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Bracing for turmoil: temporalities of livelihood adaptation among informal workers in Facatativá, Colombia

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ABSTRACT

This study considers temporal aspects of livelihood adaptation in times of turmoil by drawing on interviews with informal street vendors in Facatativá, Colombia. By engaging a ‘time stories’ perspective, this article aims to provide a better understanding of how livelihood responses to shocks emerge from (and are constrained by) individuals’ initial and changing assumptions about the continued onset of a crisis. We found that livelihood adaptation to shock, in some cases, involves adopting a new livelihood that appears more durable. In other cases, adaptation is temporary with individuals returning to prior livelihoods when conditions allow. Many individuals had limited livelihood options. In such cases adaptation was more precarious generally, implying drastic consumption cuts or relying on neighborly networks. Also, changing one’s livelihood is a high-risk decision for people who are often already struggling to survive in a context of declining overall demand and falling incomes as a crisis hits.

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Introduction

On March 6th, 2020, Colombia recorded its first case of the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, just over a month after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the emerging pandemic a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (WHO, 2020). A week later Colombia, like many countries, began adopting increasingly strict measures to limit the spread of the virus, often with devastating effects on the economy, particularly for informal workers (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2021; Benítez et al., 2020; Burki, 2020; De la Hoz-Restrepo et al., 2020). These effects sparked an acute national recession and unprecedented economic issues, both as a result of local restrictions and global economic shockwaves. For the working poor the meagre savings which they had accrued quickly ran out. At the outset of the pandemic, the World Bank estimated that up to 100 million people worldwide could fall back into the extreme poverty which they had already managed to escape (World Bank, 2020). Others have argued that the pandemic rather accelerated an on-going trend of growing poverty and inequality (Rammelt, 2021). For the majority of informal workers, staying at home would mean going hungry because daily consumption largely relies on small daily incomes. One survey found that 87% of respondents had experienced a decline in daily income, with 59% of the same respondents reporting they faced increased hunger as

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a result (Egger et al., 2021). These impacts of pandemic-induced recessions created a highly unequal response burden as a result of varying levels of livelihood adaptive capacity and the existence of intersecting vulnerabilities.

This study is not a COVID-19 study per se; rather, our unit of analysis and interest is livelihood adaptability among people who work in the informal economy during a crisis. COVID-19 presents a case with distinct attributes both due to its scope and its oftentimes surprising impacts on the economy, particularly after the initial lockdown. We draw on a ‘time stories’ heuristic, emphasizing temporal experience of pasts, presents and futures (Fincher et al., 2014). Our study is informed by 26 in-depth interviews with informal workers in Facatativá, Colombia, which is a city located about an hour’s drive outside of Bogotá. We were particularly interested in the temporal aspect of livelihood adaptation for the purpose of understanding adaptation as a process rather than an outcome. This is also reflected through our engagement with heuristic time stories.

We were interested in knowing how informal workers initially adapted as the country closed down in March 2020, rendering different types of livelihoods illegal or infeasible. This, in turn, required swift adaptations as few of the respondents had savings to rely on. We were also interested in exploring how the study participants experienced the situation after six months, when initial adaptations had time to mature. Finally, we were interested in determining how people regarded their situation and their future one year into the crisis. This study was inspired by a desire to better understand how people respond to external constraints to their economic activities, so that crisis-related policy design can have a greater and fairer social impact.

Theoretically and conceptually, this article approaches the topic of informality by employing the notion of anticipation. It explores how informal workers anticipate the future at three distinct points in time (initially, after six months, and after a year) by engaging the concept of ‘time stories’. Importantly, this analytical lens facilitates qualitative research centred around temporal experience with a particular focus on remembered and anticipated experience at various points in time. However, we recognise that the effects of the pandemic on society or on personal livelihoods could scarcely be anticipated, and this is not the main focus of our investigation. Instead, this study should be seen as an attempt at mapping out narratives, thoughts, and efforts at making it through the crisis in terms of livelihood. We speak here of anticipation as an affective state and not as foresight – or in the words of Adams et al. (2009, p. 247) ‘actively orienting oneself temporally’.

Extensive literature exists on the topic of informality, in which theoretical innovations often consider whether informality is a malady or a potential source of security or viable livelihoods. Informality is one of the longer-running research topics in the field of global development (Banks et al., 2020; Elgin, 2021; Hart, 1973; Hillenkamp et al., 2013; Maloney, 2004). Although this body of research has for a long time been viewed as a major impediment to development and livelihood security, it has also provided critical nuance on the ways that informality offers flexibilities the formal economy does not. A body of knowledge is also emerging specifically on how workers in the informal economy respond to crises, natural hazards, external shocks and recessions (Cohen, 2010; Hillenkamp et al., 2013; Nyamwanza, 2012). There is also significant recent literature now on the initial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on informal workers (e.g. Bassier et al., 2021; Cuesta & Pico, 2020; Egger et al., 2021; Webb et al., 2020). However, few such studies have focused on livelihood adaptation as their unit of analysis, particularly not from a multi-temporal perspective, as studies have instead tended to focus on the COVID-19 pandemic directly.

This article is structured as follows. The next section concisely reviews the literature and theoretical perspectives on informality. The third section describes the research design and elaborates on the research context and background information relevant for understanding the study setting. The fourth section presents and discusses the findings of the study. The final and

concluding section summarizes the main points of the article and reflects on their wider implications for theory and policy.

Literature review

This literature section has three parts. The first part sets out to contextualize the present study within the literature on the informal economy. The second part engages the literature on the informal economy in times of crisis. The third part elaborates on the ‘time stories’ perspective employed in this study.

Understanding the informal economy

A much-cited definition of the informal economy is provided by the seminal work of Castells and Portes (1989, p. 12), who define it as ‘a process of income generation characterized by one central feature: it is unregulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated’. This definition highlights how the informal economy largely revolves around lack of regulation, but often maintains deep linkages with formal businesses (Sindzingre, 2006). It should be noted, however, that although the concept’s meaning remains contested, it is also relatively straightforward; in theory, the informal economy is simply whatever is not formal work and refers to all forms of employment that are not formalised (Biles, 2009 see also Elgin, 2021). It has been argued that we can consider the informal economy the ‘developing country analogue of the voluntary entrepreneurial small firm sector found in advanced countries’, as opposed to merely a ‘residual comprised of disadvantaged workers rationed out of jobs’ (Maloney, 2004, 1159). Informality in this sense refers to economic activities such as those happening in formal livelihoods but bypasses formal labour institutions. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2013) distinguishes between informal businesses (informally employing several workers) and those that engage in own-account employment. However, many countries have created systems that formalise the informal economy through measures such as providing street vendors and other self-employed workers with permits for their economic activities (Bromley & Wilson, 2018; Gindling & Newhouse, 2014), partially formalizing the informal economy. Some countries and cities have also nominated informal economy representatives to city councils or for posts in national politics.

