



## TAKING STOCK OF COVID-19 LABOR POLICY RESPONSES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

### KEY MESSAGES

This brief is based on the analysis of over 1,300 COVID-19 Social Protection and Jobs policies, spanning 55 countries that represent 80 percent of the population in low- and middle-income countries. Findings show that:

- Labor policies have played a key role in efforts to mitigate COVID-19's economic effects in developing countries, comprising 55 percent of all crisis-related social protection and jobs policies.
- To stabilize the demand for labor, 91 percent of countries have provided liquidity support to registered firms and 71 percent have adjusted their labor regulations to the crisis.
- To avoid mass layoffs or help jobseekers, 35 percent of countries have adopted wage subsidies, 33 percent have resorted to providing unemployment benefits, and 29 percent have reduced or postponed income taxes.
- Governments are increasingly targeting self-employed or informal wage workers directly with cash transfers amounting to on average US\$714 million, compared to US\$304 million for non-labor-related cash transfers. Around 15 percent of countries have adapted public works programs to help those most in need of income protection.
- As additional interventions are collected, future analysis will explore how policies affect different income and regional country groups, and how the labor policy response relates to labor market impacts.

### INTRODUCTION

**The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered one of the largest economic downturns since the Great Depression.** Beyond its devastating effect on health, morbidity, and mortality, the pandemic shook economies and labor markets around the globe, leaving no firm, worker, and household untouched. Governments responded to the crisis with a series of public health and containment measures that deeply affected societies and economies, including the supply and demand for goods, capital, and labor. These were accompanied by a series of social, financial, and macroeconomic policies aimed at mitigating the economic effects of the crisis.

**In low- (LICs) and middle-income (MICs) countries alone, over 1,300 labor market and social protection interventions have been introduced since the start of the pandemic.**<sup>1</sup> These policies often included a mix of social assistance, social insurance, and labor market interventions, with 98 percent of countries in the sample announcing at least one labor market policy or one social assistance policy, and 60 percent announcing at least one social insurance policy.

<sup>1</sup> In the 55 countries considered in the dataset used for the present analysis alone, over 1,300 labor market and social protection policies have been introduced.

**Labor market policies were a key component of the response in low- and middle-income countries, comprising 55 percent of all crisis-related policies.<sup>2</sup>**

These measures targeted workers and firms, as well as the regulatory framework of the labor market. Of the labor market policies announced, 54 percent increased firm liquidity through tax relief, credit and payment facilities, utility support, and deferral of social security contributions, to help businesses of all sizes to survive and keep their workers.

**To stabilize the demand for workers and maintain business operations, developing countries prioritized liquidity support to firms and implemented regulatory adjustments.**

Among the most common firm liquidity policy types were tax relief, credit guarantees, and loan payment facilities. According to the limited available data on expenditures, these credit guarantees alone have an average budget of US\$1.2 billion.<sup>3</sup> In terms of labor regulation, governments have supported additional job flexibility by allowing teleworking, job rotations, shorter working hours, or other flexible work arrangements. They have also made changes to remuneration policies, among others. Measures to support entrepreneurs and new businesses were the third most common measure, after liquidity support and labor regulation adjustments.

**To protect jobs and support the income of both workers and the unemployed, governments have targeted workers directly.**

Governments have prioritized labor supply policies such as wage subsidies, unemployment benefits, reduction of income taxes, and public works. On average governments allocated budgets of US\$686 million to these policies.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, governments also used labor-related cash transfers to support labor income, with an average budget of US\$714 million.<sup>5</sup> Training and placement assistance was also provided by 31 percent of countries.

