

# ► Rapid response to COVID-19 under high informality? The case of Peru

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**In policy responses to the economic and social impacts of the pandemic, some informal workers, who are not necessarily poor because they work informally, remain invisible.**

## Preface

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Recognising the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ILO has called for immediate support on an unprecedented scale for enterprises and workers around the world. Such support can be guided by the ILO's policy framework for COVID-19 responses, which includes four policy pillars: Stimulating the economy and employment; supporting enterprises, jobs and incomes; protecting workers in the workplace; and, relying on social dialogue for solutions.

While all workers are affected by the pandemic, some groups bear a larger proportion of burden. In particular, those workers and economic units in the informal economy are likely to face disproportionate impacts in terms of job and income losses.

Even before the pandemic, many countries such as Peru were struggling with the sustained high level of informality, despite solid economic growth. This note shows that even in a country with a very high level of informality, some rapid responses can be designed and implemented to mitigate the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on small scale entrepreneurs, self-employed, vulnerable and poor households and informal workers. In addition, given the magnitude of informality in Peru, the note also calls for a broader and inclusive policy response, where informal workers and economic units are not left behind, via, for example, a micro- sectorial strategy that complements the good macroeconomic prospects of the Peruvian economy.

This note is an outcome of strong, joint collaboration between the Employment Policy Department and the ILO Office for the Andean Countries that worked together to monitor the evolution of the policy responses relating to informal employment in Peru. It is hoped that this note will contribute to the ongoing policy developments for supporting workers and enterprises in the informal economy in these difficult times.

## Introduction

Recent international discussions on the effects of COVID-19 are shifting the focus to policy responses to the economic and social impacts of the pandemic, especially in contexts of high informality. Frequently, governments tend to engage mostly with the formal sector, as this accounts for the largest share of gross domestic product (GDP) and taxes, etc. They also engage with poor households, in an effort to redistribute wealth. However, in this process some informal workers who are not necessarily poor because they work informally, remain invisible. Informal workers, who are typically more prevalent at the lower levels of income distribution, are losing a substantial proportion of their source of income, if not the entire amount. For this reason, it is challenging to enforce lockdowns for long periods in countries with this type of labour market, unless rapid response measures are implemented to compensate for the loss of income and smart, careful and prudent recovery plans are set in place for the post-lockdown period.

This note discusses possibilities for policy responses to the emergency in the context of high informality. Specifically, it examines the case of Peru, a lower middle-income country with a population of 32 million and a global GDP of US\$220 billion in 2019. Of the 16 million working population, 72 per cent is in informal employment, with 56 per cent employed in the informal sector and 16 per cent in the formal sector<sup>2</sup>. According to Peru's national statistics office, the Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática (INEI, 2018), nearly 20 per cent of total GDP is produced by those 56 per cent working in the informal sector, while the other 44 per cent of workers in the formal sector produce 80 per cent of GDP. Several studies have linked this to the country's highly heterogeneous productive structure (Salazar-Xirinachs and Chacaltana 2018).

<sup>1</sup> The opinions in this note are solely of the author and do not necessarily represent the ILO's institutional view. Javier Palacios, Jorge Bernedo, Philippe Vanhuynegem, Rosa Zamora, Efraín Quicaña, Mauricio Dierckxens and Vicky Leung provided valuable comments. Special thanks go to Pablo Lavado for his advice on short-term indicators.

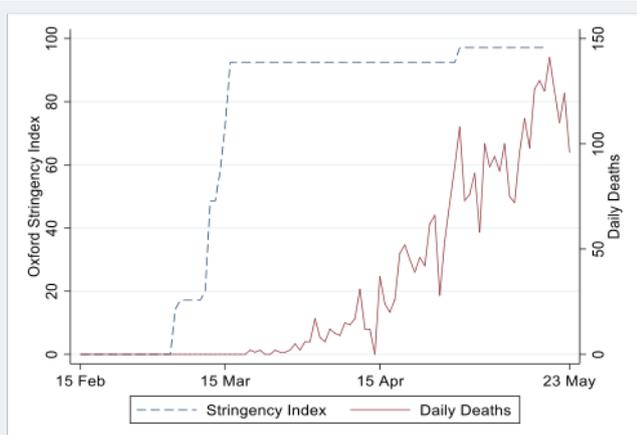
<sup>2</sup> INEI 2018, Satellite account for the Informal Economy, Lima.

