

The labor market in Latin America at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic: impacts, responses and perspectives

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SUMMARY

Latin America is experiencing an unprecedented crisis in its labor markets because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is reflected in a drastic contraction of employment, hours worked, and income. The outlook is even more worrying when considering that these impacts have been unequal and that the path of recovery, which is slowly emerging in the region, could be accompanied by a widening of labor and income gaps across different population groups. This crisis, therefore, would be exacerbating the high levels of inequality that existed before the outbreak of the pandemic, even though countries have made significant efforts to rapidly implement a set of policies aimed at sustaining employment and incomes. It is crucial to strengthen the labor institutional framework, particularly with regard to active labor market policies. Likewise, occupational health and safety have become a relevant element for any recovery strategies with safe and healthy employment.

Key words: *Latin America, COVID-19, employment, unemployment, labor policies, income policies, labor institutions.*

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RESUMEN

América Latina experimenta una crisis sin precedentes en sus mercados de trabajo como consecuencia del COVID-19. Esto se refleja en una drástica contracción del empleo, de las horas trabajadas y de los ingresos. El panorama resulta aún más preocupante al considerar que dichos impactos han sido desiguales y que el lento sendero de recuperación podría ir acompañado de una amplificación de brechas laborales y de ingresos entre los diferentes grupos de población. Esta crisis, por lo tanto, estaría exacerbando los elevados niveles de desigualdad existentes antes de la irrupción de la pandemia, aun cuando los países han realizado importantes esfuerzos para implementar rápidamente un conjunto de políticas tendientes a sostener el empleo y los ingresos. Resulta crucial fortalecer la institucionalidad laboral, particularmente en lo que refiere a las políticas activas del mercado de trabajo. Asimismo, la seguridad y salud en el trabajo se ha convertido en un elemento relevante para las estrategias de recuperación con empleo seguro y saludable.

Palabras clave: *América Latina, COVID-19, empleo, desocupación, políticas laborales, políticas de ingreso, instituciones laborales.*

Introduction: an unprecedented labor crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated an economic recession in Latin America of unprecedented magnitude and extension. The latest projections by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimate a contraction in regional GDP of -9.4 % by 2020, with falls of -11 % in Mexico, -9.1 % in Brazil, -9.9 % in Argentina, -7.5 % in Chile, -7.8 % in Colombia and -13.9 % in

Peru. The September update by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for the G20 countries further sharpens the picture for Argentina, with a projected drop of -11.2 %, while suggesting a less pessimistic outlook for Brazil and Mexico, with projections of -6.5 % and -10.2 %, respectively.

At the same time, the outbreak of the pandemic in the region is taking place in a context already characterized by an economic slowdown and a slowdown or reversal of the labor improvements achieved in previous years, where structural characteristics associated with high labor informality, low average wages, significant wage gaps and weaknesses in social protection and health systems in terms of coverage and adequacy of benefits persist.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the macroeconomic crisis is having a very intense impact on the region's labor markets and, especially, on some segments of the population, amplifying existing labor and social gaps. One difference that emerges most strongly in this crisis is between those individuals and families who continue to receive all or part of their income and those who do not. This is not only a consequence of the fact that they have lost their jobs or are unable to develop their professions or work activities, but also because a significant number of people who continue to be employed are absent from their jobs without obtaining compensation, especially self-employed workers, or are receiving only partial compensation due to the reduction in the workday.

Given the scarce labor alternatives in this critical context and the supply shock associated with the confinement measures, job losses have not fully translated into transitions into unemployment but rather into exits from the labor force. This is why the short-term adjustments of labor market variables are being different from previous crises, in which, in general, there were strong increases in the unemployment rate and informality. Thus, the dynamics observed and discussed for this note may not fully reflect the dynamics that may occur in the medium and long term, when lockdown restrictions are relaxed and people re-enter the labor market.

The current labor scenario is even more worrisome because the expected recovery for

2021 and beyond is weaker than that seen in previous crises, and will likely occur at different speeds depending on how the prolonged pandemic affects different sectors of the economy. The IMF estimates growth for Latin America next year in the order of 3.7 %, significantly lower than the growth observed, for example, in 2010 (6.3 %) at the regional level, when the economy recovered more robustly from the 2008/9 crisis.

This paper provides an analysis of the labor dynamics caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the policy responses, including a typology of three types of interventions that seek to maintain jobs and support the incomes of workers and families. Finally, considerations are made about relevant issues that have emerged on the agenda of labor and social policies in the region.

Adjustments to job loss: transitions to unemployment and exits from the labor force

Given that the start of the pandemic in most of the countries of the region took place around the middle of March 2020, the most significant impacts on employment, unemployment, and economic participation, particularly, occurred during the second quarter of this year².

The average employment rate of the 9 Latin American countries for which updated information is available for the first half of 2020 (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru, Paraguay, and Uruguay)³ was 51.1 %, representing a reduction of 5.4 percentage points (pp) compared to the record for the first half of last year⁴. The drop is even more intense when comparing the first two quarters of 2020, which is about 9 pp for this group of countries

²It is important to note that analyzing labor dynamics in this particular context for the region as a whole is not without its difficulties because the pandemic spread in countries at different speeds. Therefore, the way in which statistics began to reveal these changes in the labor markets shows some differences.

³Together, these countries accounted for 80 % of total employment in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2019.

⁴Due to changes in the information collection mechanism (through telephone calls) in employment surveys and household surveys, there may be problems of comparability with data from previous periods.

(Figure 1)⁵. This represents a historic low and meant that about 34 million workers lost their jobs in the first half of the year.

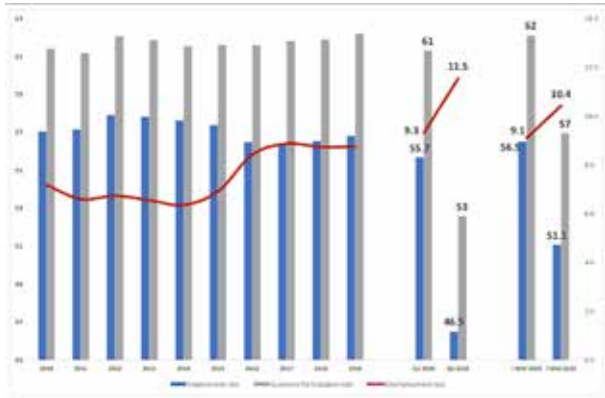


Figure 1. Employment rate, Unemployment rate, and Economic Participation rate in nine Latin American countries, 2010-2020.

