclude migrants from national healthcare and economic programs, ultimately increasing their vulnerability to COVID-19 and associated economic precarity.38

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35 Ibid., 2.
37 Ibid., 3.
“Many states used COVID as a pretext to facilitate and expedite work to exclude refugees [that had already begun] before COVID.”

—Rebecca Hamlin, Associate Professor of Legal Studies and Political Science at the University of Massachusetts Amherst

**KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR POLICYMAKERS**

- National governments and international organizations must provide support for asylum seekers and refugee communities to minimize further risks from COVID-19, including reducing density of living conditions, providing healthcare, improving sanitation, and ensuring access to food or income opportunities.

- In recovery efforts, national governments must include refugees and asylum seekers in economic recovery plans, healthcare systems, and vaccine distribution.

- The UN Refugee Agency must provide rapid guidance to governments on the specific needs of refugees and best practices for responding in the early stages of a pandemic; it must also increase pressure on governments to uphold their legal obligations, even amid crises.

- The UN Refugee Agency and national governments must reinitiate adjudication of refugee status determination and asylum claims as quickly as possible. Refugee resettlement, where paused due to COVID-19 restrictions, must be resumed with proper testing and quarantining procedures.

**QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

- How have border closures and suspension of asylum and refugee processing affected asylum seekers and refugees? What can be done to remedy these effects and prevent long-term negative consequences from these changes?

- What legal or policy reforms are needed to increase the resilience of the international humanitarian aid infrastructure and the refugee protection regime in the face of global shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How can governments build national support to expand relief policies to be more inclusive of non-citizens? How do various framings of refugees and asylum seekers, such as economic benefits or human rights claims, affect public perceptions and acceptance?
FILIPPO GRANDI, UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

The 2021 Global Shifts Colloquium concluded with a keynote conversation featuring Filippo Grandi, the High Commissioner of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and Deborah Amos, International Correspondent for NPR. They highlighted the pandemic’s impact on migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers; how the UNHCR and other actors are supporting them; and other steps that governments must take to rebuild their protection systems.

Grandi opened his overview of the impacts of COVID-19 on migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers with a poignant metaphor: “We are all in the same sea, but we are on very different boats.” As of June 2020, 80 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, a number that is expected to increase this year. COVID-19 created an extremely dire situation for forcibly displaced peoples because it added additional stress and constraints on top of already difficult circumstances.

One of the most pressing challenges that has arisen because of COVID-19 is restriction of mobility. Grandi argued that “for people in flight, movement is vital.” The closure of borders and imposition of travel restrictions have posed severe obstacles for those facing conflict or persecution because “if you cannot flee or move, you cannot reach physical safety.” Many of these restrictions have arisen because many wealthier countries have turned inward and made the false assumption that refugee protection must occur at the expense of their citizens or associated displaced people with the spread of disease.

KEY PRIORITIES

To ameliorate the devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugees and migrants, Grandi urged governments and humanitarian organizations to focus on five priorities immediately:

VACCINES
Refugees, as well as internally displaced and stateless people, must have access to vaccines as they are distributed.

ECONOMICS
People on the move have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic-induced economic downturn; stabilizing their financial situation is urgent.

EDUCATION
School closures have caused major setbacks for refugee children, especially girls; ensuring their education must be a priority.

GENDER
Gender-based violence has increased substantially during the pandemic, including within displaced communities; protections for women and girls must be centered.

RECOVERY
Domestic recovery policies have largely left out refugees and asylum seekers thus far but must include support for refugees and migrants moving forward.
“We are all in the same sea, but we are on very different boats.”

—Filippo Grandi, High Commissioner of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)

In a public keynote conversation, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi and NPR International Correspondent Deb Amos discussed how the UN Refugee Agency can support refugees throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to mitigate the effects of mobility restrictions.
LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage communities and upend daily life for hundreds of millions of people around the world, with lasting and yet unknown consequences. As wealthier countries expand vaccine distribution and improve medical care for those infected, disparities between and within countries may increase in the short-term as others face renewed outbreaks. Restrictions on global mobility, such as limitations on border crossings and mandatory quarantines, are likely to persist until vaccines are accessible to much of the global population. While domestic or regional travel may return to pre-pandemic rates soon, these restrictions are likely to keep longer trips and business travel depressed for some time. Furthermore, these restrictions will adversely impact already marginalized groups the most, including migrant workers, asylum seekers, and refugees.
The expert participants from the 2021 Global Shifts Colloquium reviewed how each of these themes has developed since December 2019, and suggested policy recommendations for mitigating the consequences of mobility restrictions in the short-term and for preventing them in case of future pandemics. They also highlighted relevant outstanding questions, given the many unknowns around the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on communities and their mobility, which provide many avenues for future research. Finally, Grandi concluded his keynote with five lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic on how to better prepare for and manage future crises. All of these recommendations can inform decisions around how to recover more quickly and equitably from the COVID-19 pandemic in the near-term, as well as how to prepare for future pandemics to more effectively stem the spread of disease while reducing the damage of economic consequences and human rights restrictions.