In addition to the critical importance of including vulnerable people in policy responses to the economic and social impacts of COVID-19, another key issue is timing, as there is an urgent need to respond rapidly. This note presents an assessment of the rapidly evolving situation, before discussing policy options in the case of Peru, paying special attention to the informal sector. It concludes by examining some lessons and posing questions for further policy discussion.

### Rapid assessment

The first case of COVID-19 in Peru was registered on 7 March 2020 and the first confirmed death was recorded on 20 March. By 23 of May, more than 110,000 cases and more than 3,200 deaths had been confirmed. Figure 1 illustrates the evolution in the number of daily deaths in Peru.

Figure 1. Peru. Oxford Stringency Index and daily deaths due to COVID-19



Source: Oxford Stringency Data. Government Policy Response Tracker. Accessed 25 May 2020.

In common with many other countries, the Government of Peru reacted by imposing a number of sanitary measures, including a total lockdown, starting on 16 March, initially for two weeks and later extended, first until 26 April, then to 11 May, subsequently to 24 May and –at the time of writing– until the end of June. This latter phase includes a more flexible approach to lockdown, as some activities were authorized to operate. The Oxford Stringency Index in Peru shows this evolution.

In Peru, intense debates have been triggered on why the virus has spread in this manner, despite the stringent measures implemented. Some highlight the role of the informal work sector in the country, and a renewed discussion on its causes has emerged – as to whether it is driven by structural factors, if it is by choice or necessity, or even if it is determined by the lack of capacity on the part of the State.

► Table 1

### Peru – timeline of health measures

| Date     | Measures  |
|----------|---|
| 11 March | National Sanitary Emergency declaration for 90 days |
| 16 March | Total quarantine (only essential services allowed)  |
| 20 March | Night curfew  |
| 7 April  | Broadened testing (rapid tests)                     |
| 15 April | Fines for non-compliance                            |

Source: Author's own elaboration

While these questions should be the subject of further research, not least since other countries with similar rates of informality have had different experiences with COVID-19, the focus of this note is the short- and medium-term impact that the pandemic, together with the lockdown measures, will have on labour markets.

In the short term, effects are related to the emergency period, in particular the lockdown. Immediately available indicators for the short-term impacts of the pandemic (see Figure 2) show that demand for electricity, which reflects overall economic activity, fell by 30 per cent in March and April 2020 (the period of lockdown) with respect to the average in January<sup>3</sup>.

Regarding the effects on the labour market, the same figure shows the evolution of the electronic payroll, in particular the variation in the number of new incorporations (inflows), a closer indicator of formal labour demand. Note that the electronic payroll provides an indicator of formal jobs and there is no similar registry for informal work. If this indicator is compared with the same period in 2019 it emerges that the figure fell nearly 30 per cent in March 2020 (the lockdown was imposed on 16 March) and nearly 80 per cent in April and May.

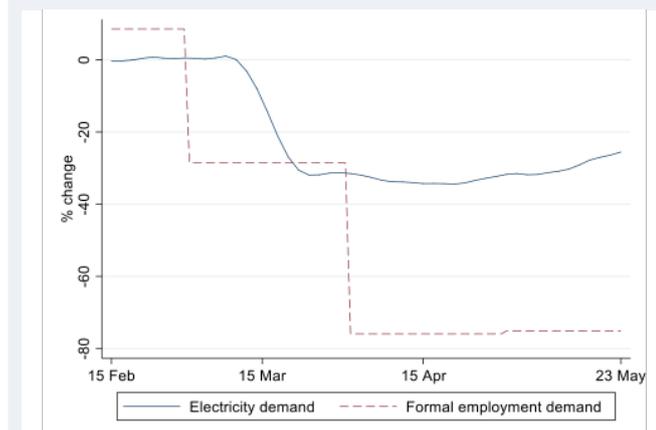
To some extent this trend is to be expected, as the figures mainly reflect the lockdown effect. Most firms stopped hiring during this period and are expected to restart hiring in the recovery period. A difficulty in assessing impact during the lockdown period is that although people are not working, that does not necessarily mean that all of them have lost their jobs; some of them could return to work once the lockdown is over (jobs could be 'hibernating'), while others may still be working in some form. A recent telephone survey conducted by the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos (IEP 2020)<sup>4</sup> showed that of the 76 per cent who declare themselves to be part of the active population, 31 per cent said that they had definitively lost their jobs (this percentage was

<sup>3</sup> Lavado (2020) argues that there is a high correlation between this indicator and GDP, of around 75 per cent.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://iep.org.pe/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Informe-OP-Abril-2020-5-Impacto-en-la-econom%C3%ADa-del-Covid-19-v2.pdf>

higher – 46 per cent among own-account workers and 14 per cent among employees). The remaining 45 per cent was still working – 20 per cent from home, 9 per cent at work with authorization, and 6 per cent at work without authorization. The latter is of course an indicator of informality, and is more predominant among own-account workers (9 per cent versus 3 per cent among employees).

