

The covid-19 crisis and its effects on employment and poverty in Mexico.

Meza, Diana ¹, Hernández, José Luis²

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Abstract

COVID-19 has caused a serious crisis in *emerging economies*, bringing increased unemployment rates and millions of inhabitants living in extreme poverty. The objective of this document is to analyze the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment and poverty in Mexico, a country that for several decades had been distinguished by various *disparities* in population sectors. To be consistent with this purpose, we will use theoretical contributions from authors who have paid in this regard, as well as presenting information that official instances of our country have released in the period from 2018 to date -National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (INEGI) and Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS). As a prelude, we can point out that the results obtained by these agencies show that, for the second quarter of 2020 compared to the same period of 2018, working poverty increased by almost 16 percentage points. While formal employment for the second quarter between 2019 and 2020, had a drop of approximately 1 point. The document closes with an outline of concrete *alternatives* that will have to be materialized in *public policies* so that the situation portrayed improves, that is, from our perspective we offer possible focuses where the federal and local governments should focus their efforts in terms of programs and Actions aimed at the vulnerable population, which obviously implies the need for greater public investment for infrastructure that allows *economic reactivation*.

Key Words

Economics, Measurement and Analysis of Poverty, Unemployment and Public Policy.

Introduction

¹ Head of the Information Control area in the National Coordination of Scholarships for Well-Being Benito Juarez, Ministry of Public Education (SEP), Mexico City (diana_mezam@hotmail.com)

² CEO Chief Executive of Servicio Industrial LYH S.A. de C.V., Universidad del Distrito Federal, Mexico City

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The COVID-19 has generated a set of crises of various kinds, from the health crisis in terms of inability to provide hospital care, to the social crisis with the effects that isolation has on beings who, in essence, are characterized by living in an aggregate and in constant interaction, and even the economic crisis with a wide range of repercussions.

Beyond the incognito of this disease and the uncertainty that it contains, the fact of the gaps in the information (the totality of the symptoms of the different pictures in which it can appear, the effects in the ages of the people, the nonexistence of certain medicines and of a vaccine, among many others) persist the stops in the economic activities. As Núñez (2020) reports, by April of this year, the losses were already immense: there were about one and a half million people confirmed with COVID-19, as well as a little more than 87 thousand deaths and 317 thousand recovered in the world. By mid-May the situation had worsened, with 4.63 million confirmed cases, of which 1.68 million people had already recovered and 311,000 had died according to Mejía and Ramírez (2020). In comparative terms, between April and May, that is, over the course of one month, there were 224,000 more deaths, which means that the number of deaths increased 3.5 times.

According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) (2020), the quarantine and physical distancing measures needed to stop the spread of the disease have generated job losses (in 2020 about 11.6 million more unemployed than in 2019) and reduced the labor income of individuals and households.) To curb the evolution of the pandemic, several governments have implemented actions such as the closure of economic, educational and social activities, accompanied by the implementation of a campaign of physical distancing.

In Mexico, the consequences of the crisis have been considerable. Specifically, the confinement began at the end of March and the following months saw the first signs of the challenging reality. According to Mejía and Ramírez (2020), by May there were already 45,032 confirmed cases, 30,451 people recovered and 4,767 deaths.

With regard to employment, the closure of businesses due to confinement affected economic activity and unemployment reached worrisome figures, to cite one case: from February to March some 130,593 jobs were lost and by April more than 555,000 jobs were lost (INEGI, 2020).

Consequently, this situation also affected poverty, increasing the already existing asymmetries. As an example, Flores (2020) mentions that the percentage of people who were poor in terms of income reached 53.1 percent of the population in April, while in May the proportion rose to 54.9 percent, which is attributed to the effect on income of the loss of jobs and the drop in economic activity during those months.

Unemployment represents the main economic policy challenge for the country and will undoubtedly remain the main concern for the present and future six-year periods (Ruiz and Ordaz, 2011).

This article is organized in four sections. In the first we will present, by way of context, an overview of COVID-19. In the second we will review the existing literature on employment and poverty. In the second section, we will review the existing literature on employment and poverty. In the third section, we will discuss the statistical data provided by government agencies that allow for a mapping of the impacts of this disease on the economic sector. Finally, in the fourth we will provide an outline of concrete alternatives that we consider important to become in the coming months and years in terms of public policy.