Theoretical advances over the past two decades have often centred around the degree to which informality can be considered ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ from a developmental perspective. Employment in the informal economy has often been theorised as the result of dysfunctional labour markets or the disappearance of formal employment, causing workers to be ‘pushed’ into informality (Biles, 2009; Maloney, 2004). With no pension benefits, few social services, and irregular work conditions, the informal sector has been conceptualized as a negative phenomenon. In reality, the idea that the informal economy can also provide working conditions that participants value is not foreign in the field of global development (Sindzingre, 2006; Elgin, 2021 see also Hart, 1973), but it remains controversial. It should be noted, however, that a considerable body of evidence suggests that some workers leave the formal sector voluntarily to work in the informal sector due to reasons such as low pay, few benefits, inflexible working hours and low levels of autonomy (Gindling & Newhouse, 2014; Hillenkamp et al., 2013). In Colombia, for example, a low minimum wage leaves it unclear how formal work will improve household economies (Arango & Flórez, 2021). However, although workers may voluntarily opt out of formality to engage in informal own-account work, this does not necessarily mean these livelihoods are not precarious; it is not clear whether or to what extent low-skill/low-pay formal work is less precarious than informal work. As pointed out by Maloney (2004, 1173), ‘[n]either job will necessarily lead to an exit from poverty, but the informal option may actually offer a measure of dignity and autonomy that the formal job does

not'. The focus, therefore, appears to have shifted somewhat away from whether the informal economy represents an economic malady, to whether it can somehow co-exist with formal economies, and if so, how they may best complement one another.

In classical development theory, the existence of informal economies is typically approached as a temporary stage on the way towards modernization and later stages of capitalistic integration (Biles, 2009; Elgin, 2021). However, the 'development trajectories' of most regions have not adhered to the stepwise stage-logic of 20th-century development thinking. According to Hillenkamp et al. the informal economy has traditionally been cast as a by-product of failed efforts at modernization:

The informal economy is viewed as an employment sector of last resort made up of pre-capitalist, informal production units that will disappear with the development process. Alternatively, it is seen to be the result of a massive opting out of rational firms and individuals from the formal institutions on finding that the costs of those institutions outweigh the benefits. (2013, p. 2)

Experience from Latin America, among other regions, has demonstrated that the informal economy is not a passive or static 'obstacle' but that it evolves and adapts with surges and dips in the prevailing economic conditions, cultural changes and technological innovations. The sector has also often been considered one that mainly serves the function of absorbing workers who either cannot find formal employment or who have been laid off from the formal economy in times of hardship. However, as historical evidence has indicated, the sector cannot be dismissed as merely a safety net for people falling out of formality. As discussed above, there are clear reasons some people voluntarily leave formal employment to engage in informal entrepreneurship; indeed, the informal sector persists in good times and in bad times (Biles, 2009; Gindling & Newhouse, 2014). Women, for example, may find that the informal economy enhances their capacity to manage their time and resources on their own terms, while also posing significant barriers for entrepreneurship due to structural constraints (Pineda Duque & Castiblanco Moreno, 2022). While the extent to which informality occurs and the number of people engaging in informal work does seem to depend on external shocks and the economic landscape, it is not as much of a factor as previously expected.

The informal economy in times of crisis and economic shocks

The relationship between informality and economic crisis has been well studied within the Latin America region (Biles, 2009; Cuesta & Pico, 2020; Fernández-Kelly & Shefner, 2006; González-Bustamante, 2021; Lépore & Simpson Lapp, 2018). The so-called 'lost decade' of the 1980s caused incomes to decline dramatically, with devastating inflation levels occurring in many countries in the region. The rise in formal- and hybrid economy unemployment (hybridity here refers to workers who are engaged both in formal and informal work) has been estimated at nearly 50%, with an increase in informal employment estimated at over 30% (Biles, 2009). Although the relationship between dips in formal employment and surges in informal work is not mechanistic or well understood (Gindling & Newhouse, 2014; Maloney, 2004), the Latin American evidence has produced a solid body of literature on informality and its role in strained times. This literature has also developed somewhat independently from an equally large body of research on Sub-Saharan African informality, although quite a major selection of these volumes also contribute to the literature on informality and its workings more generally and conceptually.

According to James Biles (2009), 'decent jobs' (as referred to under Sustainable Development Goal 8, see UN, 2015) remained as scarce and inaccessible in the late 2000s as they had been in the financial catastrophe of the 1980s, partially because informality allows companies to bypass labour and wage regulations. The majority of governments in the region have, to a lesser or greater extent, implemented structural reforms in line with neoliberal thinking (e.g. privatization, austerity, free trade agreements), but notable progress on labour market formalization has remained elusive (Biles, 2009; Fernández-Kelly & Shefner, 2006). A categorical view of the relationship between the formal

and informal economies tends to frame informality as a type of residual category providing precarious jobs to those who cannot secure formal-sector employment.

Efforts have been made to theorise typological differences, such as the features of autonomous workers, subsistence workers, subordinate work and own-account entrepreneurs, but little new insight has emerged on a theoretical level into how adaptation to changed circumstances happens (Biles, 2009; Castells & Portes, 1989). From this perspective, the informal sector absorbs what labour is superfluous to the formal sector (Biles, 2009; Hillenkamp et al., 2013). Paradoxically, the very process of neoliberalism reform produces unsafe jobs and precarious formality, which further blurs the distinction between formal and informal jobs. The historical evidence has indicated, however, that although the relationship is complex, the region has tended to experience growth and declines in both sectors simultaneously when experiencing growth spells and recessions (Biles, 2009; Maurizio, 2015). Thus, informality is increasingly recognised as a significantly more multi-dimensional phenomenon than early conceptualizations suggested.