**Figure 2. Peru. Short-term economic and labour effects**



Source: COES database (accessed 25 May 2020) and Labour Ministry of Peru (MTPE, 2020)<sup>5</sup>

As for the medium-term effects, given the generalized uncertainty it is difficult to provide accurate forecasts for the labour market. There have been some recent estimates of the economic impact. Eclac (2020) predicts a decline of 4 per cent in total GDP for this year in Peru and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects a similar fall of 4.5 per cent, (compared with a 3 per cent expected increase before the pandemic) and an increase of 5.2 per cent in 2021. More recently, some Peruvian think tanks have estimated even more substantial reductions. In this uncertain context, it is more useful to consider that for every 1 per cent reduction in GDP, given an approximated output to employment elasticity of one half<sup>6</sup>, Peru could lose up to 84,000 jobs permanently. It is also likely that most of these jobs will be in the formal sector, and possible that informal employment could even expand.

However, it is well known that unlike that of more developed nations, the Peruvian labour market – as in many developing countries – tends to adjust more via reduced incomes or quality of employment than via quantities (increased unemployment or reduced number of hours). For this reason, it is interesting to look at other dimensions of employment, such as income losses. Ipsos Peru (2020) published a telephone survey (see Table 2) indicating that during lockdown, 35 per cent of

households were not receiving any income, especially the poorest and those with informal jobs (44 per cent). By contrast, some 8 per cent were receiving income as usual, and this figure increased to 41 per cent among the richest, those older than 41 years and people with formal jobs. The greater impact on the informal economy might help to explain the difficulties of imposing the lockdown measures in some geographical areas.

In the medium term, the fall in GDP will also entail a reduction in incomes. INEI (2018) estimates the proportion of labour income in GDP (labour share) at around 53 per cent in 2018<sup>7</sup>, composed of 35 per cent of incomes in the formal sector (29 per cent wages and 6 per cent own-account workers' mixed income) and 18 per cent in the informal sector (2 per cent wages and 16 per cent own-account workers' mixed income). These shares appear to have been stable in the period 2007–2018 (see figure B in the annex). Again, any 1 per cent fall in GDP would imply some 1.2 US\$ billion losses in total labour income, of which US\$800 million would be in the formal sector and US\$400 million in the informal sector.

### Policy response

Prior to the pandemic, Peru had a solvent macroeconomic situation. Indeed, in 2019 the country showed a fiscal deficit of -1.6 per cent of GDP, an inflation rate of 1.9 per cent (within the expected band of 1 to 3 per cent), and had a Fiscal Stabilization Fund – a macroeconomic countercyclical tool – estimated at US\$5.7 billion (2.5 per cent of GDP). The Central Bank reference interest rate was 2.25 per cent (since the pandemic it has been cut first to 1.25 per cent and then to 0.25 per cent).

### General response

The Government announced an ambitious stimulus package estimated initially at 12 per cent of GDP, both for the emergency and reconstruction stages. Table 3 lists the main economic initiatives launched by the Government of Peru that could have consequences for the labour market. Naturally, the monetary stimulus is the most important in terms of magnitude, although its effects are expected to become more evident in the medium term.

During the emergency, aside from the sanitary response (enhancing the capacity of testing and treating patients), the most urgent initiatives were related to addressing the loss of income that most families in lockdown would face. Here, the informal structure of the Peruvian labour market has proved highly relevant, as it determines access to certain income-smoothing mechanisms.

<sup>5</sup> Electricity demand: Smoothed daily variation with respect to Jan 2020. Formal employment demand refers to the Monthly variation with respect to same month in 2019 (MTPE, PPT presentation up to 24 May 2020)

<sup>6</sup> MTPE, 2014. [The average elasticity for the period 2009–2014 was .53 and the median was .26.](#)

<sup>7</sup> In this estimation, OAW income refers to the concept of “mixed income”. The System of National Accounts of the United Nations Statistical Division, defines mixed income as “the surplus or deficit from production by unincorporated businesses owned by households. It implicitly contains an element of remuneration for work done by the owner, or other members of the household, that cannot be separately identified from the return to the owner as entrepreneur but it excludes the operating surplus”. For a more detailed explanation of the Peruvian case, see INEI 2018.

► Table 2

Peru – short-term income losses (% of households)

|                             | We are receiving income as usual | Income has been moderately reduced | Income has been sharply reduced | We have stopped receiving income |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Total</b>                | 8                                | 26                                 | 31                              | 35                               |
| <b>Sex</b>                  |                                  |                                    |                                 |                                  |
| Male                        | 8                                | 27                                 | 31                              | 34                               |
| Female                      | 9                                | 23                                 | 31                              | 37                               |
| <b>Socio-economic group</b> |                                  |                                    |                                 |                                  |
| A (richest)                 | 41                               | 27                                 | 18                              | 14                               |
| B                           | 18                               | 28                                 | 38                              | 16                               |
| C                           | 4                                | 27                                 | 31                              | 38                               |
| D (poorest)                 | 2                                | 20                                 | 25                              | 53                               |
| <b>Age</b>                  |                                  |                                    |                                 |                                  |
| 14–24                       | 4                                | 28                                 | 33                              | 35                               |
| 25–40                       | 9                                | 25                                 | 29                              | 37                               |
| 41+                         | 13                               | 25                                 | 33                              | 29                               |
| <b>Type of job</b>          |                                  |                                    |                                 |                                  |
| Formal                      | 16                               | 36                                 | 32                              | 16                               |
| Informal                    | 3                                | 22                                 | 31                              | 44                               |

Source: Ipsos Peru (2020)

► Table 3

Peru – timeline of main socio-economic policies

| Fecha  | Política  |
|--------|---|
| 31 Jan | Protocol for Protection of Health Staff – COVID-19  |
| 6 Mar  | Labour Ministry issues the <i>Guide for Prevention of COVID-19 in the Workplace</i>   |
| 15 Mar | Extraordinary bonus for health staff – COVID-19   |
| 15 Mar | Teleworking for all who are able  |
| 16 Mar | Exceptional Monetary Subsidy to households in poverty   |
| 19 Mar | Central Bank cuts reference rate from 2.25 per cent to 1.25 per cent  |
| 26 Mar | Authorization to withdraw savings from UI Individual Savings account (Time of Service Compensation Fund) up to PEN2 400 (about US\$700)   |
| 26 Mar | Workers exempted from contributing to pension fund in April   |
| 26 Mar | Local governments launch basic products programme   |
| 27 Mar | Payroll subsidy to businesses with workers earning up to PEN1 500 (US\$400), with a limit of 35 per cent of payroll   |
| 27 Mar | Independent Worker Bonus  |
| 30 Mar | Extension of deadline for paying taxes  |
| 31 Mar | A number of business are exempted from paying VAT   |
| 1 Apr  | Workers can withdraw, once only, up to PEN2 000 (US\$600) from their pension fund   |
| 3 Apr  | Central Reserve Bank launches the Reactiva Peru ( <i>Reactivating Peru</i> ) plan, making PEN30 billion (US\$9 billion) available as financial support to 50 000 enterprises, most of them with fewer than 10 workers |
| 8 Apr  | Central Bank cuts reference rate from 1.25 per cent to 0.25 per cent  |
| 14 Apr | Government exceptionally authorizes use of unpaid leave for 90 days ( <i>Suspension Perfecta de Labores</i> ), for businesses where no other option or support programme is available                                 |
| 19 Apr | Government creates a Rural Cash Transfer (Bonus) for poor households in rural areas that are not benefiting from other programmes   |

Source: ILO website and national sources

Table 4 shows the structure of Peru's labour market, its degree of informality, and the type of protection for each category of worker. The protection scheme mainly covers salaried workers, who represent 46 per cent of total employment in Peru, although half of them are in informal employment, most notably in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It should be noted that under Peruvian legislation, wage employment includes different special regimes, with different levels of protection. Workers in the general regime (large firms), have access to more protection or income-smoothing mechanisms, a contributory Health System and Pension Fund, 30 days of paid leave, and even access to an individual savings account system, called *Compensacion por Tiempo de Servicios*, which is activated once a worker loses his or her job. However, this regime does not apply to all employees. For example, the SME sector, which has high informality rates, is covered by the SME regime, which offers less protection. As Reinecke (2020) states, formality and solid labour institutions have proved to be key in times of crisis.<sup>8</sup>

### Initiatives for own-account workers

For own-account workers, the traditional approach has been to rely on social programmes, targeting the poor. However, during the pandemic it soon became clear that this approach was inadequate, since it left behind a great many workers. This was particularly the case for own-account workers, who could not be included in the social programmes because they work (informally), but are nevertheless vulnerable, as their incomes are still low, non-permanent and disappear if they do not work. In Peru, own-account work and unpaid family work account for 47 per cent (37 per cent + 10 per cent) of total employment and are not protected by any income-smoothing mechanism. Informality is higher in these employment categories.