1. The COVID-19

Since the announcement made on December 31, 2019, by the World Health Organization (WHO) about the existence of SARS- CoV-2 virus causing COVID-19 first detected in the Chinese province of Wuhan, and its subsequent declaration, also by the same institution as a pandemic disease on January 30, 2020 (Health, 2020), the effects on any human and economic activity, were considerable, especially considering the characteristics of the spread of the disease and the novelty that it represented for the world population to face situations of this type in a global economic relations environment.

The emergence of viral diseases has had diverse impacts on economic and commercial activities at different times. It must be remembered that not all viral diseases reach the category of a pandemic. In fact, when such a disease is restricted to a defined geographical area it is known as an endemic disease (European, 2020).

COVID 19 has affected the world economy. The first sector that suffers the consequences of a health problem like the one that affects the world is the medical sector, the costs related to detection, tests, treatments, hospital services and even funerals. A data that allows quantifying the impact on the medical sector in the United States, and from there it could be inferred in each country, indicates that the monthly cost for the period between March and June 2020, estimates that the total would amount to 202.6 billion dollars (American, 2020).

At no time in the history of the world has humanity gone through such an uncertain and unprecedented social experience. The lack of knowledge and the rapid spread of the disease did not allow countries or governments to take the right measures that would mark the high and low number of deaths and contamination. According to data from BBC News (2020),

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coronavirus disease continues to spread throughout the world, with almost 30 million confirmed cases in 188 countries and a death toll approaching one million.

In Latin America (LA) the number of infections and deaths continues to increase, presenting a more tragic picture than the rest of the world's dynamics, which can be explained by the disparities between the countries that make up the region in relation to those in continents such as Europe and the northern region of America. Brazil is the country with the most deaths with a figure that exceeds 130 thousand, followed by Mexico with more than 72 thousand deaths.

The evolution of the pandemic in Mexico can be roughly outlined in five phases: a preliminary phase, three phases of dispersion and a de-escalation phase. The previous phase, or phase zero, has been a preparation phase, beginning on January 7, 2020 and ending with the official announcement of the first case diagnosed on February 27. Phase one corresponds to the identification of imported cases of the virus with second generation transmission in outbreaks among relatives and close circles. Phase two begins on March 13 with the report of official figures of hundreds of people infected and with the dispersion in local community contagion. Phase three begins on March 24th, with the escalation to the first thousand of officially reported infections and the implementation of official quarantine and social distancing measures. Phase four is dated July 3 with a significant escalation in the curve of new infections (Leal; Martinez and Sulmont, 2020, p. 19-21).

2. Employment and poverty

The VOC-19 pandemic has strong health effects and profound implications for economic growth and social development. The consequences have been very significant with the closing of economies worldwide. It is an unprecedented crisis. For Alzúa and Gosis (2020) it is not only a crisis but a series, to exemplify it, they point out the following:

There is a triple economic crisis: a crisis of supply (driven by factory closures, retail trade, etc.), a crisis of demand (due to measures of social isolation, increased unemployment and greater consumer caution) and a financial crisis (as consumption decreases, liquidity problems arise that put companies, especially small and medium enterprises, at risk). The effect on GDP growth will depend on how long the closure lasts, and that will depend on the growth trajectory of the epidemic. However, the effect will be considerable, as the crisis is global. (p. 8)

COVID-19 has caused serious problems particularly in emerging economies, bringing high rates of unemployment and millions of people in extreme poverty. In a report, ECLAC(2020) projects that in the LA region by 2020 there would be 11.6 million more unemployed than in 2019, a

5.3% drop in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and an increase in unemployment of 3.4 percentage points, and poverty would increase by at least 4.4 percentage points (28.7 million additional people) with respect to 2019, reaching a total of 214.7 million people (34.7% of the region's population). Among these people, extreme poverty would increase by 2.6 percentage points (15.9 million additional people) and would affect a total of 83.4 million people.

In Mexico, the results of the Telephone Survey of Occupation and Employment (ETOE), report that, between March and April 2020, the rate of economic participation plummeted by 12.3 percentage points, which is equivalent to about 12 million people going into a state of suspension of work due to quarantine and without certainty about the permanence of the labor relationship, post-pandemic. In addition, an increase of 5.9 million underemployed people was observed. The unemployed population increased to 4.7% in the same period, representing an increase of 1.7 percentage points. Finally, informality fell by 8 points (United Nations Development Programme UNDP Latin America and the Caribbean, 2020, p.16).

To illustrate the net worsening of asymmetries, according to a report by Salas, Quintana, Mendoza and Valdivia (2020), household income has decreased by 75% during the time of the crises, reaching an increase of five percentage points. Considering the three main metropolitan areas, the data indicate that, in the most severe case of income reduction, the asymmetry would increase by seven points for Guadalajara and six points for the Valley of Mexico and Monterrey.

Since 2012, authors such as Figueroa, Ramírez, González, Pérez and Espinosa, who analyzed the link between unemployment and extreme poverty in Mexico, found that both are one of the greatest problems of the economy of this country (according to INEGI of 5.5%). Among other issues, this phenomenon of job scarcity brings about the migration of labor in various parts of the world.

It must be said that obviously this phenomenon is not exclusive to Mexico, but is a situation faced by all emerging countries. For example, in the case of Colombia, according to Vallejo (2010), unemployment and informality are the main problem faced by the incoming administration of Juan Manuel Santos, given that high unemployment and informality rates help explain the poverty and extreme inequality prevailing in the country. Therefore, one of the fundamental proposals of his government is to generate, for the next four years, 2.44 million jobs and to formalize 500 thousand workers, who currently work in precarious conditions.

Poverty and employment are two narrow macroeconomic variables that have implications for economic activity. In Argentina, Osatinsky (2013), comparing two provinces, shows that

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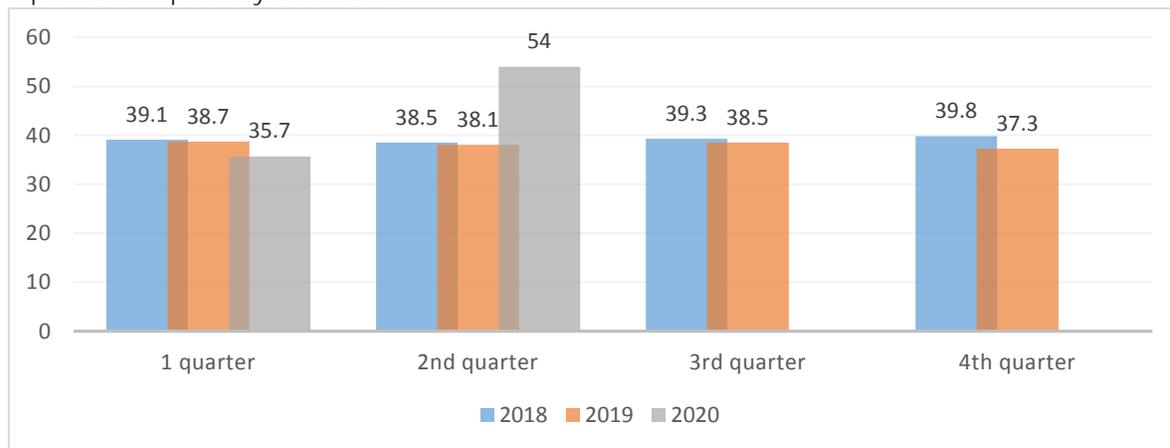
Catamarca was the province with the lowest poverty levels in all of northern Argentina while in Tucumán, whose economy was the most dynamic in the region, the percentage of poor households was higher. Taking into account that there is a strong link between economic processes and poverty, and that labor difficulties are an important component in this relationship. This paper points out that there is a direct relationship between poverty and the level of employment.

It is important to mention the deterioration that the labor environment has shown in recent decades, given the increasingly dehumanized conditions -among many other signs: continuous working hours, strenuous hours, precarious contracts and wages that are not sufficient to bring home food as indicated by Climent (2015)-. Even the most educated, those with the most university degrees face the challenges of getting a decent job. In relation to salaries in the labor market, Jiménez-Bandala et; al (2019) point out that these "lost more than three quarters of their purchasing power during the period between 1982 and 2018 and that this had negative consequences for the quality of life of the population and for the economy in general" (p. 2).

Results and discussion

The current economic crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an increase in the unemployment rate and, consequently, a high cost in jobs. This increase is shown in Graph 1 below:

Graph 1.Labor poverty 2018-2020



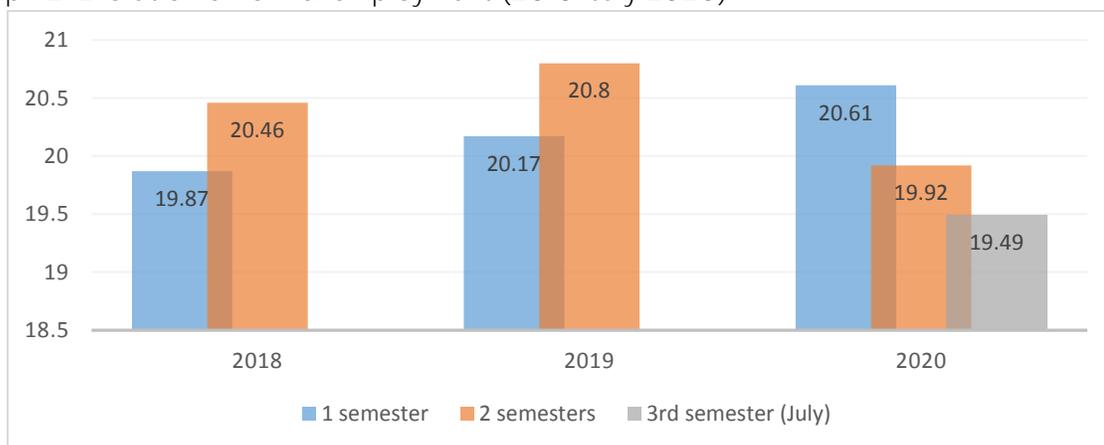
Source: Own elaboration based on CONEVAL (2020).

In Graph 1, it is possible to see that working poverty shows a slight decrease in the first quarter between 2018, 2019 and 2020. This is a drop of 0.4 percentage points in 2019 and even better in 2020, 3.4 percentage points. But by the second quarter, there is a notable increase between 2018 and 2020 of almost 16 percentage points, i.e., labor income has fallen dramatically, so

much so that it is no longer sufficient to cover basic food needs. These months correspond to April-May and June, a period of confinement and closure of the economy.

Formal employment in 2020 has fallen significantly with respect to previous years; Graph 2 shows the evolution:

Graph 2. Evolution of formal employment (2018- July 2020)



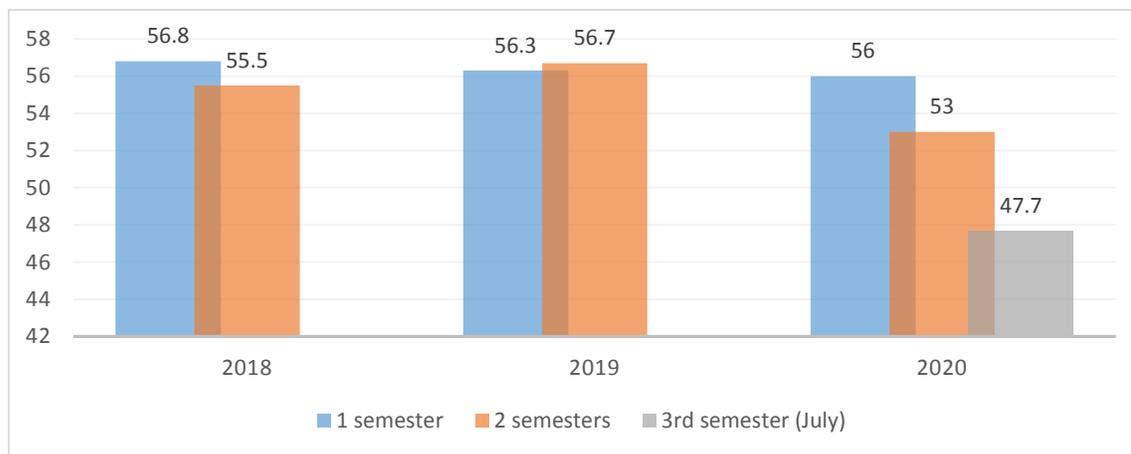
Source: Own elaboration based on IMSS (2020).

Graph 2 shows the evolution of formal employment, with growth during the first quarter between 2018, 2019 and 2020. From 2018 to 2019 it grew by 0.3 percentage points and from 2019 to 2020 it grew by almost 0.5. By the second quarter, the situation had changed drastically, with employment growing by 0.35 percentage points between 2018 and 2019, but falling by almost one point between 2019 and 2020. By July, the situation had worsened with a drop of nearly 0.5 points.

The Mexican economy is characterized by its immersion in informality, about 60% represents this sector, that is, of almost 10 jobs generated in the country 6 belong to the informal sector, which does not have social security or the protection of labor law. Graph 3 illustrates the evolution of informal employment and its unexpected fall in 2020.

Graph 3. Evolution of informal employment 2018- July 2020

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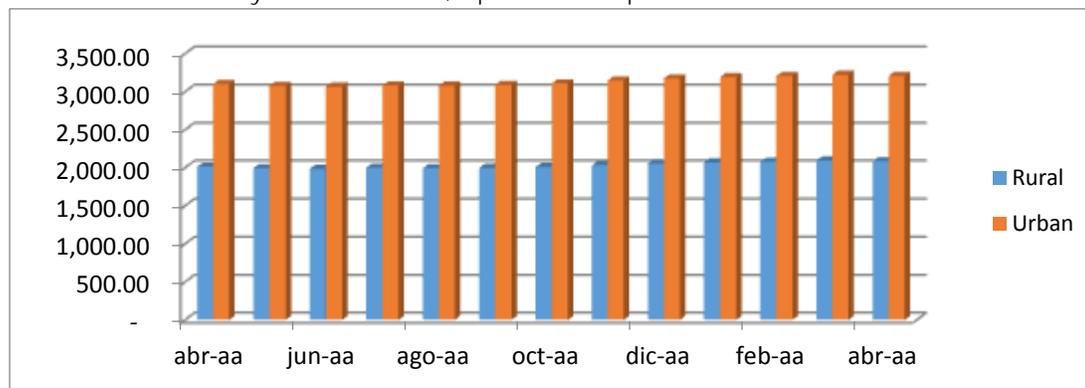


Source: Own elaboration based on INEGI (2020).

Figure 3 shows that this sector, too, has been affected by the social distance caused by the pandemic. It can be seen that informal work remained almost constant during the first quarter of the years 2018, 2019 and 2020. For the second quarter, there is a decrease in informal workers from 56.7 in 2019 to 53 in 2020, a drop of 3.7 percentage points. By July the drop was more notable, reaching 47.7, a decrease of 5.3 percentage points. This was due to the closure of economic activity.

The Income Poverty Line in Mexico, according to the CONEVAL, is equivalent to the total value of the food basket and the non-food basket per person per month. Graph 4 shows the poverty lines for the period April 2019-2020 in urban and rural areas.

Graph 4. Income Poverty Lines. Mexico, April 2019- April 2020



Source: Own elaboration based on CONEVAL (2020).

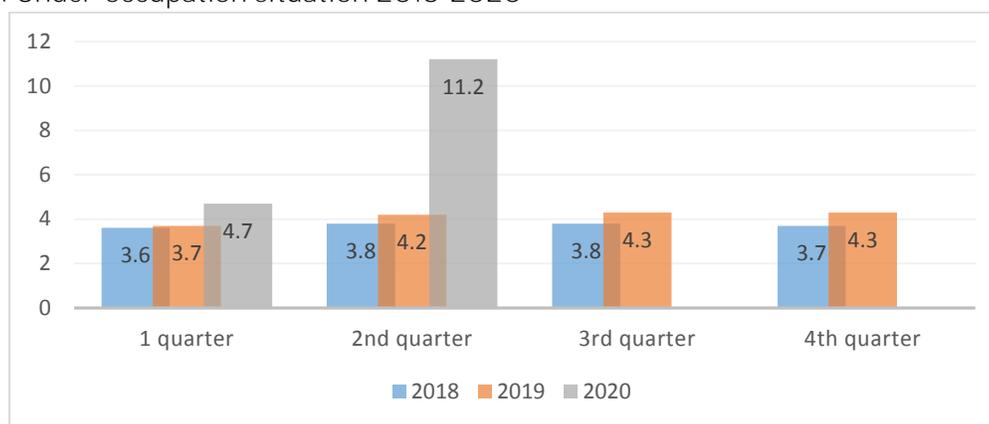
Graph 4 presents the evolution of income poverty in both the city and the rural area. The CONEVAL (2020) points out:

The monthly percentage change of the income poverty line in April 2020 was -0.5% for both areas. The annual percentage change of the rural and urban poverty line in April 2020 was

3.6% and 3.3% respectively. The value of the monthly rural and urban change is less than the general monthly inflation; while the annual changes of the baskets are above the general inflation. This can be partly explained by the drastic fall in the price of energy products, which are not part of the baskets. The products that most affected the monthly decrease in both rural and urban income poverty lines were housing and conservation services; the food basket; and clothing, footwear and accessories. (p. 3)

This shows the different products that most affected the decrease in income in both rural and urban areas. It also shows that the national economy is exposed to external shocks such as the price of oil, the dynamics of the US economy, the case of the current pandemic and others.

