

# The informal tourism economy, COVID-19 and socioeconomic vulnerability in Mexico

Carlos Monterrubio

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## Abstract

The great majority of people in developing countries depend on the informal economy for their livelihoods. In countries that rely heavily on tourism, pandemics and related confinements make these individuals even more socioeconomically vulnerable. This paper critically explores the immediate socioeconomic effects on the informal tourism economy of confinement measures associated with the corona virus-19 pandemic, as seen from a social vulnerability perspective. Mexico is one of the countries that depends the most on tourism and the informal economy, so this nation was selected for an exploratory case study. The results suggest that many workers in the informal tourism sector were affected immediately by – and their vulnerability increased because of – pandemic-related confinements. These restrictive measures' imposition on the entire population highlighted Mexico's deep social inequalities. Recommendations are offered of how to protect vulnerable individuals involved in the informal tourism economy.

## Introduction

The great majority of people in developing countries depend on the informal economy for their livelihoods. Over 90% of informal employment in the world is found in these nations, and over two-thirds (i.e. almost 70%) of individuals with jobs in developing countries are informally employed (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2018). People working in the informal economy contribute to socioeconomic development through commercial and non-commercial activities that are unprotected, unregulated and inadequately recognised or valued. Consequently, many individuals who rely on the informal economy are socially disadvantaged and excluded from public policies' benefits (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] & ILO, 2019).

Especially in developing countries, tourism is regarded as an economic catalyst that can alleviate poverty. Tourism is one the largest industries in some developing nations, in which it can help promote economic growth and improve social conditions at a subnational level (Lekshmi & Mallick, 2020). Informal sector businesses and jobs are difficult to measure (United Nations [UN], 2016), but this sector is considered an extremely significant part of developing countries' tourism economy (Slocum et al., 2011; Steel, 2012; Timothy & Wall, 1997). The tourism industry is an important provider of employment to low-skilled workers and those with limited qualifications. Tourism thus offers jobs and ways to earn income to ethnic minorities, migrants, young people and the long-term unemployed, as well as women with

family responsibilities who can take only part-time jobs (UN World Tourism Organisation [WTO] & ILO, 2014).

Tourism activities are highly dependent on exogenous factors, so this industry is extremely vulnerable to the effects of, for example, terrorist attacks, climate change, natural disasters, economic shocks and pandemics (Duro et al., 2021). When tourism activities are affected, then the people, families and businesses that depend on this industry are also affected. Previous studies have revealed that nations or destinations' tourism industry can be severely damaged or can even collapse, especially in the case of health crises (Díaz-Sánchez & Obaco, 2020; Dombey, 2004; Duro et al., 2021; Monterrubio, 2010; Pine & McKercher, 2004; Yang & Chen, 2009; Zhang et al., 2021).

However, prior research has only focused on these crises and prevention and mitigation measures' impacts on the formal tourism economy (i.e. on large corporations such as hotels, restaurants and airlines). In addition, the majority of tourism studies have been conducted in developed countries and, in particular, in Anglophone countries (Pearce, 2013) where the informal economy is much smaller than in poorer countries (ILO, 2018). Therefore, health crises' effects on the informal tourism economy have been, not unsurprisingly, largely neglected by researchers.

Not all population segments experience social vulnerability in the same way (Wisner et al., 2006) due to specific characteristics such as social class, age, gender, disability and occupation, so individuals can experience situations of risk in different ways. More specifically, working in the informal sector is associated with risks and vulnerabilities that present significant policy challenges. These issues arise primarily in less industrialised nations where most people depend, directly or indirectly, on the informal economy, but little is known about how vulnerability is experienced by those depending on the informal tourism economy during health crises.

The current unprecedented corona virus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic has affected regional economies worldwide (Diop et al., 2021) and transformed the global tourism industry in particular (Dias et al., 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Sharma et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). Although recent articles have covered the tourism industry's collapse in individual destinations due to pandemic-related restrictions (Foo et al., 2020; McCartney, 2020), further research is needed on this health crisis's socioeconomic effects on specific vulnerable groups. Studies on this topic need to include those who depend on the informal tourism sector in less developed countries. Identifying the pandemic's impacts on economically disadvantaged groups can help governments design public policies that protect the livelihoods of workers and families who rely on informal tourism activities.

The present research focused on the case of Mexico, one of the countries with the highest indexes of informality and dependence on tourism. This study sought to explore critically the immediate socioeconomic effects of confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic on the informal tourism economy. The main goals were not only to help document the pandemic's overall impacts on developing countries – about which little is still known (Muragu et al., 2021) – but also to highlight more vulnerable groups in the tourism industry that require closer attention and immediate support in this setting.

## Literature review

### Informal economy in tourism

The informal economy includes workers and economic units that employ hired labour, units owned by self-employed individuals working either alone or with family members and cooperatives and social and solidarity economy units (ILO, 2018). This term refers to economic activities that occur outside the purview of government regulations, operate on a small scale and rely on local resources. Unlike the formal economy in which companies seek to maximise profits, informal economy businesses aim to ensure individuals and their family's survival. For many poor people in developing countries, the informal economy is thus a survival mechanism (Portes & Schauffler, 1993) and these individuals' main source of income and employment (Brata, 2010). Street vendors, in particular, are forced to enter the informal economy by constraints on structural opportunities and family circumstances (Bhimji, 2010; Zloliniski, 2006). In their daily activities, informal sector workers tend to experience high levels of economic vulnerability (Brata, 2010).

As mentioned previously, the great majority of people in developing countries depend on the informal economy for their livelihood. According to the ILO's (2018) report on women and men in the informal sector, over 60% of employed individuals everywhere – around two billion people – take part in the informal economy due to a lack of formal economy opportunities and other sources of income. The informal economy is present in the world's five main regions, including the majority of employed people in Africa (85.5%) and a considerable percentage of workers in Asia and the Pacific (68.2%), the Arab States (68.6%) and the Americas (40.0%). In contrast, only a quarter (25.1%) of all jobs are informal in Europe and Central Asia (ILO, 2018).

The informal tourism sector is defined as all those people and businesses connected to tourists and the tourism industry in general that are not recognised by tourism associations and receive no support from local, regional or national governments (Slocum et al., 2011). This sector tends to consist of small-scale operations, individual or family ownership and operation, highly labour intensive activities and dependence on local resources, knowledge and abilities obtained outside the formal economy (Timothy & Wall, 1997). Many people get into the informal tourism economy because of limited job and economic opportunities, including in areas dominated by agriculture. For some people, informal tourism activities such as street vending greatly improves their living conditions (Truong, 2017).

In addition, this sector of the tourism industry offers alternative forms of employment for individuals entering the job market for the first time or encountering obstacles to getting a job elsewhere (UNWTO & ILO, 2014). Consequently, people can regard their participation in the informal tourism economy as a way to gain the knowledge and skills required to get more formal employment (Cukier & Wall, 1994). Although informal tourism offers individuals limited financial benefits, in developing countries, these benefits 'are essential impulses in initiating prosperity and giving them [workers] hope of a better future' (Steel, 2012, p. 615).

Individuals working in the informal economy are, however, frequently excluded from official economic and tourism policymaking and planning primarily because policies designed by the central government focus mainly on registered and formal tourism companies (Shinde, 2012). The informal economy is, in practice, often regarded as a problem by tourism planners and

decision makers (Timothy & Wall, 1997). Informal tourism workers thus experience exclusion since they work for a sector not covered by government policies and regulations (Truong, 2017). These people are often excluded from tourism sector decisions and their associated benefits.

### **Socioeconomic vulnerability**

The concept of vulnerability has been defined in different and frequently ambiguous ways. Overall, this term tends to be understood according to each investigation's specific circumstances and objectives. Ranci (2010) suggests that vulnerability refers to weaknesses that expose an individual or a group of individuals to unfavourable or harmful consequences if conflicts arise. This concept has often been applied in studies of natural disasters, risk management, hazards and development projects. Overall, the academic community's interest in vulnerability has been driven largely by the environmental changes affecting populations worldwide (Eakin & Luers, 2006). Unprecedented global events such as pandemics also require vulnerability research based on new cross-disciplinary approaches.

From a sociological perspective, vulnerability is regarded 'as a condition determined by underlying political, economic and social processes, so it is assigned to the same general field as such concepts as poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion' (Misztal, 2011, p. 4). Vulnerability is, therefore, understood as a result of social inequalities. Economic, political and social factors play an important role in the construction, maintenance and reproduction of vulnerability for particular social groups (Misztal, 2011).

At a social level, vulnerability is determined by various factors, including socioeconomic conditions. Because societies' members live under different specific socioeconomic conditions, individuals have varied experiences of vulnerability. People surrounded by favourable socioeconomic conditions can successfully resist and deal with vulnerability, but the more socially and economically disadvantaged individuals and groups are, the more vulnerable they are. In addition, patterns of vulnerability are influenced not only by people's socioeconomic conditions but also by everyday activities. According to Wisner et al. (2006), crucial risk factors include, among others, social class, occupation, ethnicity, gender, disability, health, age and immigration status. However, the majority of scholars agree that the most common underpinning factor contributing to vulnerability is poverty, which is understood to be the consequence of social, economic and political conditions. Thus, the poor experience greater vulnerability than other social groups do (Ranci, 2010).

### **Pandemics' economic impacts on tourism**

Tourism is an economic sector that can be severely affected by natural, economic, safety and health crises (Mather et al., 2005; Ryan, 2003). The present study focused, in particular, on pandemics. In the simplest terms, a pandemic can be defined as a global expansion of a new disease (World Health Organisation, 2010). Apart from public health consequences, they have severe socioeconomic implications, especially for tourism (Collins-Kreiner & Ram, 2020; Mason et al., 2005; Wilder-Smith, 2003) and those who depend financially on it. During pandemics, international travel plays a key role in spreading infections (Mangili & Gendreau, 2005; Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2003), so inevitably the travel and tourism industry is heavily affected.

Previous international pandemic experiences have proven that travel restrictions can be an effective strategy to diminish the spread of diseases (Camitz & Liljeros, 2006; Rodier, 2003). Other effective measures include monitoring international passengers' health, such as temperature screening in the case of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) (Wilder-Smith et al., 2003). However, some scholars have reported that restrictions may have restricted benefits in terms of reducing the spread of infections (Lam, 2008; MacKellar, 2007). Researchers have also concluded that diseases' impacts can severely affect international, national and regional economies (Monterrubio 2010; Wilder-Smith, 2003).

Previous studies have mainly focused on how infectious diseases affect the formal tourism industry and large corporations. The literature reveals that, for example, the SARS epidemic caused a significant decrease in air passenger, by as much as 80%, and lowered hotel occupancy rates to less than 10% in specific cities (Pine & McKercher, 2004). The Chinese travel and tourism economy consequently lost around 20.4 billion United States dollars (USD) in revenues (Dombey, 2004). In other cases, such as Influenza H1N1 in Mexico, the effects have also been significant. During the latter epidemic, hotel occupancy fell to between 4% and 30%, the restaurants' sales were reduced by up to 90% and national airlines experienced a 50% fall in domestic flight sales. In addition, national companies' profits shrank by 70%, and half of the national airlines' employees were given 'forced holidays' (Monterrubio, 2010).

How strongly pandemics damage a country's tourism economy largely depends on that nation's reliance on the travel and tourism industry. At the micro level, individuals and households dealing with fragile socioeconomic conditions are also affected, particularly people working in informal tourism economy in developing countries. More research is needed to determine how and why individuals involved in the informal tourism sector in less industrialised countries feel the impacts of global and national health crises.