**This JobsWatch brief provides an analysis of labor market and social protection responses to the COVID-19 crisis, with a focus on policies targeted to workers and firms.**

It includes a comprehensive set of labor market interventions, using data from the global *COVID-19 SPJ Policy Inventory*.<sup>6</sup> The analysis can inform governments of approaches that can be taken when introducing or adapting their crisis mitigation measures. To our knowledge, this is the first summary of labor market policies adopted by developing countries in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

## THE COVID-19 SPJ POLICY INVENTORY

**The analysis is based on newly collected data from the COVID-19 SPJ Policy Inventory.**

This inventory adds labor market demand-side policies to the already comprehensive social protection and jobs policies collected by [Gentilini et al \(2020\)](#).<sup>7</sup> The *COVID-19 SPJ Policy Inventory* contains qualitative and quantitative information on labor markets and social protection policies introduced between January 2020 and January 2021 for 55 low- and middle-income countries.<sup>8</sup>

**The 55 countries included in the inventory represent 80 percent of the population of low- and middle-income countries** (Annex A).

By income group, these encompass 15 low-income countries (LICs), 23 lower-middle-income countries (LMICs), and 17 upper-middle-income countries (UMICs). High-income countries (HICs) will be included in upcoming versions of this analysis. By region, five countries are in East Asia and the Pacific, 13 in Latin America and the Caribbean, eight in Middle East and North Africa, four in South Asia, 19 in Sub-Saharan Africa, and six in Europe and Central Asia. Moreover, 36 of the countries represented in the inventory are also included in the COVID-19 high-frequency phone surveys (HFPS) dashboard published by the World Bank.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A comprehensive list of labor market policies categories included in this brief can be seen in Annexes A, B, and C.

<sup>3</sup> This budget represents 0.56 percent of GDP for the countries considered. Calculations are based on available data for 26 credit guarantee policies (representing 30 percent of all credit guarantee policies).

<sup>4</sup> Based on available data for 17 programs of wage subsidies, unemployment benefits, reduction of income taxes, and public works programs (representing 20 percent of all income support programs).

<sup>5</sup> Based on available data for 39 labor-related cash transfer programs (representing 60 percent of cash transfers for workers).

<sup>6</sup> The COVID-19 Social Protection and Jobs (SPJ) Policy Inventory builds on and extends program information collected by [Gentilini et al. \(2020\)](#) who have documented in detail social protection policies introduced by countries worldwide since the start of the pandemic. It expands on the labor market component by including demand-side labor market policies and further deepens the information on social protection and labor market programs relevant in the COVID-19 context.

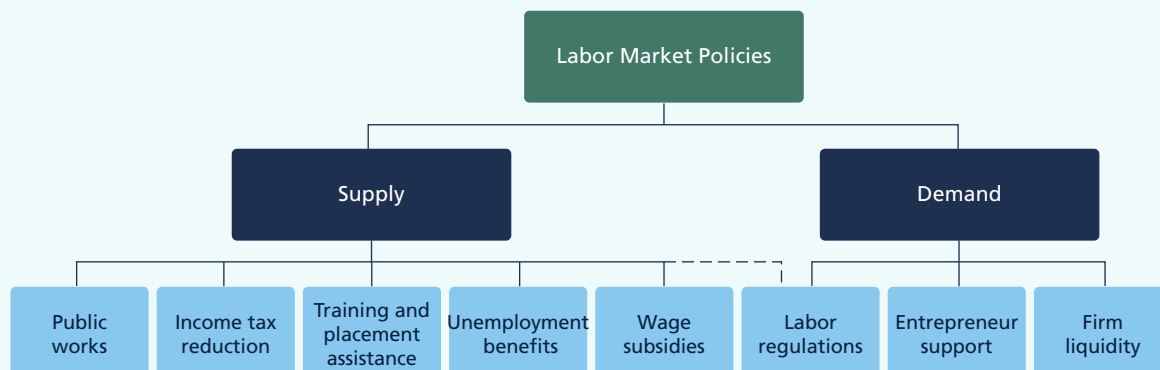
<sup>7</sup> Data collected by Gentilini et al. Includes data from March 2020 until December 11, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> The *COVID-19 SPJ Policy Inventory* includes for each policy qualitative and quantitative information such as benefit name, description, start and end dates, targeting mechanism, planned and actual beneficiaries, and, when available, expenditures.

<sup>9</sup> Results from HFPS have been published in the World Bank's [COVID-19 High-Frequency Monitoring Dashboard](#).

## BOX 1. COVID-19 SPJ POLICY INVENTORY LABOR MARKET AND JOBS FRAMEWORK

The COVID-19 SPJ policy inventory includes both supply-side and demand-side labor market policies. On the labor market supply side, it includes policies that help workers maintain their income and jobs such as public works, income tax reduction, training and placement assistance, or unemployment benefits. On the labor market demand side, it covers policies that help businesses survive and retain workers, such as firm liquidity or entrepreneurship support. Furthermore, the inventory includes changes to the regulations of the employer-worker relationship during the pandemic. While these labor regulations affect both workers and firms, they are implemented through firms and hence captured as demand side interventions for the purposes of this analysis. For a detailed description of each policy see Annexes B, C, and D.



### HOW ARE GOVERNMENTS RESPONDING?

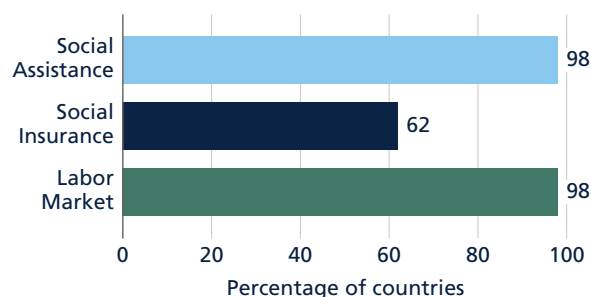
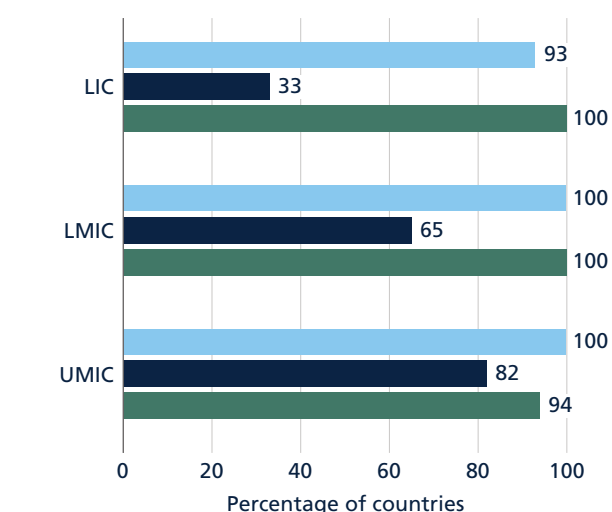
#### Labor market policies are the most prevalent type of social protection response

**Developing country governments relied heavily on labor market policies to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic.** These policies have often responded to the need of supporting or maintaining labor and firm income. Of all the social protection and jobs policies in the sample, 55 percent are labor market policies, compared to 38 percent social assistance policies and 7 percent social insurance policies. In terms of countries implementing these policies, all but one country in the sample (98 percent of countries) introduced at least one labor market policy (Figure 1-A), with countries announcing an average of 13 labor market policies each. This pattern holds when looking at different income groups. For all three income level groups considered, the percentage of countries adopting at least one labor market policy is the highest, followed by the percentage of countries adopting social assistance and then social insurance policies (see

below Figure 1-B). The use of social insurance policies increases with countries' income level.

**Cash transfers programs targeting workers became more popular during the COVID-19 pandemic.** Within social protection and jobs policies, cash transfer programs are considered as social assistance. However, the policy inventory differentiates between the typical cash transfers targeted to the household and those targeted directly at workers with a labor market policy objective. In fact, over 38 percent of cash transfer programs included in the sample as social assistance are directed to workers. When these programs are considered, the share of labor market programs increases from 55 to 60 percent. Cash transfers that target workers are mostly intended to help workers who are not protected by social insurance schemes, such as informal workers, the self-employed, agricultural workers, and other non-traditional wage workers. On average, each of these labor-related cash transfer programs benefit around 7.9 million workers and households.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Based on available data from 27 policies (representing 50 percent of labor-related cash transfer policies).