Graph 5. Under-occupation situation 2018-2020



Source: Own elaboration based on INEGI (2020).

Under-occupation is the fact of working under non-regulated conditions, that is, outside of what is established by law, it can be more hours than officially regulated, receive a salary that does not respond to the law and work in a field that is not of their "expertise".

Graph 6 presents the situation of underemployment in the country. It can be seen that for the first quarter the increase was slight between 2018 and 2020. This is 3.6 for 2018 and 4.7 for 2020, an increase of 1.1 percentage points. For the second quarter, the increase is more pronounced. Between 2018 and 2020, a significant increase in underemployment is noted, from 3.8 in 2018 to 11.2 in 2020, or 7.4 percentage points. The situation of confinement forced people to seek or generate activities themselves that would generate income for them to survive. From passing or momentary businesses to exchanging one product for another.

The employment situation and poverty continue to grow when we analyze the results presented. A slight recovery is expected in August after the progressive opening of productive activities such as the automobile industry, construction, tourism, food and others. An

improvement in the economy is also expected given the various support programs implemented by the government in support of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises as well as vulnerable populations (Chiatchoua, Lozano and Macías-Durán; 2020). This will continue to be the trend of this government if we refer to the economic package that was presented to the chambers of deputies and senators.

In fact, the President of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, declared in one of his morning conferences in August that the economy is responding; not only were jobs lost, but they were recovered. "It's going to take time, but we're on our way out, 30,000 workers have been created or rehired" (Forbes Mexico, 2020).

Without a doubt, the great challenge facing the country is informality. It is known that 6 jobs out of 10 are concentrated in the sector that does not enjoy social protection. The data showed that until July there was a decrease in informal jobs, not because of the lack of work but because of the social distancing imposed by the government to stop contagion. With the opening of activities in August, a rebound in informal workers is expected. Furthermore, the expectation is for a significant growth in this sector since several companies that were already inactive will begin to operate illegally in order to reduce expenses (payment of social security, credit and taxes) and maximize profits to stay in the market.

Interpreting the argument presented, those companies that were in the legality will turn to informality and the government will lose precious income to carry out its planned public spending policy. This is an income deficit, so it will be in the government's interest to develop mechanisms that help implement strategies to increase the formality of the economy.

Conclusions

The VOC-19 pandemic has affected the functioning of life worldwide from deaths to economic activities. The crisis has had a major impact on the economy (many businesses closed) and the labor market (loss of jobs), both on supply and demand. If before the crisis the employment situation was difficult, now the economic prospects and in terms of quantity and quality of employment worsen at a rapid pace and, consequently, poverty increases.

The objective of this paper has been to analyze the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment and poverty in Mexico. The results show that for the second quarter of 2020 compared to the same period in 2018, working poverty increased by almost 16 percentage points. Formal employment, on the other hand, for the second quarter between 2019 and 2020 the drop is about 1 point. The situation continued to worsen for the month of July with a drop of approximately 0.5 points. Informal employment registered a fall of 5.3 percentage points in the month of July 2020. Finally, the monthly percentage change in the income

poverty line in April 2020 was -0.5%. The annual percentage change of the rural and urban poverty lines in April 2020 was 3.6% and 3.3% respectively.

This crisis has taken us by surprise and has exposed the flaws in the current economic model in areas such as social security, labor contracts and general welfare regimes. Moving towards decent work, fostering co-responsibility in care between the State, the market and families, and promoting universal access to social protection, ensuring access to quality public health systems, is essential to protect the living conditions of the entire population (ECLAC, 2020).

We must learn from this difficult crisis and make decisions that reduce the number of poor people, so government policy will be fundamental to economic recovery. Speaking of which, the government has just delivered the economic budget oriented to social spending with programs to help the low income population, spending on health and spending on public investment for infrastructure. It is hoped that this proposal can be approved by the legislature to help in the economic recovery specifically in the activation of businesses, the generation of jobs and the reduction of poverty.

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