Source: Author's elaboration based on SIALC/OIT.

This drastic fall in the magnitude of employment implied transits towards unemployment and mostly strong exits from the labor force. In effect, the participation rate also registered a record low, falling from 61.3 % to 52.6 % between the first and second quarters of this year in all nine countries. In the second quarter of 2019, this rate had been 62.2 %. This meant that 32 million people were no longer economically active during the first half of 2020. As noted, the significant fall in the economically active population (EAP) is due both to measures of confinement and social distancing and to unfavorable expectations about the functioning of labor markets that reduce incentives to seek employment for those who lost a job.

These transits, therefore, significantly moderated the impact of the reduction in employment on unemployment. This is why, unlike other economic crises, the unemployment rate very partially reflects the magnitude of the difficulties the region is going through and

⁵Although the comparison between these two quarters may be affected by the presence of seasonality, it is used to observe in greater detail the short-term impacts of the economic crisis.

therefore needs to be complemented with other labor indicators to have a more complete picture of the underutilization of the labor force. Even so, this average indicator for the nine countries considered was 11.5 % during the second quarter, 2.2 pp higher than in the first quarter of this year. This translated into an additional 2 million or so people who were unemployed and continued to look for work. Once again, and even under these circumstances, this figure represents a maximum that even exceeds the values recorded in previous crises in the region.

Table 1 shows the variation in the employment rate between the first and second quarters of this year, broken down for the 9 countries considered. It also shows the percentage that the increase in the number of unemployed people and the increase in those outside the labor force represent the drop in the number of employed people. It can be seen that the reduction in employment was expressed in massive net outflows from the labor force, with these outflows representing 94 % of total job losses. The remaining 6 % implied increases in the number of unemployed people. The cases of Paraguay and Uruguay show a difference with the rest of the countries, as the total number of unemployed even decreased (also in Brazil, although very weakly)⁶, so the only group that increased in a net way has been the non-economically active population⁷.

Therefore, if the population that lost its job - in some cases temporarily - had remained in the labor force (as unemployed) the impact on the unemployment rate would have been significantly higher. In the group of countries considered, it would have reached 24 % in the second quarter of this year. What this counterfactual exercise is intended to reflect is the magnitude of the potential labor supply that is likely to return to the labor market as job search restrictions are relaxed. This situation has begun to be verified

⁶It could be conjectured that this responds to a discouraging effect because the unfavorable economic situation discourages people who lost their jobs from continuing to actively search. This assumption will have to be evaluated later in time based on the availability of information for the coming months.

⁷There is still not enough information to identify the transits that people have actually made between these labor states during the first half of this year in these countries. That is why the net variations in the number of people in each one of them are compared.

Table 1

Change in Employment Rate and Transitions to Unemployment or out of the Workforce.
 Nine countries in Latin America, Quarter 1 - Quarter 2 2020⁸

| COUNTRY | Employment rate | | | Percentage of transits from occupation to: | | |
|------------|-----------------|------|-----------|--|------------------------|-------|
| | Q1 | Q2 | Var. (pp) | Unemployment | Out of the labor force | Total |
| Argentina | 52.5 | 42.8 | -9.7 | 2 % | 98 % | 100 % |
| Brazil | 53.5 | 47.9 | -5.6 | -1 % | 101 % | 100 % |
| Chile | 57.3 | 45.6 | -11.8 | 11 % | 89 % | 100 % |
| Colombia | 53.8 | 43.7 | -10.2 | 34 % | 66 % | 100 % |
| Costa Rica | 55.5 | 43.7 | -11.8 | 51 % | 49 % | 100 % |
| Mexico | 57.8 | 47.0 | -10.8 | 3 % | 97 % | 100 % |
| Paraguay | 65.6 | 61.6 | -3.9 | -15 % | 115 % | 100 % |
| Peru | 66.6 | 41.3 | -25.3 | 2 % | 98 % | 100 % |
| Uruguay | 55.6 | 52.9 | -2.8 | -14 % | 114 % | 100 % |
| TOTAL | 55.7 | 46.5 | -9.2 | 6 % | 94 % | 100 % |

Source: Author's elaboration based on SIALC/OIT

with effective impacts on labor indicators and can be seen more clearly from the availability of data corresponding to the third and fourth quarters of 2020.

The briefness of workforce outflows during the first months of the pandemic in 2020 appears to be supported by the significant increase in people who are in this situation but declare themselves available for work. In Mexico, for example, in a context where the total non-economically active population increased by 30 % between March and April of this year, the increase in the subset of available persons was 240 % while the number of those not available decreased. Between those two months, the first group went from representing 15 % to 40 % of the non-EAP. In June, although lower, it still accounted for 29 % of the total non-working population. In Uruguay, on the other hand, in March, about 19 % of the inactive people who were available to work but did not seek work declared that they did not do so because of the

economic situation. This percentage rose to 36 % in May, 28 % in June, and 22 % in July.

Therefore, to the extent that these transits into the labor force are more intense than the generation of jobs, the rate of unemployment will probably continue its upward trend. The climate of great macroeconomic uncertainty, together with unfavorable expectations regarding economic growth for the region in 2021, makes that scenario more likely.

Employment contractions have not been of equal magnitude for the different population groups in each of the countries surveyed. In fact, in all cases, it was women, more than men, and young people (up to 24 years of age), more than adults, who suffered, in relative terms, the most intensely from the loss of employment. Thus, while the range of falls in male employment goes from 3 % to 34 %, the female fall extends from 7 % to 43 %. Likewise, in the four countries for which we have additional information on the evolution of employment by age group, the loss of employment among adults has hovered between 5 % and 20 %, but has reached a maximum of 45 % among young people⁹.