With regard to refugee protection, Grandi highlighted that prevention is key. Preventing the conflicts that cause people to flee their homes is the most effective way to reduce the number of displaced people. Humanitarian organizations and governments should try to prevent traumatic events that force people to flee unsafe situations. This holds true with pandemics as well, with strong research and rapid response in the early phases of a pandemic providing outsize benefits in prevention of disease spread and later need to implement more extreme measures. Second, countries must be better prepared to predict upsticks and influxes of displaced peoples. This can be done through monitoring global conflicts and through predictive analytics. Third, stigma toward refugees must be more forcefully combated. Fourth, refugees need to be included in health, economic, and educational systems both during and outside of crises. Finally, multilateralism must be central.

International cooperation is key to creating lasting solutions and inward-looking policies will only lead to failure. This final lesson holds true not only for refugee policies and conflict prevention, but also more broadly for public health responses, global trade and tourism, labor mobility, and more.

There are many lessons still to be learned about the outbreak of and response to COVID-19. Further research into these outstanding questions can and should continue to inform the development of global policy. These range from how WHO can re-establish its authority as a leader in global health and what are the most effective communication methods for situations with complex and constantly changing information, to how governments can design more responsive policy systems and what types of governance systems are best suited to these iterative processes. Experts from the aviation, hospitality, and travel fields asked how the COVID-19 pandemic can spur changes in the global travel and tourism industry, from environmental sustainability to questions of justice and equity, to what the ethical implications are for renewed travel before global vaccine access, and who might enforce these difficult moral, and well as practical, decisions. On migrant labor, future research might ask how shocks to migrant labor systems affect the economies of workers’ countries of origin and destination, as well as how various changes to international legal regimes around labor mobility might increase the resiliency of these systems while providing greater security and protections for workers. Finally, refugee scholars should consider what legal and policy reforms are needed to strengthen the refugee protection regime and international humanitarian aid, even or especially during crises, and how public support for these changes might be built by popular movements, national governments, and international agencies.
All of these recommendations can inform decisions around how to recover more quickly and equitably from the COVID-19 pandemic in the near-term, as well as how to prepare for future pandemics to more effectively stem the spread of disease while reducing the damage of economic consequences and human rights restrictions.

Based on what policymakers have learned so far and the results of these future research fields, comprehensive reforms are necessary for multiple intersecting systems of law and policy. National governments will need to work together and across policy levels—from municipal to international—to realize and institutionalize the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, to prevent the catastrophic loss of life, widespread disruption to daily activities, economic damage, and curtailment of basic human rights that the inadequate early responses and widespread lockdowns imposed.

On the broadest spectrum, governments must develop more iterative processes for policy design, implementation, and revision, incorporating new technologies to track policy rollout, results, and feedback from communities in real time. As is the case with most policies, governments must also design policies with nonadherence in mind, including contingency plans and incentives for compliance and enforcement. In the particular case of communicable diseases, more nuanced, targeted travel restrictions and border closures should be used, and paired with other containment strategies, such as quarantining arriving travelers, testing, and contact tracing. Regarding the secondary impacts of COVID-19 containment strategies, such as mobility restrictions, governments must continue relief funding and social safety nets for struggling industries and individuals, including for migrant workers, asylum seekers, and refugees. In preparation for future pandemics, emergency preparedness budgets should include this funding such that it can be appropriated and distributed more quickly to prevent unnecessary suffering. More flexible mobility regimes, worldwide, would also help to prevent many of the issues faced by migrant workers and other displaced individuals during the pandemic and support more resilient economic systems. As Grandi noted, multilateralism is key to resolving this crisis. Support for all individuals, regardless of their country of origin, is essential to stemming a pandemic that has no regard for national borders as well as ensuring as quick and robust a global economic recovery as possible. This can only happen if all countries work together, cooperating rather than competing to provide resources, including vaccines, to all that need them.
Colloquium participants recommended the following readings on the intersections of COVID-19, or pandemics more generally, with global mobility:


