



IMPACTS OF COVID-19 POLICY MEASURES ON MIGRATION AND FOOD SECURITY IN ECUADOR

Impacts of COVID-19 Policy Measures on Migration and Food Security in Ecuador

MERCEDES EGUIGUREN AND CHERYL MARTENS

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Cover photo: In May 2020, women wait in socially distancing lines to receive food aid in Quito (Credit: ZUMA Press, Inc./Alamy)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic had profound effects on Ecuador, exacerbated by pre-existing weaknesses in the public health system, economic austerity policies, and social inequalities. The reliance on containment measures, combined with insufficient social support, resulted in severe economic and social decline. Migrants, already a vulnerable group, were further marginalized during the pandemic, facing exclusion from social protection programs and increased food insecurity. This report examines the impacts of COVID-19 policy measures on migration and food security in Ecuador, focusing on urban contexts, particularly the capital city of Quito. The findings underscore the need for more integrated research and policy approaches that address the specific conditions of migrants and other vulnerable groups. Future policy efforts should focus on improving social protections, enhancing access to healthcare and vaccines for all populations, and addressing the underlying inequalities that exacerbated the impacts of the pandemic in Ecuador.

Key Findings:

1. Pandemic Impact on Ecuador

- Ecuador was severely impacted by COVID-19, with the coastal city of Guayaquil becoming a global epicenter in April 2020. The country experienced significant economic decline, including contractions in formal employment, expansion of the informal sector, rising unemployment, and increased poverty rates.
- The government's response relied heavily on containment, control, and law enforcement, with insufficient consideration for the specific conditions of vulnerable groups, including migrants.

2. Public Health Measures

- The government implemented strict containment measures, including curfews, lockdowns, and border closures, which lasted for approximately six months. These measures were gradually eased, but not without significant social and economic consequences.
- The vaccination program, carried out by two different administrations, reached 84% of the population by September 2022. However, the rollout was uneven, with some groups, including migrants, facing difficulties in accessing vaccines.

3. Economic and Social Impacts

- The pandemic led to widespread job losses, reduced working hours, and a significant increase in informal employment. Women, youth, and older adults were particularly affected by the shrinking economy.
- Social protection measures, such as cash transfers and food distribution, were not widely implemented or sustained, providing little support for households. Migrants were generally excluded from these measures, facing already precarious conditions marked by xenophobia, limited access to formal employment, and lack of regular migration status.

4. Impact on Migrants

- Migrants, particularly Venezuelans, were among the most affected by the pandemic, as they were excluded from government social protection programs. Humanitarian aid provided by international organizations and NGOs partially alleviated urgent needs, such as shelter and food, but these measures were insufficient and did not promote long-term integration.
- Residential segregation and lack of access to adequate housing further exacerbated the vulnerabilities faced by migrants during the pandemic. In Quito, areas with larger populations of migrants experienced deeper economic and social decline.

5. Food Security

- Food production and distribution chains in Ecuador were only modestly affected, and food availability was not compromised during the pandemic. However, the worsening economic conditions led to reduced food affordability and a nationwide increase in food insecurity.
- Vulnerable groups, including low-income households and migrants, were disproportionately impacted. The pandemic intensified the state of food insecurity for many, with less than 30% of migrant households having enough to eat.

6. Gaps in Research

- There is a lack of comprehensive studies that combine the impacts of the pandemic on public health, economic conditions, migration, and food security in Ecuador. Research tends to be fragmented, focusing either on the effects of the pandemic on the migrant population or on other groups within the national population.
- There is also a gap in data at the urban scale, with limited disaggregated data by city or by migratory status. Additionally, there are few studies addressing food security among migrant and refugee populations.

INTRODUCTION

Ecuador was among the first countries impacted by COVID-19 in South America, and one of the most severely stricken by this public health emergency. The coastal city of Guayaquil, the largest in the country and the location of its main port, became a global epicentre of the pandemic in April 2020, paralleling the impact of cities such as New York, Milan, and Madrid (Amézquita-Ochoa, 2020; Ramírez Gallegos et al., 2021). The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in the country included economic decline, contraction of formal employment, expansion of the informal sector, and rising poverty rates (Esteves, 2020; Castro and Fernández, 2020; Espinosa and Rivera, 2022). Measures put in place to contain the spread of the virus, such as lockdowns and curfews, were not sufficiently counterbalanced with social protection programs for the most vulnerable population groups. These included informal workers, low-income households, unemployed people or people who had lost their jobs because of the pandemic, children, and people with chronic illnesses (Espinosa and Rivera 2022; Jara et al., 2022).

Many scholars argue that the impact of the pandemic was aggravated by the decision of the Ecuadorian government to maintain an austerity model that had been in place since 2019, even in the face of warnings about the severe social and economic effects of the health emergency, and against the turn of several governments around the world towards Keynesian-style measures intended to curb the profound social effects of this crisis (Espinosa and Rivera, 2022; Hurtado et al., 2020; Jara et al., 2022; Ramírez Gallegos et al., 2021).¹ While there are several studies analyzing the impact of COVID-19 policy measures, and the effects of both the pandemic and governmental decisions on the immigrant population, as yet there are no studies that combine questions about policy responses to the pandemic, food security, and migration. This is due to the scarce attention paid in Ecuador to the food security situation of migrants, as well as the fact that beyond the specialized migration literature, there is not widespread interest in studying the living conditions of migrants as a specific social sector in Ecuador. As a result, there is an absence of group-specific data regarding health, food security, and access to public services in research addressing those issues at the national level.

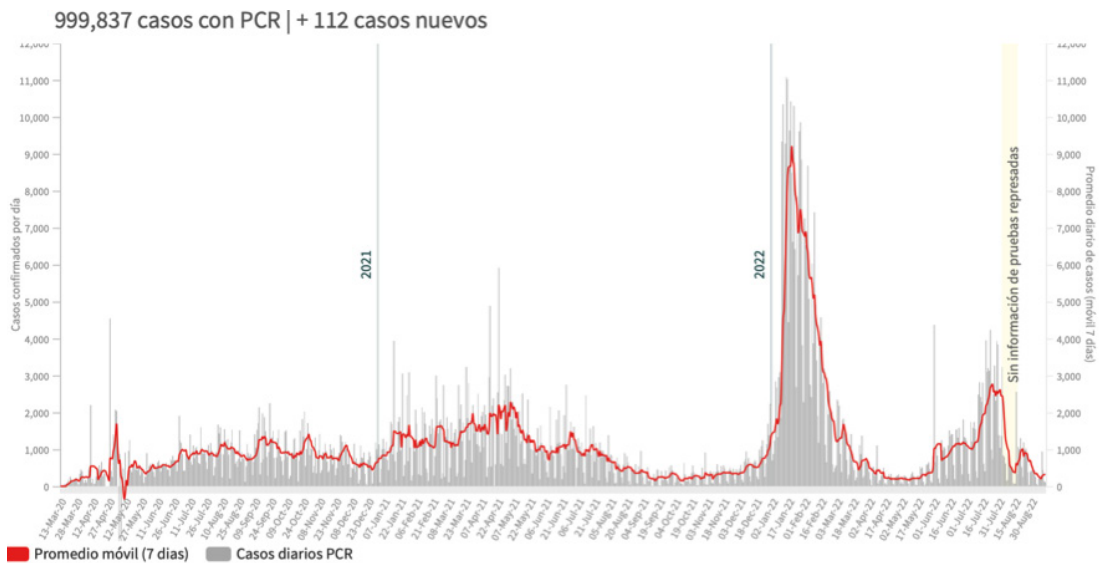
As part of a larger research project that proposes to better understand the food security situation and challenges that migrants faced during the pandemic, this policy audit analyzes Ecuador's response to the health emergency, the extent to which migrants were affected by government actions, and the broader social and economic dynamics set in motion by COVID-19. The audit is based on an in-depth review of scholarly literature, official government documents and press releases, and reports from specialized organizations.

COVID-19 IN ECUADOR

Ecuador recorded its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on 29 February 2020. The virus spread rapidly in the first two months, and during March and April, Ecuador had the highest mortality rate in the region (Briones–Claudett et al., 2021; Mathieu et al., 2020). Infection data provided by the Ministry of Public Health are measured by counting positive cases confirmed by PCR testing. These data show a nationwide increase in infections until October 2020, when 166,302 infections were recorded for the period March–October 2020. During the same period, there were several peaks of infection measured by 7-day moving averages. The highest average weekly infection rate was 1,685 cases, recorded at the beginning of May 2020 (Observatorio Social del Ecuador, 2022).

From November 2020, there was a minor decrease in infections confirmed with PCR tests, but from the end of December there was a notable increase, with peaks of infection in mid and late January, late February, March, April and May 2021. By May 2021, Ecuador officially had 393,048 cases of infection. A downward trend in COVID-19 infection began in May 2021 and continued until November 2021, although there were two important peaks in weekly averages of infection at the end of June and July 2021. This decline coincided with the start of the country’s mass vaccination campaign (Figure 1), which began in May 2021. By the beginning of October, when one of the lowest points in average infection rates since the beginning of the pandemic was recorded, Ecuador had 511,969 cases of COVID-19 (Observatorio Social del Ecuador, 2022).

FIGURE 1: COVID-19 Infections in Ecuador, Confirmed by PCR Tests, 2020–2022



Source: Social Observatory of Ecuador (2022)

The low testing capacity in Ecuador led to an underreporting of confirmed cases, so it became necessary to use the excess mortality rate to get a more accurate idea of the impact of the pandemic. Figure 2 shows that by the beginning of April 2020, Ecuador reported an excess mortality rate of 377%, which gradually declined to 44% in June, but increased again to 84% in July, and then trended downward during the rest of 2020, but maintaining a positive excess mortality rate of no less than 15% until December 2020 (Mathieu et al., 2020). At the beginning of 2021, the excess mortality rate increased again, reaching 53% at the end of January 2021, and followed an upward trend until it exceeded 100% excess deaths in April 2021. Thereafter, we observe a further decline in this indicator, reaching a near-normal mortality rate in the second half of 2021. Towards the end of that year, the trend started going up again, reaching 68% in January 2022. There was a prolonged decline during the rest of the year, reaching negative numbers for the first time in two years: -5% in April 2022 and -2% in October (Mathieu et al., 2020).

FIGURE 2: Evolution of Excess Mortality Rates in Ecuador, 2020–2022



Source: Mathieu et al. (2020)

By December 2020, data from the Ministry of Public Health recorded 202,356 COVID-19 cases, of which 1,473 (0.7%) were not Ecuadorians. This included 830 Venezuelans (56.3%), 334 Colombians (22.7%), 66 Peruvians (4.5%), 42 Cubans (2.9%), 26 Americans (1.8%), and the remaining 11.8% of other nationalities (Pérez Martínez et al., 2021: 13). This data was not disaggregated by place of residence, gender or other characteristics. The official figures on COVID-19 mortality are also not disaggregated by nationality. Pérez Martínez et al. (2021) believe that the official figures might underestimate the migrant population infected since the numbers were based only on diagnosis through PCR tests, which were performed only on people showing symptoms and their

contacts. It is also possible, according to the authors, that the tendencies toward discrimination and xenophobia in Ecuadorian society may have influenced the underreporting of cases of infected migrants.

PUBLIC MEASURES TO CONTAIN COVID-19

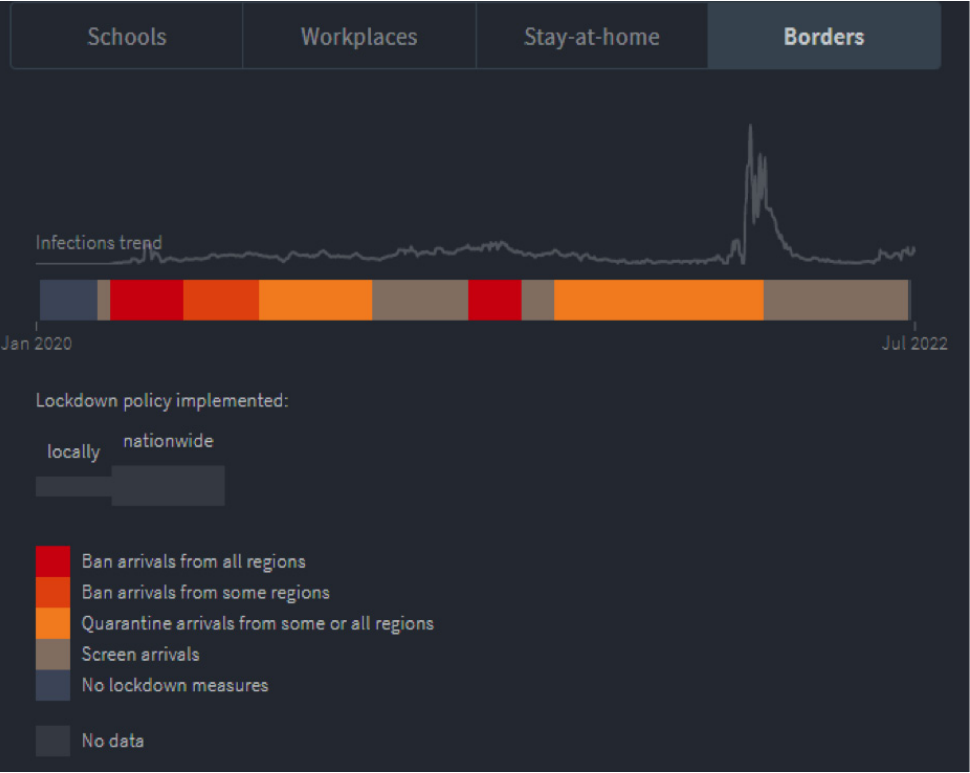
On 11 March 2020, the Ecuadorian government declared an emergency in the national health system. One week later, President Moreno signed an executive order declaring a state of emergency across the country, through which five main measures were introduced: restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly, a 15-hour curfew, closure of national borders and airports, remote work in all eligible areas, suspension of in-person classes at all educational levels, and suspension of “non-essential” activities (Esteves 2020).² A special task force, the Emergency Operations Committee, was created. Further containment measures included restrictions on mobility between provinces (Pérez Martínez, et al., 2021). These strict measures lasted for approximately six months, after which gradual re-opening of economic and social activities began (Esteves, 2020).

Borders

In terms of border control, between January 2020 and July 2022 measures varied between no closures, monitoring of arrivals, quarantined arrivals, prohibition of arrivals from some regions, and complete bans on arrivals. Together with border closings, surveillance and control measures in the northern and southern borders of the country included militarization of transit points in Rumichaca (the border with Colombia) and Huaquillas (the border with Peru) during the second half of 2020. These measures corresponded to peaks of infection early in the pandemic, but later on, the trend remained relatively constant while the severity of the measures varied (Figure 3). When a new peak was reached between May and June 2022, arrivals were monitored and closures were finally lifted. More flexible border controls were implemented during the last registered peak of infections, one year after the start of the vaccination program.

Some critics consider that border controls implemented during the pandemic went beyond attempts to control the spread of the virus and made it possible for the government to implement a securitist agenda in its migration policy. More specifically, these measures were seen as a way to curb unwanted, “illegal” migration crossings, which remain the main way for migrants lacking documents to enter the country (Pérez Martínez, et al., 2021).

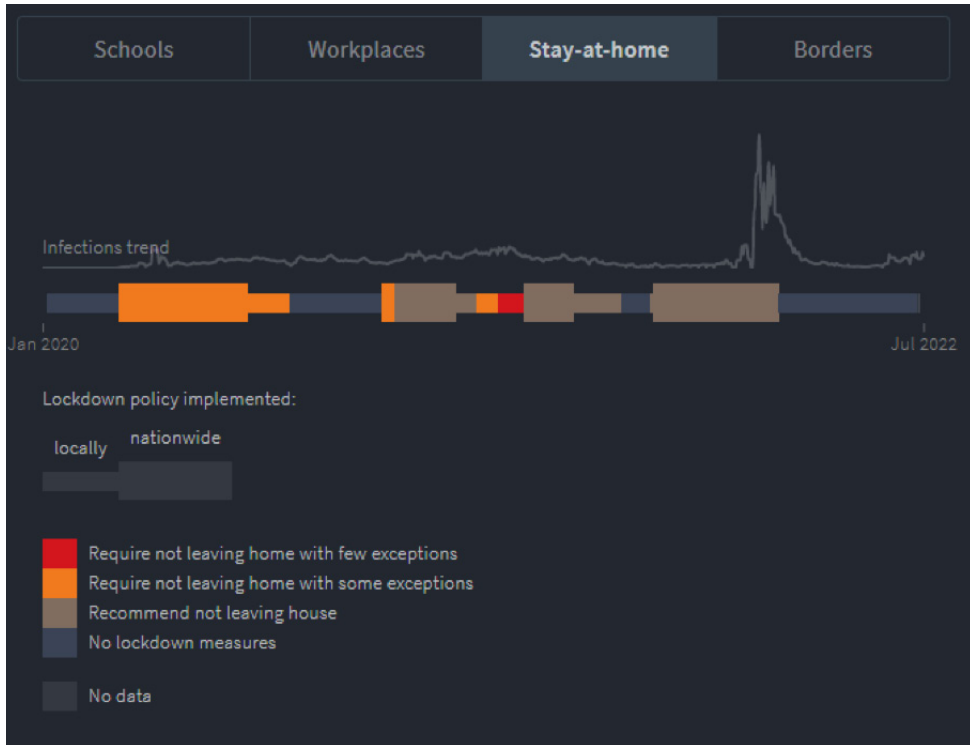
FIGURE 3: Chronology of Border Closings in Ecuador, 2020–2022



Source: Reuters COVID-19 Tracker

Lockdowns

Pandemic-response measures varied between no closures, curfews lasting up to 15 hours (with few or some exceptions), and official recommendations to stay at home. As Figure 4 demonstrates, the scale of implementation varied, with nationwide and locally implemented lockdowns. Between March and May 2020, the curfew was implemented at the national level. From 2 p.m. to 5 a.m., only essential workers were allowed to be in the streets, and they were required to carry documentation provided by the government. Exceptions were made for individuals in the case of health emergencies and work-related travel. In May 2020, decision-making about curfew and other restrictions on mobility and in-person activities was transferred to the local level (Ministerio de Educación and UNICEF, 2022). Subsequently, curfews were maintained in certain cities according to the local situation and the decisions of local authorities. In the following months, recommendations to stay at home were generally maintained via public campaigns, whereas new restrictions to mobility were implemented only for short periods.

FIGURE 4: Chronology of Lockdowns in Ecuador, 2020–2022

Source: Reuters COVID-19 Tracker

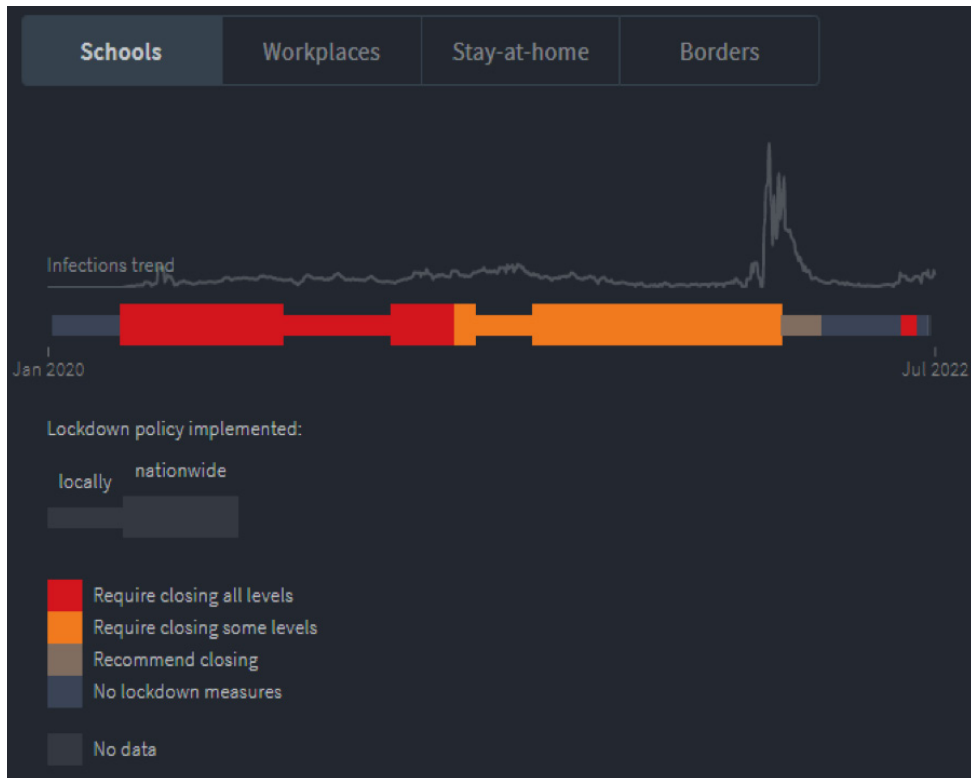
On one hand, lower-income neighbourhoods in large cities, such as Quito and Guayaquil, faced more regular controls by the local police, especially in zones where street markets and open-air markets are located. These neighbourhoods were more heavily surveilled and depicted by the local news media and government at the local and national levels as a source of “disorder” and “agglomeration”. Sociological and anthropological analysis during the pandemic, in contrast, highlights these areas as more densely populated and had less options to shop for food safely (Garces, 2020). On the other hand, migrants within large cities were impacted by mobility restrictions, since these measures made it more difficult for them to access aid programs offered by international organizations.

School Closures

The closure of education institutions at all levels began on 17 March 2020. The following month, the Ministry of Education released a plan to support online education through radio and television (Ministerio de Educación and UNICEF, 2022). The general restriction on in-person classes remained until October 2020, when 12 institutions were authorized by the Ministry of Education to launch a pilot plan to restart in-person classes. In January 2021, the plan was suspended due to a new wave of COVID-19. In May 2021, coinciding with the beginning

of the school year for the coastal region, schools were required to present a plan to resume in-person activities, which, if approved, granted them authorization to open. The same procedure was applied in September 2021 for the beginning of the school year in the highlands and amazon regions (Ministerio de Educación and UNICEF, 2022).³

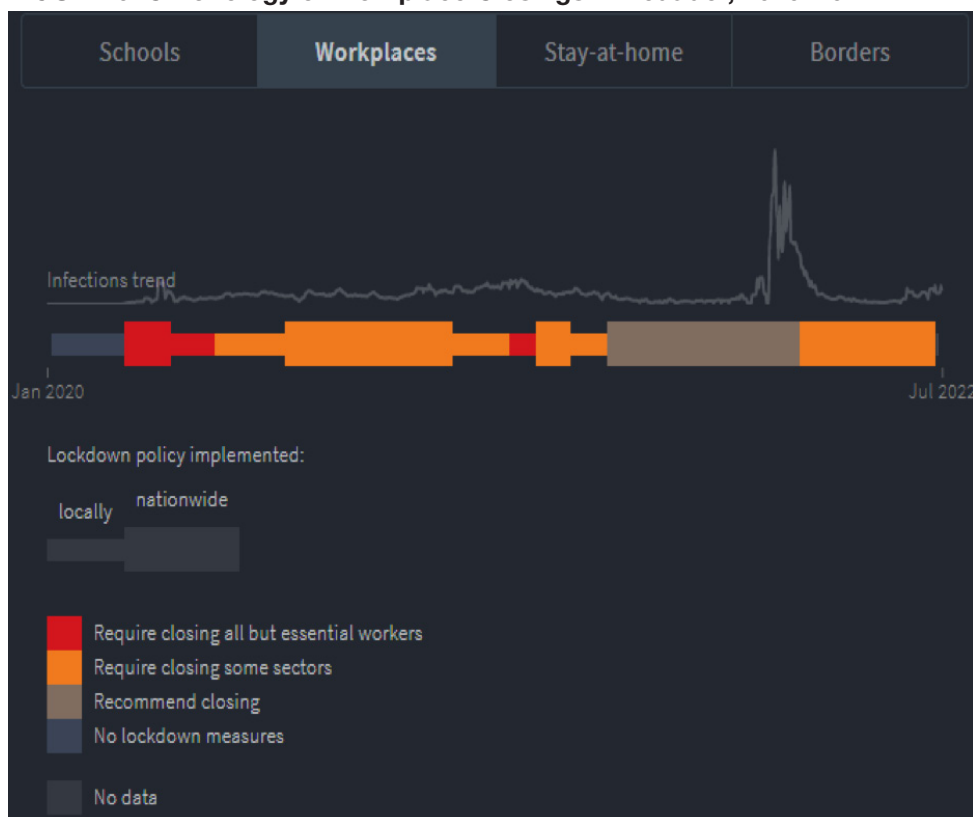
FIGURE 5: Chronology of School Closures in Ecuador, 2020–2022



Source: Reuters COVID-19 Tracker

Workplace Closures

COVID-19 measures for workplaces included the mandatory closure of “non-essential” activities and partial mandatory closures combined with recommendations of closure (Figure 6). This included the closure of the facilities of public and private companies and offices in general, together with shifts to remote work where feasible. In the public sector, this significantly limited the operations of several sectors.

FIGURE 6: Chronology of Workplace Closings in Ecuador, 2020–2022

Source: Reuters COVID-19 Tracker

Migration Procedures

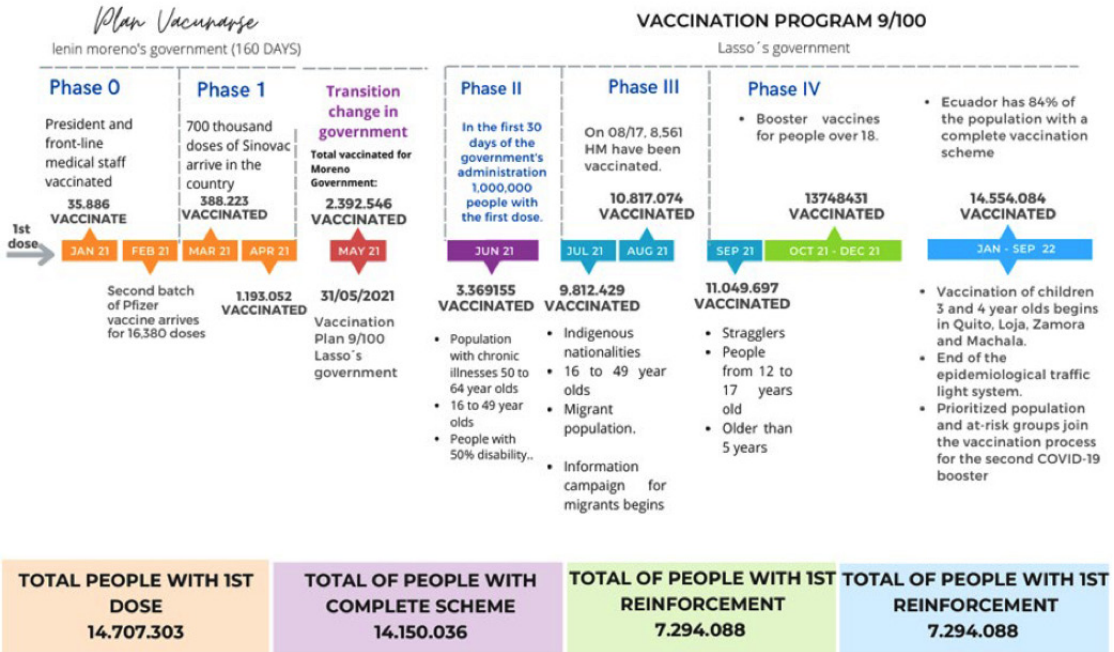
In terms of migration regulation, all migration procedures were suspended, including the refugee recognition process (Pérez Martinez et al., 2021). According to the National Director of International Protection of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility, by June 2020, 5,705 interviews of refugee applicants were on hold. This meant difficulties for asylum applicants since, on the one hand, the migrant population has limited internet access, and on the other hand, telematic interviews do not guarantee the privacy and trust necessary for people to testify about the situations that lead them to request refuge, which can negatively affect the final decisions (Pérez Martinez et al., 2021: 15).

Vaccinations

The vaccination program in Ecuador was carried out by two different governments. First, President Lenín Moreno established the Plan Vacunarse, which lasted 160 days. This project was carried out in two phases. During Phase 0, the President and front-line medical personnel were vaccinated. In January 2021,

Ecuador had 35,886 people vaccinated with the first dose, and in February, the country received a second batch of 16,380 Pfizer vaccines. For the second phase, called Phase 1, 700 thousand doses of Sinovac arrived in the country. In March 2021 the country had 388,223 people vaccinated and in April the number increased to 1,193,052.

FIGURE 7: Chronology of Ecuador's Vaccination Program



Source: Ministry of Public Health, Ecuador data. Graphic by authors.

At the end of the Lenín Moreno government, Ecuador had vaccinated 2,392,546 people. When President Guillermo Lasso took over on 31 May 2021, he initiated the 9/100 Vaccination Plan. The Lasso government added 1,000,000 people vaccinated with the first dose in the first 30 days of government. Thus, in June 2021 Ecuador had 3,369,155 people vaccinated. This vaccination phase targeted mainly people aged 50 to 64 years, followed by people aged 16 to 49 years with severe conditions and people with 50% disability. Next, vaccines were targeted to the population from indigenous nationalities, people aged 16 to 49 years, and migrants.⁴ In this phase, an information campaign for migrants was initiated. By July 2021, a total of 9,812,429 people were estimated to have been vaccinated and in August the figure increased to 10,817,074. As of August 17, an estimated 8,561 migrants had been vaccinated. During the following phase, vaccinations were open to all aged 5 and older. Booster vaccinations were also carried out for people over 18 years of age. In September 2021, 11,049,697 people had been vaccinated and this rose to 13,748,431 by the end of the year. Between January and September 2022, 84% of the Ecuadorian population (14,707,303 people)

had been fully vaccinated. During this time, the vaccination process began for children of 3 and 4 years old in the cities of Quito, Loja, Zamora, and Machala. Likewise, prioritized population groups by risk criteria joined the vaccination process of the second booster against COVID-19.

PUBLIC LAWS AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

In June 2020, the National Assembly approved the Organic Law on Humanitarian Support to Combat the Health Crisis Resulting from COVID-19.⁵ This mandated private and public companies providing basic services (such as education, electricity, water, internet, health, and life insurance) to allow for flexible payment schemes. It also prohibited housing evictions due to unpaid rent on the condition of a minimum payment of 20% of the amount owed. At the same time, the law permitted reductions in working hours, agreements between employers and workers to modify work conditions (including changes to working hours and modification in workers' leave) to prevent layoffs, and part-time hiring. It established tax benefits for the financial sector with the stated objective of expanding the supply of credit in the country. This law was criticized by some academics and human rights organizations as it was interpreted as a setback in workers' rights and as the implementation of a neoliberal economic agenda by the government (Hurtado et al., 2020; Ramírez Gallegos et al., 2021).

While there are no studies that examine the effects of the measures, there is evidence of a rapid decline in levels of employment. According to Esteves (2020: 39), between September 2019 and September 2020, 675,856 people joined the economically inactive population, unemployment increased by 115,749 people, and the economy lost 620,879 jobs. Fluctuations in the economy particularly affected women since lockdown measures impacted more women than men. However, women's representation in the trend towards employment recovery at the end of 2020 was greater than that of men (11.5% vs. 8%). Youth aged 15 to 24 had a 22.3% rate of participation in the economic recovery. However, a majority of this increase was in the informal sector and in unpaid domestic labour in the home.

Informality in Ecuador is a structural aspect of the economy and informal employment has historically represented the larger segment of the country's employed population. A few months after the onset of the pandemic, Ecuador was one of five countries in the region most affected by COVID-19 deaths (along with Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Peru), and had the largest percentage in informal employment among these countries (Benítez et al., 2020: 526). Indeed, the

general trend in Ecuador's weak economic recovery following the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, is directly related to the informal economy, which reached 48.6% of total employment in the last quarter of 2020. For Esteves (2020), this meant the precarization of the labour market, with people resorting to subsistence strategies such as street vending. With a lack of sufficiently well-paid jobs, groups already over-represented in the informal labour market (such as women, youth, and older adults) bore the greatest impact.

In Quito, underemployment reached 44.9% in the last quarter of 2020, and averaged 40.5% in 2021. Although there has been a slight reduction in these numbers in the years following the pandemic, inadequate employment was still high in 2023, fluctuating between 33% and 35.5%. At the same time, unemployment in the city peaked at 15.8% by the end of 2020. Although unemployment has been gradually decreasing, in 2023 Quito had the highest unemployment rate in the country, at 8.3% (Primicias, 2024).

Despite the difficult conditions within the Ecuadorian economy, no measures were taken to mitigate the pandemic's impact on the informal economy (Benítez et al., 2020). On the contrary, in the two largest cities, Quito and Guayaquil, containment measures at the municipal level focused on controlling the movements of densely populated areas and low-income communities, where informal economy activities are prevalent (Garces, 2020; Benítez et al., 2020).

PANDEMIC POLICY IMPACTS ON WORK, LIVELIHOODS AND DAILY LIVES

Measures to control mobility and confinement were the main mechanisms used to contain the pandemic in Ecuador, while measures for social protection and community health based on epidemiological criteria were scarce, applied in a non-systematic way, and excluded groups like informal workers and migrants without regular status (Hurtado et al., 2020; Garces, 2020; Espinosa and Rivera, 2022). The impact this had on the population varied in terms of social class and associated characteristics such as income level, access to services, information and resources, job stability and the possibility of working from home, and location of housing.

The literature addressing the social impacts of the pandemic demonstrates that it is crucial to consider in Ecuador's social inequalities, since the pandemic did not spread homogeneously throughout the population, nor were the impacts of the economic crisis equally experienced. The impacts were especially severe in sectors already affected by previous fiscal austerity measures, social budget cuts, and

in areas of the cities where mobility controls and lockdown enforcement were carried out by the security forces: the military, and national and municipal police (Garces, 2020; Hurtado et al., 2020; Ramírez Gallegos et al., 2021).

In terms of social class, the upper-middle and middle classes are generally located in the highly skilled labour sectors, where work could be performed remotely, and therefore, this job sector was better protected from the economic impacts of containment measures. In Ecuador, remote work meant a less severe contraction than for others in the labour market, which deepened existing inequalities (Esteves, 2020). In addition, this population generally lives in areas with easier access to supermarkets, owns their own means of transportation, has sufficient income to afford food and other products in supermarkets, has regular garbage collection services and potable water, and can afford good quality internet services. For Garces (2020: 311) this situation implied that socioeconomic class quickly became an emerging measure of “immunological privilege” (2020: 311).

In the case of the city of Guayaquil, Garces (2020) recalls that the conditions of confinement for the lower classes meant staying in overcrowded housing. The enforcement of the confinement measures was carried out in marginal or popular neighbourhoods of the city by the police and military, who were deployed near grocery markets and residential areas: “The first major targets were urban open-air markets, typically frequented by poor families who cannot afford to shop in upscale supermarkets” (Garces, 2020: 312). This contrasts with the upper-class residential sectors, where there was much less enforcement of confinement. This scenario was repeated in Quito and in other cities in Ecuador.

Pandemic restrictions had a greater daily impact on the working class. First, household income was severely affected. A large part of the informal workforce earns a survival income as street vendors. No policy measures were put in place for the informal sector (Benítez et al., 2020). Many are also employed in the service sector in jobs that can only be performed in person, such as food production and sales, general sales, transport, construction, and cleaning services. For these employees, compliance with confinement measures meant losing their source of income, and therefore, their means of subsistence.

Migrants in Quito experienced similar pandemic impacts as most earn income in the informal sector, including street commerce. According to the IOM (2020), in 2020 about 65% of the migrant population was affected by restrictions on mobility with their economic activity being street vending or working as day labourers. The need for even a minimal income pushed migrants onto the streets despite control measures. This exposed them to the contagion but also to forms of control and repression by the local police (Pérez Martínez et al., 2021).

Residential segregation also played a role in the impacts that migrants and refugees experienced during the pandemic. According to the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR (ACNUR, 2022), most migrants in Quito live in peripheral areas spread across the city, which are generally characterized by deficiencies in housing conditions and security. This added to the difficulties that migrants encountered in their search for housing – unaffordability and discrimination based on nationality and race often pushed them to insecure living arrangements and the constant threat of eviction (ACNUR, 2022; Pérez Martinez et al., 2021).

The areas of the city with larger populations of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers were also those that witnessed the most serious effects of the pandemic since they experienced a “deeper precarization of the economy, education, and basic services”, making them more vulnerable to a public health emergency such as COVID-19 (Barrera Guarderas et al., 2020: 3-4).

PROGRAMS AND SUPPORT TO MITIGATE THE PANDEMIC’S EFFECTS

Government Support Measures

The Ecuadorian government implemented a series of economic measures intended to mitigate the economic impacts of the pandemic. These consisted of a combination of cash transfers, flexible payment schemes for basic services and public financial institutions, and certain controls on providers of basic services to ensure access to these services. First, the government established the Bono de Protección Familiar por Emergencia (Family Protection Grant), an emergency cash transfer program for individuals with an income lower than the minimum monthly wage (USD400). In the first phase, households received two transfers of USD60 between April and May 2020. In the second phase, they received a one-time transfer of USD120 for May and June 2020. According to the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion, this measure covered 950,000 families.

Second, some payment exemptions were put in place regarding access to basic services such as electricity, water, education, private health insurance, and rental housing. Private education institutions were prohibited from suspending students due to delays in tuition payments and were mandated to implement discount schemes. At the same time, health benefits from the Ecuadorian Social Security Institute were extended for 60 days after a job loss, until July 2020 (Benítez et al., 2020).

Third, various fiscal measures were also adopted by government (Benítez et al., 2020):

- Companies with a profit greater than USD1 million in 2018 were taxed with a 5% contribution;
- Salaries of government officials from the executive branch and staff from public companies were permanently reduced by 10%. Publicly funded salaries in the domains of health, education, armed forces, and the police were exempted;
- The working day in the public sector was reduced in eligible areas.

Finally, the following measures were put in place concerning credit and loan payments for businesses, (Benítez et al., 2020; Ministerio de Economía y Finanzas, 2020):

- A USD50 million line of credit for small and mid-size enterprises was made available through the Bank of the Ecuadorian Social Security Institute and the National Financial Corporation;
- Creation of the program Reactívale Ecuador; a public fund of USD500 million opened to finance credit to micro, small, and mid-size enterprises, with favourable loan repayment conditions;
- Clients of BanEcuador (a public bank) and the National Financial Corporation had their repayments postponed for March, April, and May 2020, and interest was not charged on those payments.

These policy interventions had limited effectiveness in mitigating the economic impacts of the pandemic, since most addressed a sector of the population who had formal employment or owned small or mid-sized businesses. They were also confined to those who could afford private services such as education and insurance, or were covered by public social security. Tax reductions only represented a modest benefit to the income of households in the higher-earning wage bands (Jara et al., 2022). Other measures, such as the Bono de Protección Familiar por Emergencia), had a limited impact on the crisis facing households (Jara et al., 2020).

Many population groups that suffered from a pre-pandemic lack of social protections, including informal workers, rural communities, unemployed people, women performing unpaid domestic and care work, and migrants, were excluded from these government interventions. In the case of migrants, Ecuador Decree 804, effective June 2019, had excluded non-Ecuadorians from cash transfer programs. This meant that migrants and refugees were no longer eligible for the Bono de Desarrollo Humano (BDH), a program created before the pandemic and maintained during this period. In the case of the Family Protection Grant, migrants and refugees were not explicitly excluded, but in practice, the criteria for access were the same as those for BDH (Vera Espinoza et al., 2021).

During the pandemic, the national government decided to target Ecuadorian nationals exclusively as recipients of emergency social grants. This was consistent with the turn towards austerity that began in 2018, together with general anti-immigrant attitudes in Ecuadorian society at large. Previous studies argue that in Ecuador, and other countries in the region, there was a partial to total absence of the state regarding the protection of migrants and refugees. Although the Ecuadorian constitution guarantees equality of rights for nationals and non-nationals, the government closed all avenues for social protection to the migrant community (Vera Espinoza et al., 2021).

Recent research findings demonstrate the negative impact of this anti-immigrant turn in state policies on the lives of people migrating to Ecuador, as access to food and services was drastically reduced throughout the pandemic, while government policies excluded migrants, both de facto and overtly, non-governmental organization supports also fell short compared to the increasing demand (Milán and Martens, 2023).

Support to Migrants by Non-Government and Civil Society Groups

From 2018 onwards, international organizations specializing in migration, such as the UNHCR and the IOM, had a growing presence and influence throughout South America. Although their work in the region was long-standing, it gained increasing influence in regional migration governance structures (Domenech et al., 2022; Santi, 2020). This is evidenced by the creation of Response for Venezuela (R4V), a network led by these organizations and formed with local partners, with the goal of coordinating humanitarian action towards Venezuelan migration in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In Ecuador, the network of organizations operating under the umbrella of R4V and carrying out aid programs for migrants and refugees expanded during the pandemic. In its wake, international organizations and civil society organizations redirected resources that had been allocated to socio-economic integration schemes to expand humanitarian assistance (Vera Espinoza et al., 2021). In Ecuador, the initiatives implemented by the international organizations target migrant and refugee populations in general, but their cash transfers are limited to those deemed most vulnerable. Hence, some funds were already earmarked for the Venezuelan humanitarian response.

During the COVID-19 crisis, international organizations-maintained cash and in-kind transfer programs aimed at vulnerable groups, including migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, and were operationalized by local partners. The main types of aid offered by these programs included the distribution of personal

hygiene and basic goods, distribution of food rations, one-time cash transfers, shelters, and health and legal services (Japón Herrera, 2023). The main organizations providing these kinds of direct aid were IOM, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Plan International, the Red Cross, AVSI, Caritas Ecuador (Japón Herrera, 2023), and the World Food Programme (WFP, 2020, 2021a). Besides direct aid, some organizations partnered with national and local government offices, such as the Provincial Government of Pichincha, and local NGOs to implement humanitarian aid programs.

VULNERABILITY TO FOOD INSECURITY

The COVID-19 control measures generated obstacles for food access in two ways: first, the control of mobility, with curfews of up to 15 hours, together with the control of “agglomeration”, implemented selectively in housing sectors and popular markets, caused difficulty for people to reach food supply sites. Second, for those who earned their income informally, the controls directly affected their economic activity, reducing their purchasing power and the availability of food in their households.

The most severe impact of pandemic policy measures on food security was the loss of purchasing power of households due to the accelerated deterioration of the country’s economy (WFP, 2020), since the effects of the crisis such as increased unemployment and income reduction were directly absorbed by Ecuadorian households.

Food production and supply chains did not face significant disruption. Food production continued on a regular basis and alternative channels for the distribution of supplies in the cities were established, some with the collaboration of international organizations and both the national and local governments (Aguirre, 2023; WFP, 2020). There were no significant delays in imports either that could have posed a threat to the food system, since food imports were excluded from mobility and border restrictions throughout the pandemic. Ecuador’s internal food market was satisfied almost exclusively by national production (Ávila Santamaría, 2020; Hidalgo, 2020). During the first four months of the pandemic, when mobility restrictions were most severe, specific groups in the cities had more difficulty accessing food. Consistent with the general trend in Latin America, food production and availability were not compromised by the pandemic, but a severe increase in poverty and unemployment meant a growing inability to afford food and, therefore, an increased risk of food insecurity (León Ambrosi and Loja Chalco, 2021; Luiselli, 2020;).

In 2020, the country's GDP decreased by 7.8% (WFP, 2021a), only 30% of the population had adequate employment, underemployment grew by 2.9% and it reached 22.7% of the population, while unemployment grew by 1.1%, reaching 5%. In urban areas, underemployment and unemployment rates were higher than in rural areas, while at the national level overall, unemployment affected double the number of women than men, and grew by 2% among people aged 18 to 29 years (Gobierno de Ecuador, 2020). According to a survey conducted by the World Food Programme, 79% of households declared their income decreased by more than 50% during the pandemic (WFP, 2021a). By 2021, poverty affected 32% of the population, and extreme poverty, 15% (WFP, 2021a).

Food insecurity was more prevalent in urban areas, where it reached 56%, compared to 44% in rural areas. Between May 2020 and January 2021, moderate food insecurity in Ecuador decreased from 50% to 46%. However, severe food insecurity increased from 11.6% to 13%. About 2.3 million people in the country were severely food insecure (Gobierno de Ecuador, 2020).

Before the pandemic, Ecuador was already facing a double burden of malnutrition; a situation in which the population experiences simultaneous conditions of undernutrition and obesity and other “diet-related non-communicable diseases” (WHO, 2024). At the onset of COVID-19, the country had a 24% rate of chronic child undernutrition, while 60% of the population ranged from overweight to morbidly obese (Gavilanes Llango et al., 2021). Specialists anticipated that the population would increase its consumption of highly processed and highly caloric food products during the pandemic (Gavilanes Llango et al., 2021). At the same time, some reports stated that the consumption of non-perishable and frozen food items increased, since this allowed people to stay confined for longer periods of time, avoid contact at food-selling venues, and comply with mobility restrictions (Gavilanes Llango, 2021; León Ambrosi and Loja Chalco, 2021). Some people leaned towards food items considered healthier, such as fruits and vegetables, avoiding products high in fats, sugars and salt. However, these changes were not an effect of government policies, but a trend at the micro-social level related to beliefs about health and the prevention of contagion.

MIGRANT FOOD INSECURITY

Higher levels of vulnerability to food insecurity were concentrated in population groups that were already affected by social and economic inequalities. During the pandemic, the World Food Programme offices in Ecuador focused their assistance on lactating and pregnant women, children, and migrants and refugees, targeting some of the most vulnerable to food insecurity (WFP, 2020, 2021b).

A study on household food insecurity in Ecuador during the pandemic found that, among their surveyed population, urban households were more food insecure than those in rural areas (Viteri-Robayo et al., 2020). As is widely known, vulnerability to food insecurity is closely linked to income levels. In this regard, people in lower-income population groups, including migrants, were at greater risk for food insecurity.

In an overview of the situation of food insecurity among migrants in Ecuador during the pandemic, Milán and Martens (2023) note that little attention has been paid by government institutions or academia to this specific aspect of the living conditions of migrants in the country. They state that “during the COVID-19 pandemic international organizations led the response to food security situations, making up for the absence of the State in terms of social protection, particularly in urban areas” (Milán and Martens, 2023: 3). Consequently, the information available on migrants and food security in Ecuador comes mainly from international organisations. In their reports, there is a consensus that the pandemic increased the general state of insecurity for migrants in the country, including food insecurity (Milán and Martens, 2023; Pérez Martinez et al., 2021; WFP, 2021b). This is closely related to the economic impacts of the pandemic, as well as to the lack of social protections and the legal status of most migrants and asylum seekers (Milán and Martens, 2023).

The IOM (2020: 10) stated that “less than 30% of migrant households had enough to eat” in 2020. According to the World Food Programme, 71% of Venezuelan migrants living in Colombia and Ecuador in 2021 had “difficulties in food consumption”, a percentage higher than that of Venezuelans in Peru experiencing similar conditions (64%) (WFP, 2021b: 1). The same report identifies some common coping strategies of migrants facing food insecurity, including selling assets, borrowing money, and “accepting informal low-paid jobs” (WFP, 2021b: 2) The latter was increasingly common in Ecuador, where 51% of the migrants surveyed declared they had opted for jobs in the informal economy compared to 38% in a previous investigation.

BARRIERS TO MIGRANT ACCESS

As noted above, migrants and refugees were not eligible to access public social programs at the national level during the pandemic. However, some local governments did include non-nationals in their mitigation measures (Vera Espinoza et al., 2021; Milán and Martens, 2023). In the case of Pichincha, the provincial government’s Secretary of Popular and Solidarity Economy organized a food basket distribution program across the province, including migrants and refugees (Aguirre, 2023).⁶ However, there is no information available on the duration and scope of this initiative.

While migrants and refugees in Ecuador have faced barriers to accessing social services and support programs for many years, one factor that worsened their chances has been the severe economic crisis that the Ecuadorian state has experienced since 2019. The deterioration of economic indicators in the last five years has resulted in stark deficits in funding public social programs. According to the ILO in Ecuador, this has been a crucial limitation on the inclusion of migrants and refugees in public policies (OIT, 2022).

Some experts argue that public service deficits in Ecuador are not exclusively the result of adverse economic dynamics, but also policy decisions that implemented an austerity regime, pushing social policy into the background and weakening the State's capacity to respond to crises (Espinosa and Rivera, 2022; Hurtado et al., 2020). Beyond the economic crisis and general trends in social policy, migrants face specific barriers in accessing social protection programs. A study by the ILO (OIT, 2022) identified barriers to access both the contributory and non-contributory social protection systems (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Barriers to Access to Ecuador's Social Protection System for Migrants and Refugees

Barriers related to the contributory social protection system	Barriers related to the non-contributory social protection system
Limited access to adequate employment	Exclusion from cash-transfer programs
Limited access to regularization of migration status	Limitations of coverage in the public health system
Difficulties in obtaining National Identification Documents	Lack of information about health services
Difficulties in obtaining an identification number at the Ecuadorian Institute of Social Security	
Unaffordability of self-affiliation to social security	
Lack of information on procedures and documentation required	
<i>Source: Based on OIT (2022)</i>	

Access to both modalities of social protection are hindered by gaps between the rights and protections that migrants are entitled to by law, and the ways in which the law is applied (OIT, 2022). Other studies concur, demonstrating that in Ecuador, and in Latin America more broadly, there are tensions and contradictions between advanced but ambiguous legal frameworks and policy implementation (OIT, 2022, Vera Espinoza et al. 2021). To a certain extent, this has to do with a lack of knowledge on the part of public officials of the rights guaranteed to migrants and refugees by Ecuadorian law, as well as the discrimination and xenophobia that permeate public services (OIT, 2022). Another obstacle is the lack of sufficient and up-to-date sociodemographic information about migrants and refugees, especially those without official status, who constitute the majority

of the migrant population in Ecuador (OIT, 2022). As Table 1 shows, many of the central obstacles to effective access to social protection programs are related to a lack of documentation and pathways to obtaining regularized status, as well as a lack of information on the documentation needed. Furthermore, in several Latin American countries, program rules are ambiguous, imprecise or restricted to the national population (Vera Espinoza et al., 2021).

Although emergency or temporary assistance programs for migrants were put in place by international organizations and NGOs, these do not meet the broad needs of the targeted population. As Milán and Martens (2023) demonstrate in the case of Ecuador, they focus more narrowly on the provision of assistance for food needs. Moreover, social research on the expansion of humanitarian aid in the region has been critical of the conception and management of these programs. One criticism is that the “vulnerability criteria” under which organizations manage the allocation of aid is often based on their own notion of a “gender perspective.” This is based on binary representations of gender that systematically exclude impoverished male migrants from aid (Biondini et al., 2023). Furthermore, “these distinctions generate conflict among humanitarian aid institutions, as they are perceived as unfair, and at the same time, accentuate the condition of precarity of impoverished and racialized population, under the application of a supposed ‘gender perspective’” (Biondini et al., 2023: 6-7).

In a comparative study involving seven countries in Latin America (including Ecuador), Vera Espinoza et al. (2021) argue that migration governance in the region evidences a trend towards ad-hoc measures that address migration as a temporary social issue and an emergency, rather than creating and implementing policy that promotes the long-term integration of migrants in society. Regarding the barriers that migrants and refugees face in accessing social protection, Vera Espinoza et al. (2021) point out that even when they have access to short-term aid, their protection is ultimately not guaranteed by access to rights.

CONCLUSION

Ecuador was among the most severely affected countries in the region in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, and had one of the weakest response capacities in terms of managing public health emergencies. This policy audit has examined the trajectory of the pandemic in Ecuador, the economic and social effects, and the policy response. It identified two sets of policy measures taken in the face of the crisis: (a) policies put in place to curb the spread of COVID-19, and (b) policies implemented to mitigate the unwanted economic and social consequences.

Looking at the public measures taken to address the crisis, two aspects stand out: first, Ecuador relied heavily on restrictions and enforcement to the detriment of other strategies such as prevention, monitoring of cases and contacts, mass-testing, and community-based public health services. And second, the social protections implemented in response to COVID-19 were insufficient and did not properly address social inequalities, since they were unable to systematically reach the most affected groups i.e. those such as migrants and refugees already excluded from social protection systems.

The combination of punitive measures and lack of sufficient social support resulted in a clear setback for Ecuadorian society, which experienced the worst economic and social decline since the beginning of the 21st century. In addition to a notable increase in poverty, a decline in employment, and an increase in underemployment, the country saw a serious stagnation in the basic education system and, in general, the closing of opportunities for younger generations. In the years following the pandemic, the results of this crisis have begun to be felt in problems such as the growth of criminality and increasing social and political polarization in the country.

Analyses of the response of the Ecuadorian state to the pandemic concur that this cannot be adequately explained without taking into account the pre-existing conditions: on the one hand, the economic deterioration and, on the other hand, the state model that promoted cuts in public services, indiscriminate reduction of social spending, and the centralization of the public health system.

While the focus of this report is on what is known about the pandemic's impact on migrants and food security, both are closely linked to the broader context of the country's experience of COVID-19. The policy information available on how migrants and refugees were affected by the pandemic and by the measures used to deal with it shows that this population was less protected than other social sectors in the country, as they were excluded from the few social protection measures adopted by the government. The most serious negative consequences of the pandemic were faced by migrants and refugees but also Ecuadorian informal workers, the urban poor, and young people.

In terms of food security, government policy reports and academic studies indicate an increase in levels of household food insecurity during the pandemic, particularly in urban areas. Although the policy documents and related studies reviewed in this report demonstrate the combined effects of the pandemic and public policy measures on the food security of the migrant population in urban areas, there is currently insufficient data disaggregated by city or migratory status. Likewise, the specialized literature lacks comparative studies of the situation of the migrant population, and is not disaggregated by other variables such as education, employment, and gender. There is also a dearth of studies comparing

different groups of migrants. Finally, there is a lack of information accounting for the transition to the post-pandemic context and changes that may have occurred.

Our ongoing research agenda seeks to fill these research gaps by focusing on the case of Quito, contributing to a better understanding of the relationships between public policies, migration, and living conditions and their relation to food security. In addition to documenting available social protection programs and their accessibility to migrants, it is also crucial to examine the nature of these programs and their impact on the relationships between migrants and the state, as well as the extent to which they are promoting or limiting migrants' access to rights.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Between early 2020, when the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, and May 2023, when the pandemic was declared over as a global health emergency, Ecuador was governed by Lenín Moreno, who was in office from May 2017 to May 2021, followed by Guillermo Lasso, who held office from May 2021 to November 2023.
- 2 Mandatory curfews of 15 hours a day were imposed from March 24 until May 31, 2020 (Hurtado et al., 2020). Beginning in June, curfew measures became more flexible.
- 3 In Ecuador, there are two regional school systems following different calendars, based on the seasons. For the coastal region (*Costa*), the school year goes from April to January, and for the highlands (*Sierra*) and amazon (*Amazonía*) regions, it runs from September to June.
- 4 Indigenous groups in Ecuador are self-identified and recognized by the Constitution as peoples and nationalities (*pueblos y nacionalidades*).
- 5 Ley Orgánica de Apoyo Humanitario, in Registro Oficial No. 229, June 22, 2020.
- 6 The terms social and solidarity economy and popular and solidarity economy refer to alternatives to economic organization under capitalist principles (Coraggio, 2020). In Ecuador, the popular and solidarity economy is acknowledged within the 2008 Constitution, which identifies this type of economy as part of the national economic system (Castro Medina 2018).

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Ecuador was among the most severely affected countries in South America in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, and had one of the weakest response capacities in terms of managing public health emergencies. The pandemic's profound effects were exacerbated by pre-existing weaknesses in Ecuador's public health system, economic austerity policies, and social inequalities. The country's reliance on containment measures, combined with insufficient social support, resulted in severe economic and social decline. Migrants, already a vulnerable group, were further marginalized during the pandemic as they were excluded from social protection programs and faced worsening food insecurity. This report examines the impacts of COVID-19 policy measures on migration and food security in Ecuador, focusing on urban contexts, particularly the capital city of Quito. The findings underscore the need for more integrated research and policy approaches that address the specific conditions of migrants and other vulnerable groups. Policy efforts should focus on improving social protections, enhancing access to healthcare and vaccines for all communities, and addressing the underlying inequalities in the country that exacerbated the impacts of the pandemic.



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