## **Research context**

### **Tourism in Mexico**

Tourism is the third most important economic activity in Mexico. This industry contributes 8.7% of the national gross domestic product (GDP), generates 14.7 billion USD and activates a value chain of 65 billion USD (Arsuaga Losada, 2020). In 2018, Mexico ranked seventh worldwide in terms of international arrivals (WTO, 2019). According to national agencies' reports for 2019, Mexico received 45 million international tourists and 24,563 million USD. These figures represented an increase of 9% over 2018. At an international level, tourism in Mexico depends largely on North American travellers since 55.2% and 12.1% of international tourists entering Mexico by air in 2019 came from the United States and Canada, respectively. The European market accounted for 12.8% of international arrivals. The number of passengers that arrived on cruises in 2019 was 9.95 million passengers.

Domestic tourism is also significant for Mexico's tourism activities. A total of 53.658 million passengers arrived on domestic flights in 2019, which was 7.8% higher than the volume recorded for 2018. In 2019, 4.438 million people were employed by this country's tourism sector, which was the highest number of jobs since 2006 and 8.9% of total employment (Sector, 2019).

## **Informal tourism economy in Mexico**

García (2019) reports that, in 2018, Mexico's informal economy generated 22.5% of the total national production and 56.7% of all jobs. Around 31.2 million Mexicans (60% men and 40% women) worked in the national informal economy. These figures indicate that more than half of Mexican workers are part of informal labour systems. Although around 40% of workers in the informal economy are young adults, minors and the elderly also participate in the informal sector (García, 2018).

Around four million older adults in Mexico work as independent workers or in subordinate positions in informal sectors such as agriculture and commerce, and these individuals have no access to social security or health benefits (Mejía & Solera, 2017). The population segments employed by the informal economy are quite vulnerable in Mexico as their labour rights are ignored and they receive no social benefits such as holidays, bonuses, profit sharing, formal contracts or access to social security and medical care (García, 2019). In addition, due to these individuals' limited income, workers in the informal economy are continually forced to live hand to mouth, including waiters, maids, drivers, janitors, street vendors and construction workers (Patiño, 2020).

Tourism in Mexico offers multiple opportunities to people involved in the informal economy. The existing data indicate that the tourism industry generates almost 4.5 million jobs (i.e. 8.9% of national employment) in Mexico (Sectur, n.d.), but the real figure would be significantly higher if informal employment were considered (Sectur & OECD, 2017). International agencies estimate that, out of the 2.2 million children and adolescents working in the country, 43% work in the tertiary sector, which includes tourism (Save the Children, 2017). In some Mexican destinations, children actively take part in paid work, and their participation comprises more than just bringing in complementary income for their families. These minors' informal economy activities put them at risk of physical harm and health problems (Monterrubio et al., 2016).

In tourism, the informal trade in local food, traditional clothing and handicrafts is characterised by low prices. These activities not only benefit locals but also potentially constitute an attraction in some Mexican destinations (Andrade Romo et al., 2016; Torres Zenon, 2015). However, in some of Mexico's tourism destinations, informal sector jobs have increased migrants' vulnerability. Research has revealed that informal activities such as street vending increases marginalisation, discrimination and exploitation. For those with limited employment and income-generation opportunities, working in the informal sector, although risky, can mean having an income and experiencing empowerment and greater autonomy. For specific disadvantaged groups such as women, informality means making an important – and sometimes the only – financial contribution to their household income (Wilson, 2014). Thus, the informal economy helps reduce individual and family poverty in some Mexican population segments (Gámez et al., 2011).