For this reason, a major challenge for the Government while launching the total lockdown was the rapid organization of a massive transfer of resources to the poor and to those in the informal economy. To this end, three types of cash transfer were created that could be used by those in the informal economy.

- **16 March.** The Emergency Household Bonus of PEN380 (about 40 per cent of the monthly minimum wage) was launched. The target group is poor families, as identified in the national list of poor families (*Sistema de Focalizacion de Hogares* or Household Targeting System). This is the list used by most social programmes.
- **27 March.** The Independent Worker Bonus of PEN380 (40 per cent of the monthly minimum wage) was launched. The target group is own-account workers who are non-poor but vulnerable (according to a threshold of incomes), mainly from urban areas. When the lockdown was extended, the Government decided to issue this bonus again (so the total transfer has been PEN760 or 80 per cent of the monthly minimum wage).
- **19 April.** The one-time Rural Worker Bonus of PEN760 was launched. The target group is poor families in rural areas. Again, the list of poor families was used.

In addition to these measures directly targeting workers, Peru has launched low-interest credit lines for small businesses (FAE-MYPE and Reactiva Peru), which are particularly important for own-account workers and employers running small businesses.

These initiatives have been implemented by various agencies, using different approaches. In a country with little access to electronic banking, physical presence at the banks has been a genuine concern.

► Table 4

### Peru – workers' protection schemes

|                    | Total employment (in thousands) | Share of total employment | Informality rate | Institutional protection scheme (for formal workers)              |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|---|
| Employment status  | 16 511                          | 100%                      | 73%              |   |
| Employer           | 654                             | 4%                        | 51%              | Private individual protection                                     |
| Own-account        | 6 100                           | 37%                       | 87%              | No protection/individual protection                               |
| Employee           | 7 661                           | 46%                       | 55%              | General regime / Special regimes (SME, Agriculture, etc.)         |
| Unpaid family work | 1 670                           | 10%                       | 100%             | No protection/individual protection                               |
| Domestic workers   | 395                             | 2%                        | 92%              | Special law.<br>Social security health protection<br>Pension Fund |

Source: Author's own elaboration based on INEI 2018

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion on this, see Reinecke 2020.

Particularly noteworthy, for its speed of implementation, is the Independent Worker Bonus (see Box). This initiative was launched on 27 March and came into effect on 8 April. Implementation was handled by the Ministry of Labour, in particular Trabaja Peru, a public works programme that had an expenditure capacity but was also in lockdown.

To make this possible, the Ministry of Labour had to rapidly assemble a list of independent workers. The starting point was the Electronic Payroll, a monthly digital declaration by private firms of their complete list of (formal) workers, accompanied by a tax declaration. Together with records of public servants, this registry constitutes an approximate registry of formal workers in Peru. In addition is a list of poor households, as identified by the National Targeting System.

In order to identify vulnerable own-account workers, the Ministry of Labour obtained exceptional access (under the emergency law) to personal data from different sources, including the tax and bank system, as well as the electronic payroll for private firms and the list of public sector staff.

After examining all these lists, the Ministry identified 780,000 independent workers who were non-poor, but vulnerable, since they earned less than PEN1,200 per month. The list was then validated by the National Registry of Identification.

For the transfer itself, the Ministry engaged with the Banco de la Nacion (National Bank), where some 10 per cent of people named on the list held an account. For the remainder, other transfer arrangements were devised, including a mobile phone-based solution which involved sending beneficiaries a code, enabling them to access the direct debit network without a card and withdraw cash. The technology was basic, given that not all recipients were likely to have access to the latest generation of cell phones. The speed of implementation was rapid, and within just 6 days, 60 per cent of the total fund had been transferred to the independent workers targeted.