⁸For example, in Chile, outflows from the labor force accounted for 89 % of the total drop in employment while transits to unemployment accounted for the remaining 11 %. In Uruguay or Paraguay, on the other hand, unemployment instead of being a "net recipient" also reduced the number of people in this state, those who joined the flow of workers who lost their jobs and left the workforce.

⁹The perspective could be different if the variations in percentage points were analyzed due to the significant divergences that population groups exhibit in the initial employment rates.

As mentioned, these trends significantly exacerbate the employment gaps that existed before the pandemic. In the case of women, this is associated with their greater presence in certain economic sectors that have been heavily affected by this crisis, the higher rate of informal employment (which, as will be seen below, has been reduced more intensely than total employment) and the growing difficulties in reconciling paid work with family responsibilities in a context where education and care services have been profoundly altered by health measures to distance and reduce people's mobility.

As noted in (2), by 2019 women were over-represented in some of the sectors of activity severely affected by this crisis, such as hotel and restaurant services, other service activities, and the household sector as employers, where the average female presence for the region was in the order of 61 %, 59 %, and 81 %, respectively¹⁰. Indeed, the different sectoral composition of employment between men and women has been one of the key factors through which the impacts of employment reduction were channeled according to gender. For example, in Costa Rica, the five most affected productive sectors accounted for more than half of female employment in 2019. Among them, domestic service, which reduced total employment by almost 46 % between April and June (3). The contraction of employment in this sector has also been very abrupt in the case of Chile, where the drop was almost 48 % between those same months (4). In Bolivia, for its part, while total employment in urban areas fell 16 % between February and May, it fell 22. % in domestic service.

Additionally, the proportion of formal salaried workers in the mentioned sectors of activity is extremely low: between 19 % and 26 %. This panorama is even more complex if we consider that, on average, the segment of workers in high-risk activities (that is, sectors where the level of economic activity has been greatly reduced) or medium-high, where these activities are included, receive reduced labor income, below

the average for all workers. This is associated, in part, with the higher incidence of informality among salaried workers and self-employment, especially self-employment where the incidence of informal workers is also very high.

Consequently, the loss of employment in these productive sectors with a greater presence of women is associated with both the abrupt fall in the levels of economic activity and the greater instability of certain jobs. The fact that labor income is relatively low suggests that those who lose their jobs do not have sufficient prior financial resources to sustain adequate living standards in the absence of a source of labor income.

Finally, while women also predominate in activities with a low risk of employment reduction in the context of the pandemic, such as health and social services, they are disproportionately exposed to risks of infection and/or extended working hours. In particular, health care workers, many of whom are women, face increased professional demands as family care demands have increased (5).

In the case of young people, the greater loss of employment is also associated, at least in part, with their sectoral insertion (6). In particular, the incidence of youth employment is high in hotels, commerce, personal services (except for public administration, health, and education), and construction, activities strongly affected by the pandemic.

Additional information reports dissimilar impacts among employees with different levels of education. In Metropolitan Lima, for example, in the May-July quarter, the year-on-year reduction in the total number of employed persons was 40 %, but the loss reached 52 % among those with an elementary level of education, while it was 32 % among those with a university level of education. In Costa Rica, there was also a more intense reduction among those with incomplete secondary education or less. This may be linked to the higher probability that people with lower levels of education have of inserting themselves in informal jobs, the lower probabilities of teleworking, and its higher incidence in certain productive sectors strongly affected by this crisis.

As mentioned, a significant part of the job losses resulted in outflows from the labor force.

¹⁰Although the presence of women in the education and health sectors, which were less affected by the crisis, is also high, this has not compensated for the heavy loss of employment in other economic activities.

Again, these transits have not been homogeneous among the population, but have been stronger among women, youth, and those with lower levels of education. While falls in the case of men range from 3 % to 30 %, in the case of women the range is 11 %-42 %. A similar picture emerges among young people for whom job losses have led to exit from the workforce. In particular, the reduction in the economic participation rate of people between 15 and 24 years of age has represented 2 to 3 times the drop registered among people 25 years and older.

While, as noted, the significant reduction in employment is not entirely reflected in increases in unemployment, the unemployment rate increased in almost all of the countries considered. Again, and as a correlate of the above, these transits have been different according to population group. In effect, the increase in unemployment has been proportionally more intense among men, which means that the abrupt loss of jobs, particularly among women, implied a greater intensity in leaving the labor force, while men remained in greater proportion in search of employment.

A similar perspective appears when comparing adults with youth, where the gap in unemployment incidence narrowed between both groups. In particular, adults - with lower rates of previous unemployment than young people - experienced relative increases in this indicator that represented between 1.3 and 2 times more than those recorded by people under 25 years of age.

It is therefore clear that the “adjustments” in the labor market in the face of unemployment have been different between men and women, on the one hand, and between young people and adults, on the other. These movements could slow down or even reverse previous trends such as the growing incorporation of women into the world of work, due to the more pessimistic scenario and the fewer opportunities that the labor market presents, and will present, in addition to the already mentioned fact that education and care services have been severely affected, increasing the weight of family responsibilities.

This situation adds to the greater historical difficulties experienced by young people in the region’s labor markets. Indeed, they face greater labor intermittency explained, in part, by the intense inflows and outflows of the labor

force. The greater occupational instability, in turn, is associated with their greater prevalence in informal, precarious, low-skilled activities. For those adolescents who enter the labor market early and, in general, for young people with low work experience and less development of work skills, the high occupational turnover attempts against the possibility of accumulating specific qualifications, thus making their future work trajectory more difficult. In turn, the lower experience reduces, especially in contexts of low labor demand, the probability of accessing a job and increases the chances of being fired. This situation may be accompanied by an increase in the discouragement effect that results in fewer incentives both to seek employment and to begin or continue studies.

Finally, when both dimensions -gender and age- are combined with socioeconomic level, the labor panorama becomes even more complex, since young low-income women tend to be more likely to move and stay out of the labor force, or tend to face greater difficulties in accessing a job. Therefore, these movements in the labor market can generate significant unfavorable distributional impacts not only in the short term but also in the long term.

The drastic contraction of hours worked, increased suspensions, and absenteeism

As was pointed out, in the context of this economic crisis with its characteristics, neither the unemployment rate nor the employment rate is complete measures of the significant difficulties faced by the labor markets. That is why another key indicator is the hours worked. Indeed, the variation in the average number of hours worked by the working-age population may be affected not only by the destruction of jobs (which reduces to zero the hours worked) destined for unemployment or inactivity but also by temporary suspensions (which also lead to zero this value) and by the reduction of the working day (which partially reduces it). Therefore, the average hours worked reflect in aggregate the overall underutilization of the labor force, not only because it is not occupied but also because it is not fully occupied.

This is why the ILO has been estimating the

loss of hours worked in the world and by region. The latest estimates from September (7) show that Latin America is the region with the greatest contraction in working hours worldwide, with an estimated loss of around 20.9 % for the first three quarters of 2020 compared to the fourth quarter of 2019. This figure is almost double the global estimate of 11.7 %. It is interesting to note that, consistent with the evolution of other labor indicators already analyzed, the greatest contraction in hours worked was seen in the second quarter of this year (-33.5 %) while in the third quarter the fall was less intense (-25.6 %). Once again, the gaps with the world average are very significant, where the reductions were 17.3 % and 12.1 % in these two quarters, respectively.

In the countries of the region with available information, it can be seen that the reduction in hours worked and the increase in absenteeism -that is, those who have not been working in the reference period but who continue to have a labor relationship with their employer or have expectations of returning to work in the case of independent workers- was especially intense in the second quarter of the year. The employment support measures implemented by the region's countries have helped maintain the employment relationship even when workers are temporarily not performing the tasks.

In Colombia, for example, the proportion of informal self-employed workers without income rose from 4.2 % in May 2019 to 30 % in May 2020. Among formal self-employed workers, these figures were 1 % and 21 %, respectively. A similar panorama, although with less intensity, is observed among wage earners where these values were 1 % and 18 % among the informal, and 0.4 % and 5.2 % among the formal.

In Argentina, on the other hand, the rate of suspensions of formal employees in the private sector has experienced a growing trend and recorded historical highs since March. In July 2020, the percentage of suspended workers was 8.4 % (0.8 % in March 2020) while 19 % of companies had applied suspensions (5 % in March). In turn, in this same country, the proportion of absent workers in total employment was 21 % in the second quarter of this year, compared to 2.6 % in the same period in 2019.

In Paraguay, as of June 18, 2020, some 94 000 jobs had been suspended, equivalent to 18.5 % of formal workers in the private sector. In Chile, absentee workers represented around 19 % of total employment in the May-July 2020 moving quarter, more than doubling its value in the last 12 months. In Mexico, the incidence of temporarily absent employment with employment ties was only 3.8 % of total employment in July 2019. This figure rose to 22 % in April of this year. Although after that peak this percentage began to fall, in July of this year it was double that of the previous year.

In Uruguay, the employed temporarily absent from their jobs represented 9.4 % of the total employed in March, having been 5.4 % in the same month of the previous year. This figure rose even higher in April, reaching a maximum of 23.7 %. Although the figures for the following two months were lower than this record (16 % in May and 10.6 % in June), in all cases they continued to be high in the year-on-year comparison. The latest available figure for July was 8.6 %, lower than the March record (9.4 %). On analyzing the composition of the reasons for absence in April, suspension or quarantine due to COVID-19 was the main reason (explaining around 37 %), followed by those covered by unemployment insurance. In the following three months this last cause explains most of the absences (37 % in July) while the first one reduces its relative importance (15 %).

In addition to the higher incidence of absenteeism, the reduction of the effective working day among the employed present has also been another way of adjustment in some countries of the region.

In Costa Rica, 20.5 % of people were underemployed in the second quarter of 2020, representing an increase of 10.3 pp over the same quarter of the previous year. In turn, 26.8 % in the second quarter worked fewer hours per week than they normally do. In Mexico, the underemployment rate was 7.9 % in July 2019 and rose to 30 % in May of this year, with 20 % in June and 18.4 % in July.

In Metropolitan Lima, the visible underemployment rate also experienced a sustained increase in recent months in relation to the February-April 2020 quarter, when 13.3 %

of the employed population involuntarily worked less than 35 hours a week. That value was about 18 % in the May-July quarter of this year.

Finally, in Chile, in the May-July quarter, the number of effective hours worked fell by 32 % compared to the same quarter last year. In Paraguay, underemployment did not vary significantly in the second quarter of 2020 (7.7 %) compared to the same period in 2019 (7.9 %). However, it was somewhat higher than in the first quarter of this year (6.6 %), explained by what happened in rural areas.

The adjustment mechanism turned off: the massive loss of informal and self-employment jobs

In this exceptional context, some adjustment channels in the labor markets are cushioned while others are exacerbated. It is frequent that when salaried employment falls, self-employment plays a counter-cyclical role. In fact, this has been the case in recent years and previous crises. However, this “traditional mechanism” is weakened or disappears in this situation, where these occupations as well as informal wage-earners have been strongly affected.

A significant portion of the independent workers was not framed in the exception of the distance and reduced mobility and, in turn, many of them are self-employed who did not work from home and for whom the possibility of teleworking is reduced. In turn, the transit between this type of occupation and economic inactivity is usually very frequent in the countries of the region. This is explained both by a lower rate of retention of informal jobs or self-employment (greater occupational instability) and by higher rates of exit from the labor force once they leave these types of jobs. These behaviors were exacerbated in the context of confinement. Given this panorama, the countries of the region have quickly implemented or expanded income transfer programs to reach the most affected population, many of whom were previously employed informally.

In Costa Rica, for example, self-employment accounts for 22 % of total employment but accounted for around 28 % of the drop between the first and second quarters of 2020 (3). The impact

of the pandemic has also been differentiated in Mexico, where the proportion of dependent employment increased by about 6 pp between March and May of this year compared to the reduction in the other occupational categories (8). Something similar was seen in Argentina, where the share of self-employment fell from 22.3 % to 19.8 % between the first and second quarters of this year, after experiencing an upward trend during 2019.