## **COVID-19 outbreak in Mexico**

The present study focused on the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on informal tourism activities in Mexico. This subsection briefly describes the immediate measures implemented nationwide in response to the pandemic. COVID-19 first appeared in Latin American countries in late February. Nations such as Brazil and Ecuador reported their first cases in the last week of

February, while Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Costa Rica did so in the first week of March (Horwitz et al., 2020). The virus's presence in Mexico was formally announced on 28 February, 2020, thereby initiating the pandemic's first phase in this country. Phase two began on 24 March, during which the measures implemented were a national quarantine and temporary closure of schools from 23 March to 19 April. Events with more than 100 people were also cancelled in this phase. In response to active outbreaks, COVID-19's spread across Mexico and more than a thousand cases, phase three was declared on 21 April. To mitigate the spread and transmission of the virus, measures adopted in this phase included extending the national quarantine until 30 May and interrupting non-essential activities in the public, private and social sectors. Activities in all recreational spaces, such as cinemas, theatres, parks, squares and beaches, were suspended to make social distancing mechanisms more effective. As of 19 May 2020, the federal government had reported 51,633 cumulative confirmed cases and 5,332 deaths from COVID-19 nationwide (Gobierno de México, 2020).

Unlike many countries in Asia and Europe, Mexico and other Latin American countries were fortunate enough to be some of the last countries to be hit by the virus. This gave Mexico a great strategic advantage, allowing officials to plan the prevention, contingency and mitigation phases well in advance. However, in addition to protecting people's health, the pandemic-related prevention measures had an immediate significant socioeconomic impact on more vulnerable population segments.

## **Methodology**

The current research explored the immediate socioeconomic effects of confinement associated with the COVID-19 pandemic on Mexico's informal tourism economy. As a field of study dealing with dynamic and ever changing phenomena, tourism research touches on many topics that are not fully understood. Exploratory studies are a quite valuable way to gain an initial understanding of many previously unresearched aspects of tourism. Mason et al. (2010) suggest that exploratory research should be conducted when sufficient information about a topic – in this case, the pandemic's impacts on the informal tourism economy in a developing country – is unavailable. This type of study can help generate new ideas and develop an overview of the topic in question. The present study's exploratory nature thus makes the results useful in terms of defining subsequent stages of research. The research focused on providing a panoramic view of the selected subject matter rather than final or generalisable findings. The initial insights gained need to be studied further using more structured methods.

Qualitative research methods are valuable tools in exploratory studies (Ritchie, 2003). The present study's goals were best served by a qualitative approach based on a review of newspaper reports. Bryman (2012) asserts that newspapers are a potential source of data for social science researchers. More specifically, newspapers can both provide valuable information that facilitates the identification of emerging topics in areas of social concern and often be the only source of data available.

In the present study, electronic newspapers were searched for reports of the pandemic's varied consequences for the informal tourism economy in Mexico. Keywords such as 'COVID' and 'informal tourism economy', 'pandemic' and 'informal economy', as well as 'COVID' and 'informal tourism employment', were used to search for articles published during the

pandemic's first three months in Mexico. The most illustrative and frequently reported news stories were selected.

Although the reports were chosen based on the researcher's discretion, care was taken to incorporate a variety of newspapers. In addition, the researcher sought to ensure that the news selected met authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning criteria, which are standards that need to be met for documents to be useful to social science studies (Scott, 1990). The following section presents an overview of the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on Mexico's tourism industry and informal economy.

## **Findings**

### **Short-term impacts on tourism industry**

The pandemic is expected to result in an average negative growth of -5.3% in the Latin American and Caribbean region's GDP. Forecasts included that, in 2020, 11.6 million people would lose their jobs in this region because of the pandemic, which could contribute to the informal economy's growth. Experts estimated that Mexico's GDP, in particular, would drop by -6.5%. The impacts were expected to be considerably more serious on the tertiary sector of the Mexican economy since this sector generates the most jobs, with 34.67 million people employed by service providers. The tertiary sector is also one of the sectors that employs the largest number of women, especially food and beverage services in which women have taken more than 60% of the jobs (Aguilar, 2020).

Mexico's tourism industry experienced immediate significant economic effects as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Travel cancellations were expected to reach 75% for domestic trips and 80% for international trips, for a total loss of 239.2 million Mexican pesos (Cicotur, 2020). By early May, more than 1,200 hotels in Mexico closed, representing 25% of the accommodation businesses associated with the National Tourism Business Council. The remaining 75% of all hotels do not belong to this association, so their status was left out of these statistics. Around 450,000 micro, small and medium-sized tourism and related companies were considered to be at risk of closure, and around 100,000 jobs in the hotel sector were likely to be lost in the short run (Arsuaga Losada, 2020).

In specific destinations such as Mexico City, the hotel sector would reportedly experience estimated monthly losses of 60 million Mexican pesos. However, if the tourism industry's entire value chain was considered, the figure could rise to 6,000 million pesos. Three months after the pandemic had started, 95% of the city's restaurants were closed (Ayala Espinosa, 2020). In the same vein, Cancun - one of the destinations most visited by international tourists - registered a hotel occupancy rate of 2.7% by mid-April, and 157 accommodation establishments - the equivalent of 44,655 rooms - were closed (Varillas, 2020).

### **Short-term impacts on informal tourism economy**

Mexico is a large country, so it offers disparate socioeconomic and cultural conditions. The following cases were chosen to illustrate briefly the quite diverse experiences of vulnerability arising from the interaction between economic dependence on tourism and the COVID-19 pandemic.



Mexico City is one of the most heavily populated cities in the world and one of the most visited destinations in the country. This city's street vendors are estimated to be around 100,000 strong. After contingency measures were imposed on Mexico, these vendors registered losses of up to 90% during the pandemic's first months (Usi, 2020). At an individual level, the consequences immediately generated cases of extreme need. For example, newspapers reported that an indigenous artisan family working on Mexico City's streets were forced to offer their crafts in exchange for food due to low sales and their precarious subsistence level income (Televisa, 2020).

In addition to street vendors, sex workers in Mexico City were extremely vulnerable to the COVID-19 crisis's effects. Many female sex workers nationwide live hand to mouth. Hotels are used not only to provide sex services but also to serve as the place where some sex workers live. By early April 2020, around 1,100 hotels in the city had closed, which for sex workers meant being both unemployed – and thus having no income – and homeless (Mérida, 2020).

Population segments' vulnerability depends largely on their economic conditions. In the state of Guerrero in southern Mexico, for instance, 79.3% of the economically active population works in the informal economy. Guerrero's residents were severely affected by the closure of tourism activities that make up more than a third of the state's GDP (Gracida Gómez, 2020b). In popular sun and beach Guerrero destinations such as Acapulco, vulnerable groups include older adults and children, as well as people who lost their jobs – disadvantaged individuals hard hit by the contingency measures. In response, social agencies and some tourism companies offered free food to street vendors and tourism service providers who regularly live hand to mouth (Gracida Gómez, 2020a). The state's other destinations include Cozumel, a Mexican island completely dependent on tourism. The island's street vendors also live at a subsistence level, so they were severely affected by pandemic restrictions. In some cases, their sales did not even reach 10% of their former income (Galú, 2020).

In Mexico, one of the most socially excluded groups with high levels of poverty has traditionally been Afro-descendants. In southwestern Mexico, half a million individuals fall into this group, many of whom depend on tourism. They had to survive without jobs, income or any government support during the quarantine. Many businesses are family-based and heavily dependent on visitors, taxi drivers and cargo carriers that pass through their communities. Local pandemic restrictions severely limited movement between these towns. Due to the blocked transport lines, residents found that they were barely subsisting because they have an economy that depends heavily on tourism, their work forces them to live hand to mouth and they have no way to save money. In the Afro-descendant population, more people than just those directly involved in tourism were immediately affected since fishermen and farmers were unable to sell their goods to restaurants. Locals protested that they would die of hunger rather than of corona virus due to the lack of tourists in the affected communities (Rodríguez, 2020).

The tourism industry's susceptibility to mobility restrictions' effects thus made other population segments more vulnerable. In various tourism destinations, the number of informal food vendors increased as a result of staff reductions in hotels, restaurants and other non-essential businesses that were temporarily closed due to phase three measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Mexico (González, 2020).

## Conclusions and policy implications

The pandemic's impacts on the informal economy have been experienced differently depending on the economic sector. According to Aguilar (2020), the primary sector, which includes agricultural, livestock and fishing activities, has a greater chance of recovering well in the short term. Because the primary sector is essential, these activities will most probably see a much smaller reduction in jobs and a more immediate recovery compared to other activities, including tourism.

In the informal tourism economy, people work without any social protection, and they are thus exposed to more risks of great concern. Informal tourism activities in Mexico and other Latin American countries have been among those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Individuals who depend on the informal economy will feel more substantial effects in terms of jobs and income, as well as being exposed to health risks when going out into public spaces to try to earn money. Their involvement is likely to be intensive and immediate because many of these people are continually forced to live from hand to mouth.

In addition, the vast majority of tourism activities in which the Mexican population is employed are at a high risk of being unable to fill vacancies or make sales and even of disappearing. Many tourism jobs are in family subsistence businesses, which means that sometimes they are the only source of income for families and, in times of confinement, they have no way of generating additional resources. For many individuals, families and small businesses that depend on tourism, staying home for such long periods is not a viable option. Faced with the pandemic's effects, many individuals and families in developing countries are currently struggling to decide whether to protect their health or source of income.

Informality is part of the daily lives of many workers in developing countries' tourism. Informality often comes with risks and vulnerabilities that present difficult challenges to policymakers (OECD & ILO, 2019). From a perspective of socioeconomic vulnerability, some observations and recommendations can be made regarding how to safeguard not only people's health but also their financial needs. Protective measures are needed especially because individuals' livelihoods in the informal tourism economy are threatened by the immediate economic impacts of health emergencies requiring confinement.

Policymakers must acknowledge that vulnerability is experienced differently according to each population segments' socioeconomic conditions. The COVID-19 experience has highlighted that vulnerability is defined by social class, age, gender, race and, quite importantly, the formality of the economic activities on which groups depend (Ranci, 2010).

Confinement is not always a viable option for many people and families who depend on tourism and live in precarious situations in economically disadvantaged countries. To impose confinement measures on informal tourism workers without offering any financial assistance is to intensify and reproduce vulnerable groups' level of exposure.

Financial support must be given to micro, small and medium-sized organisations in the tourism industry during pandemics. This aid should be given immediately after confinement measures are imposed to reduce the financial vulnerability of those who depend on tourism on a daily basis.

Once preventive restrictions are lifted from non-essential travel, domestic trips to destinations highly dependent on tourism should be given priority to reactivate national, regional and local economies. In parallel, the consumption of local products and services, especially those produced by the informal sector and from local resources, needs to be encouraged.

Confinement measures implemented in Mexico and other Latin American countries underlined that vulnerability is a result of inequalities and population segments' socioeconomic exclusion (Misztal, 2011). In the medium and long term, strategies should be promoted that reduce socioeconomic polarisation linked to tourism. Finally, policies need to be developed that seek to encourage the informal tourism economy's transition to formality.

In conclusion, from the perspective of socioeconomic vulnerability, health crises associated with confinement measures have increased the exposure of the informal tourism sector's workers to unfavourable conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic's effects were still ongoing at the time of this paper was written, and many of them will undoubtedly be felt in the medium and long term. According to Sharma et al. (2021), 'the pandemic has created severe roadblocks for the tourism industry, and the way ahead seems to be . . . [difficult]' (p. 4). Therefore, the experiences of economically and socially disadvantaged groups should constantly be monitored to identify their needs at different stages of the crisis. As noted by Becker (2004), most attempts to tackle poverty and its associated social costs will be unsuccessful if vulnerable individuals in the informal economy and their employment needs remain underresearched and ignored.

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