In a more empirical study on the topic of livelihood resilience, Marschke and Berkes (2006) draw on data from Cambodia to theorise adaptation in the face of shocks. The study is framed within a critique of status-quo-orientated understandings of normalcy. The introduction to the study observes that a clear distinction between crisis and recovery does not reflect how people's livelihoods actually respond to stressors. Instead, the researchers argue that explicitly considering how households strive to withstand disruptions through adaptation and entrepreneurship is necessary, particularly if we are to understand how the same economic downturn can affect people differently despite similar initial conditions. Among the study's main findings is that livelihood diversification is one of the main coping strategies among the study informants.

We can distinguish between different forms of diversification: for example, reactive adaptations and more opportunistic kinds. Risk can thus be reduced either by moving from one type of activity to another, or by engaging in a variety of economic activities simultaneously (effectively reducing productivity but minimizing risk). Therefore, we can understand diversification strategies both in terms of wealth generation and of subsistence or survival. The study theorises that the dilemma between short-term and long-term adaptations and innovations (in some cases concerning meeting daily needs and in other cases, entrepreneurial thinking) plays a role in determining the long-term effects of the crisis in households. This view is in line with conceptual innovations centred on the notion of positive and negative 'spirals',—a metaphor commonly used in literature on coping. A particularly destructive coping mechanism, often used as a last resort, is to rely on money lenders or expensive loans to navigate hardships. It should be noted, however, that households are often aware of these dilemmas but perceive their realistic options as severely constrained by the situation they face. After all, during the initial phase of the onset of a crisis it is difficult for individuals to anticipate how the crisis will develop over time (e.g. how long it will last, if it will get worse or better with time or if some options available in the present will be closed off in the future).

Examining specifically how economic crises that unfold at the global level ultimately manifest locally, Jennifer Cohen (2010) discusses how the livelihoods of traders adjust in response to global value chains and changes in local supply and demand. A common observation is that dips in formal opportunities lead to a surge in informality, but also a decrease in customers, further burdening people already working informally. Cohen's data from street vendors in Johannesburg suggests that when structural conditions change, although people pushed into the informal sector by external causes generally consider it an act of desperation, they recognise it is a necessary move for survival. In a context shaped by lack of opportunities, social nets and low demand in relation to supply, many people believe they only have three choices: idleness, engaging in improvised and informal economic activities, or criminal activities. Within this context, informal work is commonly considered a legitimate and honest livelihood as it is locally conceptualized as refraining from participating in criminal economic activities. Therefore, economic crises typically witness the number of competing informal workers increase; however, 'it is not possible to definitively ...

separate the impact of a drop in market-wide consumption demand from the impact of competition' (ibid., p. 281).

The most common strategy of livelihood adaptation is typically to work longer hours and create minor adjustments to business strategy. The effect on women is, therefore, often disproportionate, as care work becomes increasingly difficult to combine with longer hours engaging in informal work outside the home. This tendency was also observed in Colombia, as noted by Cuesta and Pico (2020). The gendered aspect of changes to the economic terrain is thus shaped by a simultaneous need for informal work and an increase in uncompensated care work, often in the home or in the home of relatives. According to Furceri et al. (2020), economic crises and pandemic conditions significantly increase inequality (as measured by the Gini index) by creating higher supply in times of lower demand.

Latin America is one of the regions where livelihoods were resumed more quickly due to economic activity resuming relatively faster compared to other regions, but still saw a slow recovery (Colombia's GDP grew very quickly in 2021–22 but mainly because of resumed economic activity, and is expected to be slow in the years ahead [OECD, 2022]).

Livelihood adaptation and coping strategies from a 'time stories' lens

A starting conceptualization for this study, also demonstrated in the literature review above, is that livelihood adaptations in the face of adversities are adaptive strategic moves made from different temporal perspectives. News of global developments, such as a financial crisis, a pandemic or other types of calamity spark reactions, debates and emotional responses locally even before their impacts are felt. In other words, although the 'shockwaves' spread throughout the world, they take time to travel from the 'epicenter', allowing some time to consider how one's life could be affected before the crisis hits.

Both in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2008 financial crisis we observed that actors in the informal economy were aware of and discussing these global events before their impacts were truly felt locally. Therefore, we naturally expect people to have thoughts about how the unfolding situation may concern them in the future even before their livelihood is directly impacted by it. This in turn, may plausibly give rise to actions aimed at mitigating the worst of the impending developments. As local conditions change (e.g. as a result of national measures to 'flatten the curve' in the context of COVID-19 or when the impacts of global recession are felt in terms of altered supply and demand), many people find themselves forced to adjust their livelihoods in response to new realities.

It seems likely these new realities are often initially perceived as temporary adjustments but may actually have a much longer time horizon than originally anticipated. When relatively costly and precarious dips in income are sustained for a longer period than expected, quality of life, nutrition and other valued aspects of everyday life also gradually decline (Cuesta & Pico, 2020; Egger et al., 2021). This trajectory is dependent on, for example, available savings and community network. A third temporal perspective can then be inferred, in which people respond to the protracted nature of the crisis conditions and renegotiate their expectations for the future. These responses also manifest in changes to livelihood activities.

To analyse livelihood strategies and changes to livelihood strategies in the context of protracted crises, we find that the 'time stories' approach, as conceptualized by Fincher et al. (2014) is useful. Time stories can be understood as 'narratives connecting pasts, presents and futures' (ibid., p. 202). Operating at various and often incoherent and simultaneous (imagined and hopeful) temporal horizons, time stories construct expectations of the immediate future and how unfolding events will transpire. Spatially, stories about time serve to 'fix time in places, and places in time', often with a normative function (ibid.). Coined in the context of climate change and creeping environmental changes, the approach explicitly recognises that images of the future are inherently imagined futures. Another advantage of this approach is its implicit focus on multiple intersecting

temporalities, which is appropriate in our case considering that we wanted to capture changes and adjustments to livelihood adaptation at different points in time, in addition to changes to affective stances.

In a creeping emergency or protracted adversity context, this means that challenges of livelihood adaptations occur as people realistically or unrealistically imagine how livelihoods may be affected in the short term, the medium term and the long term. As this study also reveals, people who realized more quickly that the unfolding crisis would be of a longer duration coped better than people who based their adaptation strategies on the assumption these adjustments would be of a shorter duration.

Research design and context

This study draws on 26 conversational qualitative interviews with informal own-account workers, mainly street vendors, whose livelihoods are based in the central Facatativá area. Facatativá is a city and commuter hub about 30 km from Bogotá, making it part of the greater Bogotá economic zone. Facatativá is the fourth-largest urban area in the Cundinamarca department, which includes the Bogotá Capital District with well over 10 million inhabitants living and working in the wider economic zone (see [Figure 1](#)). It is a relatively representative 'suburb' in the Colombian urban context with many formal and informal businesses that serve the Bogotá metropolitan area and economic zone. While we wish to caution against directly applying findings from Facatativá elsewhere, we consider the informal economy of Facatativá to be representative for other Colombian and Latin American cities, keeping in mind local variation in the financial impacts of the pandemic response.

Economically, the city of Facatativá has many formal and informal types of livelihoods. Several medium-sized factories are located in or around Facatativá, engaged in activities as diverse as flower cutting, processing, agriculture and logistics. This sector vividly illustrates that the lines between formality and informality are often blurred. For example, formal flower processing facilities often contract informal workers to either clean, do low-skilled tasks or to cook lunches and do deliveries. Some of these are contracted on a more permanent basis while others for one-time tasks or day labour. Disruptions in one sector thus shapes the functioning of the other.

The interviews took place between February and April 2021, roughly one year after the start of the crisis. At this time formal restrictions on outdoor economic activity had been eased. Street vendors and informal workers were approached in their everyday livelihood setting well after restrictions banning the exercise of these livelihoods had been lifted (after the more-or-less full lockdowns after March 2020). No specific inclusion or exclusion criteria were applied other than that all informants work as informal street vendors (i.e. whose livelihoods are visible in public spaces some days or all days).

The Informants were asked to recollect their initial sentiments, their affective state six months or so into the pandemic, and their views one year into the pandemic. As mentioned in the introduction, the interviews did not focus on the pandemic itself but on livelihoods, adaptation and attempts at planning or coping. Our focus was to understand how people had changed livelihoods or changed the practice of their existing livelihood. Although informants also expressed fear at the prospect of being infected, or how they strived to continue with their livelihoods without catching the virus and similar themes, this study explicitly focuses on livelihood adaptation and temporalities by engaging the notion of 'time stories' (Fincher et al., 2014). The conversations that form the foundation of this study are based on longer interactions with one author of this paper who lived in Facatativá throughout the pandemic, and the study was inspired by a concern for how local street vendors coped with shifting external constraints and internal fears surrounding the perceived risk of infection and on making ends meet.

Initially, we debated the importance of understanding how self-employed informal workers coped. We knew that social security nets were in place, but it also seemed clear from the outset that many of the intended beneficiaries were not eligible for various reasons elaborated on later. These social security net implementation failures were not a central focus of our research design, however. It was also immediately clear that social security nets were not nearly enough to live on over time in the absence of savings. It also seemed evident that adaptations did not remain static once undertaken, since livelihoods had to be continuously adjusted as measures changed, lockdowns were re-imposed and demand for products and services quickly vanished. We determined that the material on which this inquiry is based could not be understood without a temporal lens, and we found that the notion of time stories was the most appropriate way to proceed with our analysis as it allowed for an explicit focus on multiple time points at which livelihood adaptations were potentially taking place.

Although the interviews were not rigidly structured, it was important for us to tease out three distinct temporal perspectives as part of the conversations. First, each informant was asked to recall how they first anticipated their livelihood and work-related future would be affected upon hearing news of the emerging global pandemic. We also wanted to know whether any pre-emptive actions were taken prior to the mandated lockdowns; for example, to minimise personal economic risk or perhaps to capitalise on the developing situation in some way or another.

Second, we were interested in hearing how things had turned out after the first 'wave' was over (what happened, how livelihoods changed, whether informants were still engaging in the same types of economic activity as before the pandemic). Based on our reflections prior to the study, we were interested in the varying levels of capacity and constraints people faced when changing their livelihoods to cope with demand changes and other structural and legal constraints. It was also important for us to document the reality of how things turned out compared to expectations at the outset, as this question could have important policy implications for local decision-makers. As the study findings also reveal, the quality, consistency and reliability of official communication is vital for reducing the uncertainties faced by informal workers when forced to make critical decisions that will impact not only their own future, but also that of their family.

Third, we were interested in learning about how permanent or temporary specific livelihood adaptations were thought to be. During the design stage, we expected that many adaptations would be based on the need to continue earning a living despite constraints, as observations suggested that people worked more than before while earning less due to the sudden dip in demand. However, we also suspected that some livelihood adaptations would be more permanent, for better or worse, such as when people not only altered their previous livelihoods, but also changed their economic activities completely (e.g. people laid off from the formal economy or people who changed the type of business they engaged in). Therefore, we also investigated how the informants anticipated their future livelihood situation. In this way, our study draws on three temporalities as part of a time stories approach: 1) stories about how people expected things to play out from the outset; 2) stories about how things turned out after a select period of time; 3) stories about how things turned out after a longer period of time and what the future looked like from this temporal perspective.

Results and discussion

Overall, the findings from this qualitative study suggest very few informal workers anticipated the degree to which they would be personally affected by the economic crisis and therefore had very little to base adaptation decisions on, mainly due to poor communication on the part of authorities (see [Table 1](#) for an overview of the informants). Initially, the Colombian Government announced a two-week lockdown, which ultimately lasted months as it was continuously extended. Although this paper is not about COVID-19 explicitly, the pandemic is crucial for understanding livelihood adaptations and anticipatory action undertaken by informal workers. However, for the remainder of this section, we consider the COVID-19 pandemic mainly in terms of its economic aspect; that is,

Table 1. Overview of informants, key characteristics and livelihood changes.