In Colombia, however, a different situation arises, since between May 2019 and the same month in 2020 the number of self-employed workers fell by 19 %, while salaried workers fell by about 26 %. When a detailed analysis is made of each of these two groups, it can be seen that it was the informal workers, that is, the workers of private sector companies and domestic workers, who suffered the greatest reductions (-50 %), followed by the formal self-employed (-32 %). However, these figures must be considered together with those corresponding to the hours worked. In particular, informal self-employed workers are the group with the highest rate of absence from work, where about one-third of them did not work for temporary reasons, mostly associated with confinement and restrictions on mobility (9). Once again, this points to the insufficiency of a single labor indicator to explain this situation and, therefore, the need to consider a broad set of indicators in order to better dimension and understand the specific impacts of this crisis on the region’s labor markets.

In that sense, as mentioned, the dynamics that have followed formal and informal employment differ, in many cases, from those observed in previous economic crises. In fact, despite the measures to contain formal wage-earning employment implemented in a large number of countries, which have undoubtedly contributed to limit job losses, the data emerging from administrative records also show significant drops in this type of occupational insertion. In fact, the evidence seems to suggest that the negative impacts of the economic crisis on formal employment were more intense in April and May. In the cases for which subsequent information is available, a certain stability is observed in the number of formal employees. As will be analyzed later, some of the countries in the region have implemented mechanisms to sustain this type of

employment. Therefore, the dynamics of formal employment in the coming months will depend, among other factors, on the maintenance of these policies together with the evolution of the level of activity and the demand for labor.

With even greater intensity than that observed in the fall informal jobs, there has been a reduction in informal wage employment and, even more so, in self-employment, most of which is also informal. This greater contraction has meant that the rate of informality has fallen (temporarily) in all countries with available information, in the context of the widespread collapse in demand for labor, especially in the early months of the pandemic (Figure 2).

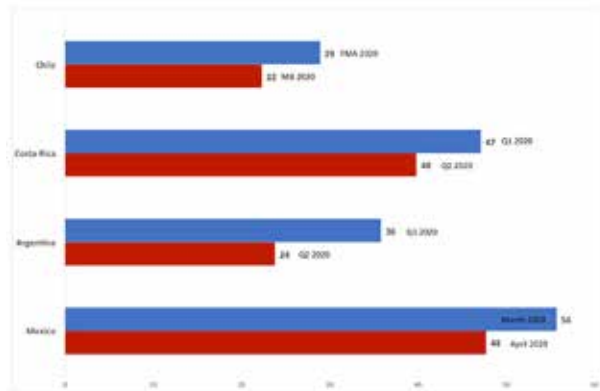


Figure 2. Informality rate before and immediately after COVID-19, selected Latin American Countries*.

* The blue bars reflect the situation before COVID-19, while the red bars reflect the situation immediately after. Source: Author's elaboration based on employment and household surveys of the considered countries

Therefore, the counter-cyclical adjustment mechanism on the part of informal jobs, often observed in the region in the face of weak formal job creation, has been strongly cushioned at this particular juncture. This is explained by a multiplicity of factors. Among others, the higher rate of informality was shown by some productive sectors that had to stop their activities because they were not included among the essential ones. In addition, it is easier to interrupt

a non-registered wage-earning relationship and the greater incidence of this type of occupation in smaller, less productive businesses, which find it more difficult to endure long periods of inactivity. On the other hand, and as mentioned, the measures to sustain formal employment are also a fundamental factor in explaining these divergent dynamics.

In summary, the region's labor markets have experienced the impacts of the economic crisis as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic mostly during the second quarter of this year. This crisis is exceptional in both its magnitude and characteristics. This is even more problematic considering that informal workers, women, young people and those with lower levels of education are those who have generally experienced the loss of a job with greater intensity. Given that these workers, on average, are located in the lower half of the distribution, that they generally do not have sufficient economic support to endure long periods without a source of employment, and that income from work represents a majority of family income, the contraction in the demand for labor ends up having very unfavorable distributional impacts.

The massive loss of labor income

As a result of the sharp contraction in employment and hours worked, the world and the region have been experiencing a deep contraction in income from the labor market. Recent estimates by the ILO (7) suggest a global loss of 10.7 % in labor income during the first three quarters of 2020, which is equivalent to 5.5 % of the first three-quarters of global GDP in 2019. However, consistent with the above, the contraction in total labor income is significantly higher in Latin America, on the order of 19.3 %.

In Metropolitan Lima, nominal income from labor fell in the March-May 2020 moving quarter, on average, 8.1 % compared to the same quarter in 2019. This, added to the contraction of employment, resulted in a fall of more than 50 % in the wage bill. This downward dynamic continued to be strongly observed in the following months, with a 48 % year-on-year drop during the May-July quarter.

According to the ILO (10), the level of income fell back to the levels of 2014, that is, six years ago. In Mexico, the proportion of employed people with incomes up to the minimum wage increased from 22.0 % to 26 % between March and April 2020.

In Argentina, for the first time, the variation in the average income of formal employees in the private sector between March and May was negative, with the fall being even greater in real terms due to inflation. This, in part, reflects the wage reduction for private-sector employees who were suspended, but also the wage reductions for some of those who continued to work.

According to Chile's Remuneration Index, average labor income decreased by 1.3 % during April compared to the previous year. This drop was even higher in the transport and storage sector (-4.9 %) and professional activities (-3 %). In turn, in the May-July quarter of 2020, 34 % of those employed declared that they had experienced a drop in their income while 58 % kept it unchanged and 2 % obtained an increase. It is interesting to observe this behavior separately among the absent employed (19 % of the total employed) and the present employed. Among the former, as expected, the loss of income amounts to 58 %, of which 31 % had no income. Among those present (81.1 % of the total employed) these percentages were 28 % and 2 %, respectively. Self-employed workers and employers are the most affected groups, with 68 % and 67 %, respectively, suffering a contraction in income. They are followed by informal workers (34 %), domestic service (24 %), and formal workers (23 %). Finally, and as additional evidence of the unequal impacts of these reductions, self-employed and domestic service personnel were the ones who reported the highest percentage of zero labor income.