**FIGURE 1****Percentage of countries with at least one social protection and labor market policy****A. By social protection area****B. By area and income group**

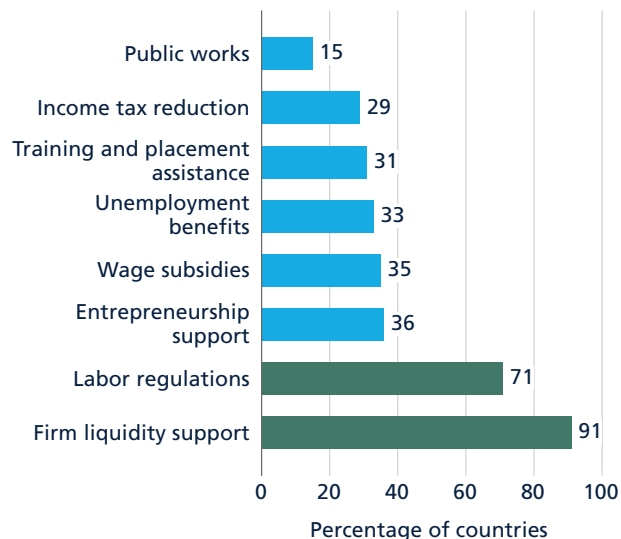
■ Social Assistance ■ Social Insurance ■ Labor Market

Source: COVID-19 SPJ Policy Inventory. Own elaboration.

Note: Graphs based on 55 countries. Percentages in panel B) are based on the total number of countries in each income group: 15 countries are low-income (LICs), 23 are lower-middle-income (LMICs) and 17 are upper-middle-income (UMICs).

### Labor market policies primarily focus on providing firms with liquidity and increasing regulatory flexibility

**Policies increasing firm liquidity and labor regulatory flexibility were the most widely used labor market policies.** These policies were aimed at helping businesses survive (Annex C and D describe them). Together, they comprise 77 percent of all supply- and demand-side labor market policies introduced. Moreover, at least 91 percent of them introduced some sort of firm liquidity support and 71 percent introduced changes in labor

**FIGURE 2****Percentage of countries with at least one labor market policy, by category**

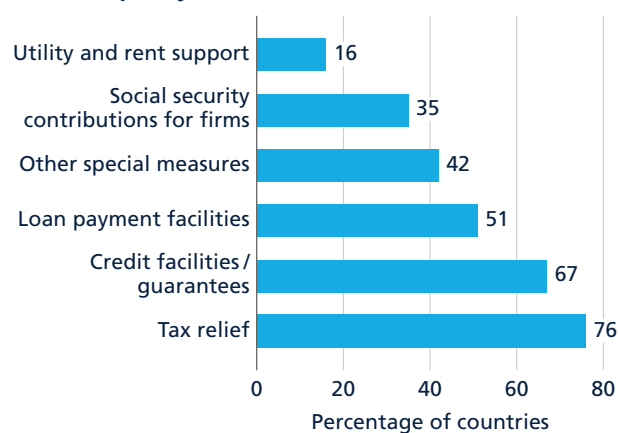
Source: COVID-19 SPJ Policy Inventory. Own elaboration.

Note: Graph based on 55 countries implementing labor market programs.

regulations (Figure 2). This result holds true when looking across income groups. It should be noted that both firm liquidity and labor regulation policies typically apply to formal firms and wage workers.

**Among policies to improve firm liquidity, most governments prioritized giving firms tax relief, followed by credit facilities and guarantees, loan payment facilities, reductions in social security contributions, and utility and rent support** (Figure 3-A). Around 76 percent of countries have introduced tax relief policies, such as the postponement of corporate tax payments, extension of VAT tax credits, additional deductions for tax credits, or the extension of the deadline for settling tax liabilities. Around 35 percent of countries allowed firms to postpone the payment of their part of social security contributions. These policies have likely been attractive because they are an easy way for governments to help businesses without having to make additional transactions or reallocating resources.