Informant*	Demographic and social characteristics	Livelihood**	Impact	Adaptation response
1. Luz	Female, early 50s, single, children, main breadwinner	Sells homemade fruit juices to passers-by	Lost previous livelihood selling lunches and empanadas to factory workers	Secured funding for buying a blender and equipment for making fruit juices in a popular recreational space at the outskirts of town
2. Juan	Male, mid 30s, married, children, main breadwinner	Sells “Chinese rice” from a street stand	Had to shut down the business for what he thought was 15 days but turned out to be 3 months, demand remains low a year later	Same livelihood as previously. Works more hours earning less and the households responded by cutting expenses to a minimum
3. Fabiola	Female, 50s, single, children, lives alone	Sells underwear for men and women in a space on the sidewalk	Had to close down business for a period of time, but was forced to continue working illegally to get by	Took up a loan from an informal moneylender to restock and try to improve the business but ended up worse off. Has mainly relied on lowering consumption.
4. María	Female, early 60s, no family	Sells soles and accessories in a cart on the sidewalk	Had to close down business for a longer period of time, ended up relying on food aid from the community	Continues with the same livelihood earning less. Notes that the great uncertainty surrounding how long the crisis would last prevented her from being more proactive.
5. Lorena	Female, early 30s, married, young children, husband is main breadwinner	Sells antennas, controls and equipment for TVs	Had to take over husband’s job of selling TV equipment as the husband had to find a new job	Took over husband’s informal business so he could take on a new job to make up for lost income due to lowered demand
6. Sergio	Male, mid 30s, married, children, main breadwinner	Sells belts displayed on the sidewalk	Outdoor mobility restrictions, lowered demand, sales and increased unpredictability	Moved business onto social media marketplaces but saw lowered incomes
7. Milena	Female, mid 30s, Venezuelan migrant, married, children	Sells flowers from a cart in a park	Lost previous job as housekeeper at a hotel	After 8 months of unemployment she started selling flowers from a cart in the park
8. Mercedes	Female, late 50s, indigenous, married, children	Sells woolens, supplements and facemasks from a cart on the sidewalk	Had to continue selling amidst restrictions, low demand and low earnings, had to get help from her son	Also started selling facemasks, disinfectant and other protective gear
9. Anna	Female, early 30s, single, children, main breadwinner	Sells arepas with cheese from a street corner grill	Stopped previous livelihood of selling snacks due to no sales, was forced to look for other ways to earn income	First tried selling snacks online without luck. Started working as a nanny but demand dropped after some months. After restrictions were eased she started selling arepas with cheese
10. Carlos	Male, early 40s, single, children, main breadwinner	Sells a variety of socks on the sidewalk	Restriction on mobility and economic activities as well as low demand meant that he had to look for alternative income for a period of time	Spent the most restrictive months working the fields before returning to his old livelihood
11. Orlando	Male, late 50s, married, children, main breadwinner	Sells CDs and flash drives etc. on the sidewalk	Saw sales and income decrease substantially	Was able to maintain some level of sales drawing on network and social media.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Informant*	Demographic and social characteristics	Livelihood**	Impact	Adaptation response
12. Elena	Female, early 60s, married, children, husband is main breadwinner	Sells clothes from a small cart on the sidewalk	Largely suspended her business for a period of time and relied on family. Focused on helping those in greater need.	Was not too worried at first due to having her own home and family. Focused for some time on helping neighbors but as time went on the family had to increasingly minimize costs to get by
13. Ayde	Female, early 40s, single, spokesperson	Sells various convenience items, such as belts, socks, gift items, hygiene items	Struggled greatly to balance payments of rent and bills while also facing the great uncertainty of continuously prolonged confinements which disrupted business.	Led and engaged in a lot of activism against restrictions for informal workers. Was jailed for a period of time for promoting work despite restrictions. Was later released and allowed to work under certain conditions but saw much lower earnings which required cutting consumption
14. Claudia	Female, late 60s, married, children, main breadwinner, husband in a wheelchair	Sells beans and vegetables from a cart in a public space	Had been forced to live off of people's charity during confinement, although some market income helped pay for basic services and medicine	Relied on community contributions for the initial months but later had to return to work. Saw much lower demand and loss as some days she had to throw out most of the vegetables she had invested in. The household had to substantially cut expenses.
15. Flor	Female, mid 30s, single, children, main breadwinner	Sells fresh juices and homemade salad servings in the city center	Lost previous job when restaurants closed. Survived for some time from savings.	Invested in some basic equipment to make juices and sell simple salads. Business was slow at first but picked up. Later she accepted that her old job would not be given back to her anytime soon and she expanded her informal business with a bigger cart and more salad ingredients. Earnings are a bit more unpredictable but acceptable she notes.
16. Luisa	Female, early 60s, married, children, main breadwinner	Sells hot coffee on the sidewalk	Was a stay-at-home mother until her husband lost his job	Started selling coffee to contribute towards paying the household expenses. Husband has not been able to find more than sporadic jobs in the meantime.
17. Ángel	Male, mid-40s, married, children, main breadwinner	Sells a variety of footwear on the sidewalk	Decreased sales and earnings. Reports that continuing work is a struggle as authorities often shut it down	Has participated in the petition to ease restrictions on economic activity during the lockdowns, but although the restrictions were largely removed at the time of the interviews, demand remains worryingly low, he notes, but intends to continue selling footwear.
18. José	Male, late 60s, married, children, main breadwinner	Sells hot coffee outside a commercial area	Saw his livelihood activity suspended for 3 months. During this time the family depended on the goodwill of others to get by.	Continues doing the same livelihood as he has been doing for 8 years. Adapts to the changing economic circumstances mainly by cutting consumption and working more.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Informant*	Demographic and social characteristics	Livelihood**	Impact	Adaptation response
19. Eduardo	Male, mid-60s, unknown relationship status	Repairs and shines shoes on the sidewalk	Was forced to keep working despite restrictions but reports very low demand	Kept taking on sporadic work as lockdowns were lifted but eventually returned to his old livelihood once restrictions were lifted and demand picked up, but income is lower than before
20. Paola	Female, early 30s, single, young children, main breadwinner	Sells a variety of items brought in from Bogotá	Found it difficult to continue engaging in economic activity with the children out of school and sales were very low	After a few months of trying to continue with her old livelihood she saw herself forced to go work on a farm and help out with housework. She went with her children and stayed there a few months until there was no more work to be found. She later returned to her old livelihood.
21. Álvaro	Male, mid-50s, unknown relationship status, children	Produces and sells cooking aprons	Demand for aprons decreased as well as prices. Few places to advertise due to confinements.	Relied on network and word-of-mouth which enabled him to sell some aprons despite not being able to go out and advertise. Had to lower his prices to attract customers.
22. Hermes	Male, late 60s, unknown relationship status	Sells ice creams from a mobile refrigeration cart	Saw his initial livelihood cut due to the lockdown but also due to the school closures as he used to sell his ice creams to school children after school.	Took some time off to go assist a lorry driver in handling goods. Engaged in sporadic work related to transport and logistics. Is now back to selling popsicles and ice creams after more people started going out in Facatativá.
23. Ramiro	Male, early 50s, married, children, main breadwinner	Sells carpentry services	Continued working despite restrictions but reported lower demands and only small repair jobs	Has been able to carry out smaller jobs from his workshop but discreetly. While the nature of the work has changed and income has been lower than previously, he has been able to get by after cutting consumption
24. Camila	Female, mid-20s, single, children, main breadwinner	Sells fruit juices and buffet-style salads on the street	Was laid off from her previous job working in a kitchen	Sells fruit juices and buffet-style salads on the street. Considers that this new livelihood is a long-term option
25. Luciana	Female, mid-60s, single, children	Sells 'oblea' desserts from a cart in a public space	Survived without work for a period of time, relied on the assistance of the community and smaller social security payouts	Continues doing the same livelihood as she has been doing for many years
26. Andrea	Female, mid-50s, married, children	Sells sliced mangoes from a stand in a public space	Continued to sell her products but from outside her own home	Relied on contacts built up over many years and people continued buying but from her home instead of in a public space, sometimes with the help of her daughter

Note: *Names have been anonymized **Livelihood at time of interview .

as a phenomenon that severely restricted demand, not necessarily due to a lack of willingness to consume, but as policy bans and negative affective responses influenced demand. One by-product of the pandemic was that for a prolonged period informal workers were legally prevented from engaging in economic activity in the same ways they had previously. Moreover, even after restrictions were lifted demand remained low due to the continued existence of risk, anxiety and non-pharmaceutical interventions.

Our observations (see online supplementary material for more information) resonate with several findings from previous studies on the informal economy in the region (e.g. Cuesta & Pico, 2020; González-Bustamante, 2021). One of these findings is that a notable proportion of informal sellers in Facatativá were women, and that several of them had been adversely affected due to a large care work burden, which limited adaptation options. This aligns well with the overall literature on informality. Another observation is that a large proportion of the workers were older, some even above the national pension age. The importance of network and community is also evident – the sample of stories clearly demonstrates how many of the informants relied on family, children and neighbours to survive when their livelihoods were disrupted.

We also found that some of the less affected informants actively worked to feed their neighbours or relatives, as well as organising protests and marches to better their situation and ease restrictions on their livelihoods. However, despite restrictions later being lifted, the general lack of demand for many goods and services indicates an economic crisis that will outlast the existence of pandemic response measures. With communities experiencing a general reduction in income, many informants noted that the future seems uncertain, and livelihood recovery remains highly elusive for many. As we explore in the following three sections, the responses generally varied throughout the crisis, with adaptations mainly responding to changes in the prevailing local economic conditions.

Breaking with the past: taking on a new livelihood in the face of crisis

The process of adapting to crisis conditions in the informal labour market cannot be compared to the process of looking for new opportunities in the formal job market. As noted in the literature review, the informal labour market often experiences a surge in competition with simultaneous reduced demand in times of economic turmoil. The experiences of the informants interviewed for this study confirm these trends. Although some informants did manage to adapt to the changing economic circumstances, the process was always associated with a deep sense of despair and uncertainty, even for those few who earned similar incomes in their new livelihoods as their previous livelihoods.

One story was told by Luz (Informant 1), who were informally contracted in a formal enterprise to prepare lunches but was told this activity could not continue as infection mitigation and social distancing measures were increasingly enforced. She had attempted to continue selling lunches. However, a short while later, she saw sales drop markedly and discovered that employees had been prohibited from going out for lunch out of fear they would crowd together around a few lunch vendors, a direct order from a facility manager to reduce interpersonal contacts and crowding. She explained that she was unemployed for the initial months and was forced to rely on the help of family and neighbours. She experienced despair and uncertainty as the crisis lasted far longer than she had anticipated. Just over half a year into the crisis, she accepted that her old livelihood would not be feasible for a long time, and she instead received help from a nephew to buy equipment for making fruit juices in a nearby recreational area where local residents go to exercise and hike. She noted how the new livelihood is a big improvement on her time in unemployment but not quite as good as her old livelihood.

Flor (Informant 15) told a similar story. She sells fruit juices and homemade salads (to take home and use as a side) in central Facatativá. She lost her job when the restaurant she worked at closed its doors. She noted how she had some savings but not enough to allow her the luxury of a period of idleness – as a single mother she had to find some way of earning an income for herself and her

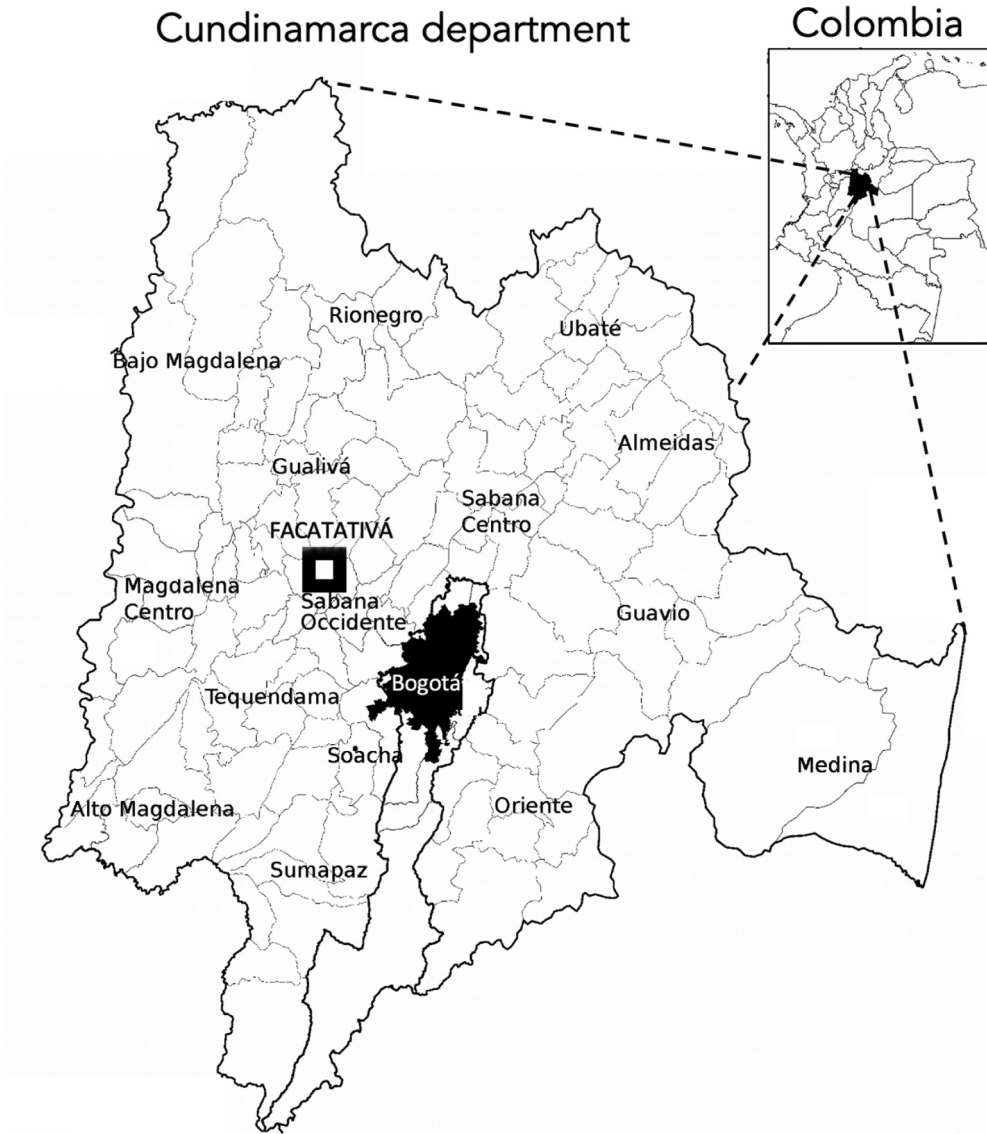


Figure 1. Map showing the location of Facatativá in Cundinamarca, Colombia.

children. She invested in equipment to make a popular juice drink consisting of freshly squeezed orange juice, water and ice cubes served from a large container. This story is also similar to that of Camila (Informant 24), who lost her former job and started selling juice and buffet-style salads from a sidewalk cart. Camila said that as sales increased, she expanded her business and offered greater variety for the buffet-style salads. However, both informants related that while their new businesses sustained them in this difficult time, they faced much more uncertainty and variable income than in their previous jobs, making planning and care responsibilities more challenging.

Some families adapted by reshuffling livelihoods within the household. One example is the experience of Lorena (Informant 5), who took over her husband's business of selling television equipment in a public space, such as remotes and antennas, after he was forced to look for another source of income due to declining sales. This adaptation enabled the family to have two sources of

income, but they also experienced an extra burden since they had young children, which limited the time Lorena could dedicate to the business. Rather than selling in a physical location, as her husband mainly had, she primarily advertised the products on social media as this was more feasible to combine with care work. She had also been selling a limited range of personal protective equipment, such as masks. Although the family were able to survive via these adaptations, she described the initial months as desperate—‘I thought it was the end of the world’—as the confinements were continuously extended without any sense of predictability. She expressed wanting to get back to physical sales when conditions allowed for it.

Other vendors reported trying to adapt several times before finding something that worked. Often, these processes of trial and error were exceedingly costly, as even a short period of no income can have fatal outcomes if no savings or community resources are available. One person who made multiple adaptations before finding one that could sustain her was Anna (Informant 9). She was forced to shut her previous business of selling snacks, such as toasted nuts, corn and artichokes, due to low sales and continued restrictions on economic activity. She found herself idle for a short period, with very few community resources and no access to social support due to her status as a Venezuelan migrant. She reported trying several common strategies, such as selling masks and other protective equipment and some sporadic work offered in the area, but mainly experienced losses as income did not exceed expenses. She ultimately resorted to selling grilled arepas with cheese, which she said could sustain her and her children but that they faced lower earnings than previously.

These stories appear to support the reviewed literature, which suggests that while informal workers often adjust their livelihood in response to changes in demand and overall economic conditions, these responses are often costly and subsistence-based. While several of the informants interviewed in this study noted that their new livelihoods were able to sustain them (and their families), we found no examples of people better off than in their previous livelihood. The vast majority of the respondents who had changed their livelihoods were engaged in their present livelihood due to external factors (e.g. being laid off, restrictions, low demand) that made it difficult to continue their old livelihood. This evidence provides some support for perspectives underlining the flexibility offered by the informal economy in changing the type of economic activity; however, to some extent it problematises perspectives framing livelihood adaptation and crisis in terms of entrepreneurship. It seems more credible, therefore, that transitions from one livelihood to another are more likely to be productive when voluntary and not triggered by strong external push factors. When demand drops, and with it employment opportunities, the informal vendor market will have more participants competing for fewer clients.

Making ends meet in times of disruption: temporary adaptations

While some of the informants seemingly abandoned their previous livelihoods to adopt new ones, several shifted to a new livelihood for a period before returning to their previous livelihoods. These short-term adaptations were mainly in response to either crackdowns on the sort of economic activity engaged in by the person in question or due to very low demand during the initial months of the pandemic. Most people who opted for temporary adaptations reported that although they provided at least some income which helped them during the most difficult months, these jobs were not an attractive option once the old livelihood became feasible again.

One such person who changed to a short-term livelihood adaptation was Carlos (Informant 10), who found it necessary to work in the fields outside Facatativá for a period when his normal livelihood as a sock salesman became increasingly restricted and unprofitable. This seasonal job as a potato planter sustained him and his family throughout the initial period of confinement. Without this work, the family would have had no income due to a near-complete absence of sock sales, and crackdowns on economic activity in public spaces. Carlos said that the fact this lack of income was accompanied by increasing household expenses related to home-schooling and utility costs made

this necessity even more evident. Although he started his old livelihood again, he stressed experiencing great uncertainty regarding the future, fearing new lockdowns and that demand will not pick up. This story is similar to that of Hermes (Informant 22), who, despite not having young children, had to go out of town to find seasonal work assisting a lorry driver by handling cargo.

While care work often constrains adaptation options, some of the informants reported having had to relocate temporarily to find sporadic work. For example, Paola (Informant 20), a single mother, shared her story of how she could no longer survive as a street vendor and had to relocate to a farm with her children to help out with work there, mainly housework. They stayed there for a few months until there was no more work, after which time she returned to Facatativá with her children to resume her old livelihood. However, she said that sales were only somewhat improved and the overall situation did not seem to be improving.

Temporary livelihood adaptations often serve as a lifeline for people whose primary livelihood has collapsed. While some of the informants reported having recovered to some extent (albeit none reported having the same level of sales as previously), some noted that recovery remains highly elusive as demand remained persistently low. Overall, temporary livelihood adaptations are best understood as concerning survival, as earnings are often at subsistence level, or workers primarily work for shelter and food, rather than for income.

Finding ways of continuing their existing livelihood

Although a notable proportion of the informal workers who participated in this study found ways of obtaining a new livelihood either in the long term or temporarily, we also observed that many people could not do so and resorted to other types of adaptation strategies, such as lowering consumption, drawing on family or community connections, or working longer hours.