Consequently, given the context of very weak labor demand, it is very likely that adjustments in the region will be further channeled through real, but also nominal, wage reductions, especially in the informal part of the labor market. In turn, given that labor income represents, on average, between 70 % and 90 % of total family income, these reductions result in heavy losses in the monetary resources obtained by households with significant impacts on poverty levels.

National policy responses to sustain employment and provide economic security

As a response to the crisis, numerous direct actions have been implemented in Latin America to support businesses, maintain jobs, and compensate for the loss of income of households, especially those most affected and which are generally in the informal economy. As previously mentioned, multiple aspects make this crisis unprecedented. Its magnitude, scope, speed, and characteristics demand coordinated responses in terms of health, labor, economic and social protection. To this end, countries have resorted to mechanisms created in previous crises, but have also implemented new responses taking into account the specificities of the current situation and the need to cover a broader set of population than in previous experiences.

The main policies and measures concerning three areas, not necessarily exclusive but complementary, could be stylistically classified into three groups: i. measures and monetary benefits within the framework of strategies to sustain labor relations; ii. unemployment benefits and iii. other programs to provide economic security through monetary benefits to the individuals and families most affected by this crisis that are not in the sphere of formal salaried labor relations and/or are not covered by social security contributory programs (Table 2). The severity of the crisis has led the countries in general to implement a combination of these instruments; for example, within the framework of unemployment insurance, subsidies for the payment of benefits for the suspension of activities and/or reduction of the workday have been incorporated.

The policies and instruments described below do not exhaust the set of public interventions that were also expressed through active fiscal responses, flexible monetary policies, direct actions to specific economic sectors, credit and financial support to companies, protections for workers in the workplace, and the use and revitalization of instruments that allowed consensus to be reached through social dialogue.

Table 2

Typology and instruments of the main policies implemented in Latin America to sustain employment and provide economic security to families and individuals

| Retention of employment in the informal economy | Economic security for the unemployed | Economic security for families and individuals |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Instruments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Payroll subsidies - Unemployment Insurance <p>Benefits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Other support to firms conditioned to the maintenance of employment | <p>Instruments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contributory unemployment insurance | <p>Instruments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conditional benefits - Unconditional (emergency) benefits - Other monetary and non-monetary benefits |
| <p>Recipients:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employed persons (full and part-time, absent) | <p>Target group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unemployed | <p>Target group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unemployed, inactive and workers in the informal economy - People with no or low income regardless of their work status |
| <p>Examples:</p> <p>Argentina: ATP</p> <p>Uruguay: unemployment insurance</p> <p>Chile: unemployment insurance</p> <p>Costa Rica: Bono PROTEGER</p> <p>Paraguay: subsidy through IPS</p> <p>Colombia: payroll subsidy</p> <p>Dominican Republic: FASE</p> | <p>Examples:</p> <p>Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia: contributory unemployment benefits paid by social security institutions and unemployment savings</p> | <p>Examples:</p> <p>Chile: Bono COVID-19, IFE</p> <p>Argentina: IFE</p> <p>Brazil: EmergencyAid</p> <p>Colombia: Solidarity Income</p> <p>Costa Rica: Bono PROTEGER</p> |
| <p>Features to be highlighted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transience - Sustainability | <p>Features to be highlighted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relatively low coverage (either by its contributory nature or insufficient financing) - Relatively low performance | <p>Features to be highlighted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Speed of response - Transitions - Coverage, registration systems, duplication of benefits/beneficiaries |

Benefits to support formal employment

Support measures and incentives to maintain the labor link are crucial because, on the one hand, they prevent its discontinuity from generating losses of specific and general job skills as well as future search costs for both sides of the labor relationship but also, on the other hand, because maintaining this link could facilitate a faster economic recovery.

In this area there have been several innovations and programs in the region that seek through

payment to the company or the worker, generally with funding from general income taxes, social security contributions or a combination of both, the payment of such benefits either through social security institutions, the tax authority or another agency.

In particular, two types of interventions can be differentiated: on the one hand, payroll subsidies and, on the other, the extension of unemployment insurance to cover other events beyond unemployment due to dismissal. In fact,

this second modality has been extended to cover both total suspension and reduction of working hours or partial suspension of activities. Some insurances already had these options, while other countries incorporated this modality, thus allowing to adapt the schemes to the diverse realities that the different economic sectors and their companies have been facing.

Within the first group, Paraguay established a subsidy for formal employees who earn up to 2 minimum wages and whose work contracts are suspended due to the cessation of activities by the pandemic. The amount of the subsidy corresponds to 50 % of the minimum wage and is financed by the National Government through an increase in the resources allocated to the Social Security Institute (11). Colombia allowed companies and individuals who certify a decrease of 20 % or more in their income to apply in May, June, July, and August for a subsidy equal to 40 % of the minimum wage for all workers for whom they contribute in the Integrated Contribution Settlement Plan (PILA), without exceeding the number of employees registered in February 2020 (9).

In Peru, workers included in a complete work stoppage continued to have the benefit of the Social Health Insurance - EsSalud. In addition, the private sector employer receives a subsidy of up to 35 % of the gross monthly salary of its employees whose salaries do not exceed 1,500 soles (US\$424). The Dominican Republic launched the Employee Solidarity Assistance Fund (FASE), a monetary transfer to sustain employment in the sectors most affected by the pandemic and where the government contributes 70 % of the salary from a minimum value of RD\$ 5,000 pesos to a maximum of RD\$ 8,500 pesos per month per worker.

In Argentina, the National Government established the "Emergency Assistance Program for Work and Production" (ATP) that provides a 95 % reduction in employer contributions to the Argentine Integrated Social Security System (SIPA) and a compensatory salary allocation in private companies. At the same time, it establishes the prohibition of dismissals without just cause and for the causes of lack or decrease of work and force majeure and suspensions for such causes, first until the end of May, but then

it was extended for six more months (12). In September the sixth payment of the program was approved with some differences from the conditions previously stipulated. In particular, the companies that can apply for this benefit are those with less than 800 workers, which register a nominal recovery of their turnover of up to 40 % but a real negative variation compared to the pre-pandemic situation. ATP 6 offers the possibility of access to the complementary salary for critical sectors and credit that can be converted into a subsidy for companies that incorporate workers.