Due to the size of the crisis, as the Peruvian government extended the lockdown period, it also announced a Universal Cash transfer to all workers not included in these programmes. The Universal initiative was launched in May, based on the expansion of the above mentioned schemes (Emergency, Independent and Rural Bonuses). In addition, it includes the possibility of registering persons not present in any of these lists, for evaluation by the Government on a case-by-case basis.

### Some conclusions

Countries with high levels of informality face a disproportionate challenge in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Informal workers tend to be more affected by the impacts of the virus, as many cannot stop working, at least not for a prolonged period, and they typically lack social protection or institutional income-smoothing schemes. At the same time, it is more difficult for these countries to reach out to informal workers and economic units in order

## The Independent Worker Bonus

This is a cash transfer targeting own-account workers not included in the social programme scheme, during the period of lockdown in Peru.

The definition of independent (own-account) worker includes:

- ▶ not being an employee (wage worker)
- ▶ having a business, supporting the main income
- ▶ not having any paid worker working with him/her

### Targeting

- ▶ Special authorization to the Labour Ministry to access personal data in different databases.
  - Tax system database
  - Database (income prediction) of the financial system
  - Electronic payroll
  - Public sector staff database
  - List of social programme households (*Sistema de Focalizacion de Hogares*)
- ▶ Focus on those with economic vulnerability

### Procedure

- ▶ Web page to register and create accounts, with a security procedure ([www.bonoindependiente.pe](http://www.bonoindependiente.pe))
- ▶ Delivery via the National Bank (public, largest network) deposit to an account or direct withdrawal from direct debit network

### Indicators

- ▶ 780,000 vulnerable independent workers identified.
- ▶ PEN380 per worker (40 per cent of monthly minimum wage). Offered a second time when lockdown was extended.
- ▶ 60 per cent delivered in first 6 days (first round).

Source: Ministry of Labour, Peru

to provide services, and/or to enforce measures or standards, including safety or health protocols.

In Peru, the policy response to COVID-19 has had to take into account the fact that a large proportion of workers are in informal employment. In the emergency stage, a primary challenge involved devising mechanisms to transfer resources to a sector that is characterized by a total lack of registration. However, the case of the Independent Worker Bonus –probably insufficient given the extent of own-account work in Peru – shows that it is possible to reach some independent workers rapidly, if not all of them. This emergency has shown that the Government was able to rapidly identify a list of workers who had no previous contact with the State, initiating a process that could lead to additional efforts towards formalization in the long term. It helped that the Peruvian Government had fiscal solvency accumulated over many years of macro-prudent policies. Another contributing factor was the use of new technologies as a means to reach independent workers. This could also be an opportunity for tripartite social dialogue on using technologies for formalization, as well as on monitoring pathways towards formality. However, in a country with little access to electronic banking, physical presence in banks has been a genuine concern. This could be an opportunity to decisively promote an effort to reduce cash transactions, improve banking access and increase the registration of transactions in general, which could promote a broader process of transition to formality.

In any event, such cash transfer mechanisms, while extremely helpful in an emergency situation, cannot be sustained for a prolonged period. In the medium term, only a job-rich recovery phase, backed by stronger employment policies and institutions, can help to reactivate the interlinkages between production, incomes and consumption and at the same time protect the most vulnerable (ILO, 2020). Given the difficulty of establishing

a general rule to combine security protocols, the reopening of activities, and government impulse in an adequate manner, a microeconomic perspective may be effective in complementing the macro approach of fiscal consolidation and/or injection of liquidity in the financial system (Salazar-Xirinachs, 2020); any such intervention should include sectoral coordination mechanisms, involving the participation of workers' and employers' organizations.

Following the emergency period, informality is expected to increase in Peru, thereby reversing the positive trend observed in the previous decade. The agenda of a transition to formality is once again on the table. This presents an interesting opportunity to reach consensus, since Peru has been attempting to reduce informality for some decades. However, until now the policy options have mostly been disproportionately focused on informal employment (and hence on labour regulations), underscoring the fact that an informal economy includes informal employment, but also other dimensions such as informal businesses and informal GDP. Given the nature of informality in Peru, where more than half the labour force produces one fifth of GDP, the real issue seems to be more related to finding ways of promoting productive inclusion for those in the informal economy, a challenge that requires a more integrated approach. This is another feature that could be part of a microeconomic perspective, for consideration in the recovery phase.

  
**The Government was able to rapidly identify a list of workers who had no previous contact with the State, initiating a process that could lead to further efforts toward formalization in the long term.**

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