María (Informant 4), Claudia (Informant 14) and José (Informant 18) all shared their stories of how they coped with the initial turmoil of the pandemic mainly with the help of their community and working in their existing livelihoods whenever possible. All three faced a precarious situation in the initial months when community resources became more strained and their livelihoods produced little to no profit, in addition to being restricted due to local measures. Consumption had to be cut substantially, and they worried about their health. All three informants were in their 60s and had medical expenses. Claudia's husband was in a wheelchair and assisted her selling vegetables and beans from her sidewalk stall, but their earnings hardly covered their expenses due to the lower demand. All three informants reported limited options regarding other economic activities due to a combination of health status and age discrimination.

Lack of mobility also prevented them from going to other towns or the countryside to search for seasonal work, as such work often involves hard labour. Similar obstacles were faced by many families with young children, such as by Juan (Informant 2), who did his best to keep the family business of selling mixed rice but had few orders as people increasingly cooked at home.

A recurring theme in the stories we were told is that a major barrier both to adaptation and generally exercising one's livelihood was the continued crackdown on commercial activity in public spaces. A common response to such restrictions was to advertise goods for sale on social media instead of engaging in street vending. Sergio (Informant 6), for example, moved his business online when street vending became fraught and unprofitable, but he reported far lower sales.

Legal barriers to livelihood changes, such as permits being provided to individuals to carry out a certain economic activity, restricted people to a particular business. It is worth noting that such permits blur formality-informality boundaries. Furthermore, changing from one type of livelihood to another also caused community conflicts in some instances as it meant increased competition for those who had been engaged in that livelihood activity for a longer period. Ayde (Informant 13) increasingly engaged in activism as a representative for the informal vendor community, fighting for the right to engage in economic activity despite restrictions on mobility and that type of livelihood. She reported facing a lot of harassment from the authorities as she tried to continue

her livelihood, and she was jailed for a day for advocating that informal vendors should continue working despite the confinements. However, despite eventually being allowed to work relatively undisturbed as a street vendor (selling an assortment of convenience items), she also experienced far fewer sales and regarded the future with despair.

We observed some recurring vulnerability dynamics and structural barriers to livelihood adaptation that prevented many people from changing their livelihood activities, which is a finding that resonates with previous work on the gendered and intersectional dimensions of the crisis (e.g. Cuesta & Pico, 2020). Older people appear to face larger obstacles as they encounter structural discrimination when seeking new jobs. Several of our informants noted that they struggled to draw on their network resources to find alternative employment due to their age. Care responsibilities, particularly responsibility for small children (e.g. in the case of single mothers) is another factor that significantly reduces available adaptation options. Many of the informants reported being ineligible for existing social security measures, highlighting structural inadequacies in the way such measures are designed, particularly regarding eligibility. A recent report outlines the technical complexities of the social support design process (Gallego et al., 2021). News reports have also demonstrated problematic aspects of the implementation of these social security nets, revealing that non-eligible people have received support, whilst many eligible have not been provided for despite meeting the criteria (Semana, 2020a). There were also reports of fake identities or people who had passed away being erroneously accepted as beneficiaries (Semana, 2020b).

These implementation errors became a frustration for many of those unable to receive support, especially when the informal economy also largely failed to compensate lost incomes for those laid off from formal jobs. As such, when neither the informal sector nor social security nets can provide sufficient income for basic necessities, poverty and its associated hardships will consequently rise markedly. Furthermore, the fact that many of our informants faced idleness for extended periods but survived thanks to the help of neighbours and family underlines the role of community and social ties during a crisis. However, not everyone has access to such aid and not everyone has sufficiently strong networks to fall back on. Venezuelan migrants faced a particularly precarious situation as the informal market became increasingly competitive due to falling demand and earnings, while they simultaneously lacked equal access to either community resources or formal social security benefits.

Concluding reflections

In this paper, we analysed livelihood adaptations in Facatativá, Colombia from a temporal perspective, distinguishing between immediate, medium-term and long-term reactions to an economic landscape changed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the public health measures implemented in response.

One salient point raised in this paper is that livelihood adaptations are costly. Several of our informants shared their stories of how they had changed livelihood activities multiple times when faced with changing economic conditions. Some of these adaptations led to livelihoods that the participants continued for some time and considered a feasible livelihood. Others reported they had worked several temporary jobs but returned to their old livelihood as work demand was sporadic or the nature of the new job was less attractive than their previous job. Still others said they had tried a new livelihood for a period but became worse off in the process as earnings remained low and initial investments were rarely recouped. These stories point to two dynamics of the informal economy that are relevant for what we here have referred to as crisis-induced adaptation.

In many ways the nature of the informal economy offers few concrete obstacles to changing one's business, especially in livelihoods not heavily reliant on large initial investments. However, livelihood adaptation is very costly in the social sense and is experienced as high-risk. Opportunity costs are high, relatively speaking, for those with much to lose and care work. Additionally, structural discrimination based on gender, age, class, race, ethnicity, disability status and so on, means that

some people's individual manoeuvring spaces are greatly constrained with no easy-fixes to facilitate adjustments. Also, since some people in this study indicated that they prefer the new kinds of economic activities they took on after the crisis over the jobs they had previously, it seems clear that the informal economy does provide a degree of flexibility that the formal economy cannot necessarily provide for low skill workers. This ultimately contributes to on-going debates problematising the informal/formal economy debate. A concluding remark we wish to raise in this paper is that, while some of the livelihood adaptations appear to be of a more durable nature (outlasting the lockdown and financial turmoil itself), it would be highly problematic to make judgements concerning whether some individuals are better off or not in their new livelihood. While we observed that informants varied greatly in how quickly they changed their livelihood when their existing livelihood became impossible to engage in, the process of adjusting to a radically changed economic landscape was very challenging for all of the informants. Describing these kinds of 'flexibilities' or adaptations in terms of 'resilience' or similar terms is thus something we would warn against given the painstakingly high costs involved in calibrating oneself to very unpredictable unfolding disruptions of everyday life.

Future studies are encouraged in order to determine the stickiness of livelihood changes in times of turmoil over the long term in ways that are sensitive to the lived hardships involved in such adaptations. Whilst the generalisability of this study remains limited, the insights presented here on the role of structural obstacles to adaptation, and particularly the many design pitfalls of social security programs or policies that adversely affect livelihood may also provide useful lessons for other contexts because the informal economy Facatativá is generally similar to the informal economies that exist elsewhere.

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