The "Benefício Emergencial de Preservação do Emprego e da Renda" in Brazil is also a program to sustain the income of formal employees with the temporary suspension of contracts or reduction of working hours and income. The amount of the benefit is calculated based on the employee's salary of the last three months and corresponds to a percentage of the Severance Insurance to which the worker would be entitled in case of dismissal.

Within the second modality, Uruguay has a contributory unemployment insurance, and to respond to the pandemic situation, the conditions of entry were made more flexible or the duration of the benefits was extended. The existing regime was thus complemented with a special regime that covers all sectors of activity that have Wage Councils, including both monthly contracts and day laborers and those who have exhausted the subsidy under the general regime. The benefit was also extended to those workers with partial suspension, with a partial reduction of the hours worked (at least 50 % of the working day) and to those workers who carry out activities with a total suspension of tasks (subject to compliance with certain requirements), maintaining the employment relationship. Within this framework, unemployment insurance reached a maximum number of applications of around 82 000 in March 2020, compared to a maximum value of 16 000 applications per month in previous years. This figure decreased in the following months. During the period March-June about 77 % of the applications corresponded to the cause of suspension and less than 10 % to dismissal (13).

In Trinidad and Tobago, the Wage Assistance Grant provides \$1,500 (USD220) for 3 months to dependent workers who have been affected by the pandemic at work.

Finally, in Chile, through the Employment Protection Act, additional resources have been injected into the Unemployment Solidarity Fund and the criteria for eligibility for insurance have been temporarily modified. In particular, specific circumstances are contemplated, including the temporary closure of companies, staff suspensions, or temporary reductions in working hours to access this benefit. Therefore, the worker maintains the employment relationship while receiving income from the unemployment insurance while the employer must continue to pay the worker's provisional and health contributions. The basis for the calculation of the benefit is the average remuneration of the last 3 months (while for the calculation of the insurance in case of unemployment it is the last 12 months). While the replacement rates in the case of contract suspension are the same as in the case of unemployment, in the case of a reduction of working hours the employer pays the worked part and the insurance covers half of the non-worked part (14).

Unemployment insurance

In the proposed typology, the "pure" unemployment benefits are those provided by the unemployment insurance. Among the modifications that contributory insurance has undergone in the context of this crisis, to expand its horizontal and/or vertical coverage, are the relaxation of certain requirements for access to them, the extension of the duration of benefits, the increase in replacement rates, the increase in benefit amounts and the use of individual accounts for reasons other than those originally contemplated

In Argentina, unemployment insurance provides workers registered with social security who has been legally dismissed without just cause with a monthly payment, family allowances, and medical coverage while they are unemployed. In the context of this crisis, in April the minimum and maximum amounts were raised to \$6,000 and \$10,000, respectively. At the same time, in view of the extension of the quarantine, the Ministry of Employment, Labor and Social Security established a new extension of the expiration of the benefits until December 31, 2020 (after the one established in March and May), for all those

cases with expiration between August 30 and November 30, 2020. The number of beneficiaries remained relatively constant at around 120 000 people.

In Chile, in July, the national government announced a project of transitory modifications to the unemployment insurance. On the one hand, access requirements are relaxed by reducing from 6 to 3 contributions made in the last 12 months. At the same time, those workers with available balances in their individual accounts can access their funds regardless of the months they have contributed. At the same time, replacement rates are increased from month 2 onwards. On the other hand, the "Benefit for self-employed workers" was created, which includes a subsidy and an interest-free loan to self-employed workers who have submitted ballots for at least three months in the last year or six months in the last two years and who, additionally, in the month they apply for the benefit have experienced a drop in their income of at least 30 % for the period April 2019 -April 2020. The subsidy, which is not considered income and, therefore, is not subject to taxes nor is it considered for social security purposes, covers a maximum of 70 % of the reduction in income, this percentage decreasing with the amount of income (14). In September of this year, through Law 21 269, domestic workers were incorporated into the unemployment insurance system.

In Ecuador, before the Humanitarian Support Law came into effect on June 22, 2020, workers independent relationships who were laid off had to wait 60 days of being unemployed to apply for unemployment insurance. Now they can apply from the tenth day of being unemployed and payments are made automatically (15).

In Costa Rica, the Law of Delivery of the Labor Capitalization Fund was approved in April, which allows for the withdrawal of the Labor Capitalization Fund in the event of suspension of the work contract or reduction of the workday that implies a salary decrease (3). In Colombia, while the economic emergency lasts, the salaried workers who continue with the labor relationship but who have suffered income cuts may withdraw each month from their severance account an amount that allows them to compensate for such reduction (9). In Peru, on the other hand, free availability for workers of up to S/2 400 of

the compensation funds for the time of service (CTS) and additional retirement measures for workers with a complete suspension of work were established.

Cash transfer programs to informal workers and families

Another important group of strategies and policies aims at compensating, at least partially, the loss of monetary resources for families in a situation of vulnerability, many of them in informality and beyond the condition regarding occupation and type of labor insertion. To this end, non-contributory income transfer programs were expanded and/or created. Some of them are described below, without attempting to make an exhaustive review of all the experiences in the region.

In Argentina, in March, the amount of the Universal Allowance per Child (AUH) and the Universal Allowance per Pregnancy (AUE) was doubled, with an additional outlay of \$13.4 billion. In addition, a bonus of up to \$3,000 (USD 45) was granted to approximately 4.6 million retirees who received a single pension benefit until reaching \$18,892, which implied an outlay of approximately \$13.8 billion. However, the largest income transfer measure is the “Emergency Family Income (IFE),” created towards the end of that month, liquidated through the National Social Security Administration (ANSES), and destined for informal workers, domestic workers, and single-income or single-income workers in the first two categories. The beneficiaries of the AUH and the AUE were the first to be included in this new benefit. The amount of the IFE is \$10,000 (59.3 % of the minimum wage). The first payment was made between April and May 2020. The second payment was made during June and July and a third during August and September. The number of benefit holders has been around 9 million, a figure that compares to the 4.3 million children and adolescents receiving the AUH.

Colombia already had two conditional transfer programs: Families in Action and Youth in Action. During the first months of the pandemic emergency, the national government authorized the payment of two extraordinary transfers, one in March and the other in May, to strengthen

both programs. At the same time, the Solidarity Income program was created for families that are not beneficiaries of those two programs or Colombia Mayor, and VAT refund and are in a situation of vulnerability.

Ecuador, through its Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion, established the Family Emergency Protection Bond for a few months, aimed at those who do not have access to social security with an income below the unified basic salary, and at those affiliated with the peasant insurance. In Bolivia, the Family Bonus was created, a transfer of 500 Bolivian pesos (USD70) per month to low-income families with children attending the initial, primary, and secondary educational level.

In Uruguay, contributions to the Uruguay Social Program and the Equity Plan were increased, programs focused on protecting poor households. In Costa Rica, the PROTEGER Bond was implemented, which consists of temporarily providing an economic amount according to the condition of labor vulnerability in which the person finds him/herself as a result of the national emergency caused by COVID-19.

In Paraguay, the Social Fund was established to provide a subsidy of 25 % of the minimum wage to independent informal workers or employees of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises. The so-called “Pytyvõ” program reached approximately 1,100,000 beneficiaries by mid-June 2020. In September 2020, a new phase of this program began, with four additional monthly payments, reaching 770 000 potential beneficiaries. At the same time, the coverage of the “Tekoporá” program and the Elderly program was expanded (11).

In Peru, different alternatives were also implemented to reach the population most affected by the crisis. On the one hand, the “Yo Me Queen en Casa” bonus, a monetary subsidy for households in situations of poverty; on the other hand, the “Independiente” bonus for households with low-income independent workers affected by the pandemic; the “Bono Rural” for rural families in situations of poverty or extreme poverty; the “Bono Familiar Universal” bonus for those vulnerable households that were not covered by the previous bonuses and the “Contigo” program for severely disabled people in situations of

poverty, in which the payment of a bimester was advanced in March-April.

In Chile, the COVID-19 Emergency Bond and the Emergency Family Income were created. The former provided a one-time subsidy to households receiving the single-family subsidy, households receiving other transfers from the Seguridades y Oportunidades system, and households belonging to the 60 % most vulnerable households according to the Social Registry of Households. In those households in which some member receives a retirement pension or is a formal worker, the exclusion was indicated. The Emergency Family Income is a monthly transfer to households belonging to the 80 % most vulnerable (14).

In Brazil, the “Auxílio Emergencial” was implemented, a money transfer for informal workers, individual micro-entrepreneurs, the self-employed and the unemployed, belonging to families whose monthly income per person does not exceed half the minimum wage (R\$522.50), or whose total family income is up to 3 minimum wages (R\$3135). Households benefiting from the Bolsa Familia program receive the benefit automatically. The program consists of 5 payments of R\$600 and is doubled in the case of single-parent mothers. In September, the continuity of the program was announced until December 2020, but for an amount of R\$300.

Final considerations

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated the constraints faced by labor and social policies in countries with a high presence of informality and relatively weak labor institutions. This is compounded by challenges in terms of fiscal space and institutionality, including aspects such as government and public-private coordination and technological and logistical capacities to provide the goods, services, and economic benefits required by the affected populations, especially the most vulnerable, including the restrictions imposed by geographical location, for example, being far from urban centers where there is the greater installed capacity for health services. Some national and sub-national governments quickly decided to deliver food directly in order to guarantee food security before the impossibility

of rapidly expanding or implementing cash transfer programs. Such is the case of Chile, which at the end of May began delivering 2.5 million boxes of food. Subsequently, this program was expanded, reaching 5.6 million in August. Private initiatives by employers' organizations and private companies and the community work carried out by many unions and other workers' organizations also joined in.

The crisis clearly shows the need to move towards greater income coverage because of job losses, especially in the informal economy. Until the beginning of the pandemic, the region had a rich experience in social protection programs of conditional and unconditional cash transfers, although in most cases with strict targeting criteria, thus reaching mainly the first deciles of income in the distribution of the population's income.

Given the magnitude of the crisis, it also strongly reached the middle sectors of the population, who were also severely affected in their income. Thus, in terms of managing transfer policies, they have faced the challenge of expanding and improving the registration of these individuals and households that have also become vulnerable. The rapid and timely intervention has not only made it possible to limit the immediate loss of income and the lack of access to basic goods and services but also to limit the amplification of these negative shocks in the medium term.

Additionally, another challenge refers to the best intervention strategies to support economic recovery, and the insertion of people who have lost or seen their sources of labor income severely reduced. The countries of the region have different schemes of active labor market policies with different designs, requirements, and target population, implemented from different state levels, which could, a priori, fulfill the double objective of providing income to people with greater difficulties in entering an occupation, while at the same time helping them to achieve quality labor market insertion. However, their scope is still very insufficient, and the effects in terms of the possibilities of obtaining formal employment after going through the transfer program are usually low. The challenge at this juncture is even greater given the strong

uncertainty regarding the characteristics and intensity of the post-pandemic growth paths.

The crisis opens the opportunity to restructure labor and social protection institutions to advance in strategies that allow for a more permanent labor guarantee and social protection basis, as well as to structure a comprehensive employment policy that accompanies or is part of the economic recovery strategy. The adaptation of some labor institutions such as unemployment insurance can already be considered an important institutional advance. In this sense, the design of a system of protection against unemployment, which includes the suspension and reduction of working hours as a reason for receiving benefits, is making it possible to improve coverage while maintaining the employment relationship. These mechanisms will surely be very appropriate for future systemic or sectoral crises that the economies of the region may face.

A key dimension, which should play a greater role in the strategy for recovery with employment, relates to occupational safety and health, particularly in the area of biological risks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries have been incorporating and gradually increasing provisions for policies, institutions, businesses, and workers to take the necessary preventive measures, but given that the overlap between pandemic and possible recovery scenario is the most likely, there is no doubt that a strengthening of occupational safety is what will allow a safe and healthy return to activities. Other dimensions, such as psychosocial risks, have also taken on significant importance, for example, in segments that have seen teleworking intensify. Thus, the quality of work, the sustainability of companies, and their productivity have begun to be more closely linked to these factors and areas of labor policy.

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