**Many governments also introduced more active policy options to inject firms with liquidity.** Around 67 percent of countries created credit guarantee funds, allocating an average of US\$1.2 billion. UMICs allocated the biggest budgets to these funds, with an average of

**FIGURE 3****Percentage of countries with at least one firm liquidity or labor regulation policy****A. Firm liquidity****B. Labor regulation**

Source: COVID-19 SPJ Policy Inventory. Own elaboration.

Note: Graphs based on 55 countries. Percentages in panel A) are based on the number of countries implementing firm liquidity policies. Percentages in panel B) are based on the number of countries implementing regulatory adjustment policies.

US\$1.5 billion.<sup>11</sup> LICs and LMICs also implemented this policy but with a smaller budget. Around half of the countries analyzed have also offered loan repayment facilities to support businesses' liquidity, by reducing the interest on their loans or allowing firms to restructure or postpone their debts. Other recurring measures included support for utilities such as water, natural gas, and electricity bills, or the suspension of rents.

In terms of labor regulations, governments introduced a series of regulatory adjustments to protect workers (Figure 3-B). They have permitted new working conditions and methods, such as teleworking and other flexible work arrangements not previously stipulated by law, with 45 percent of countries announcing this type of adjustment. Around 31 percent of countries have also modified labor regulations to increase requirements to health and workplace safety regulations.

**Dismissal procedures, severance payment compensation, hiring flexibility, and leave policies were frequently modified.** However, there is considerable heterogeneity in these regulations as some policies prevented firms from dismissing workers while others allowed them to temporarily cancel their contracts. Similarly, in the case of remuneration, some policies allowed firms to decrease remuneration while others required increased allowances for certain type of workers.

**Support to entrepreneurs was also common.** Around 36 percent of countries introduced policies that promote entrepreneurship by encouraging the unemployed and target groups to start their own business or to become self-employed. Some policies were targeted to already existing ventures by providing them with grants.

### Labor income support policies are less common but affect workers

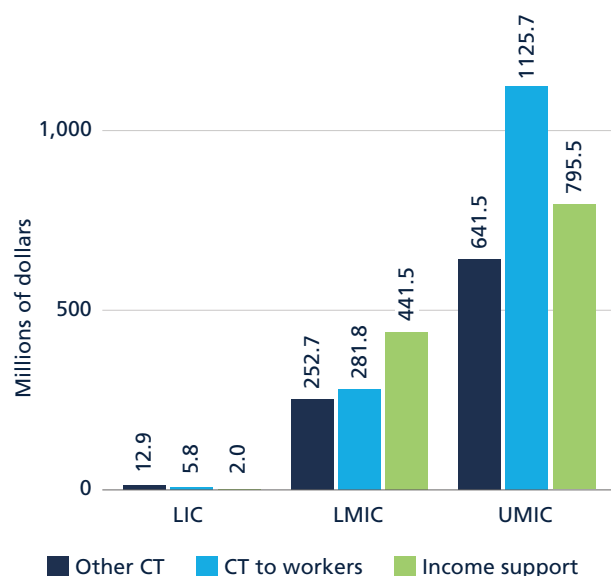
**Policies aimed at supporting labor income have been less widely used.** Less than 40 percent of countries have implemented some type of policy directed to increase disposable income for workers and the unemployed such as unemployment benefits, wage subsidies, income tax reduction, and public works. LICs tended to implement only one of these policies at a time, while LMICs and UMICs introduced on average two of these policies at a time. LICs have prioritized public works programs and income tax reductions. LMICs have been able to implement more unemployment benefit programs, which, in some cases, were accompanied by wage subsidies. UMICs, in turn, have prioritized wage subsidies, accompanied by either unemployment benefits or income tax reductions.

### On average, budgets allocated to labor-related cash transfers are roughly equal to the combined

<sup>11</sup> Average budgets are calculated based on available data from 26 policies (30 percent of credit guarantees policies).

**FIGURE 4**

**Average expenditure for labor-related cash transfers (CT), non-labor-related CT, and income support by income group (in millions of US\$)**



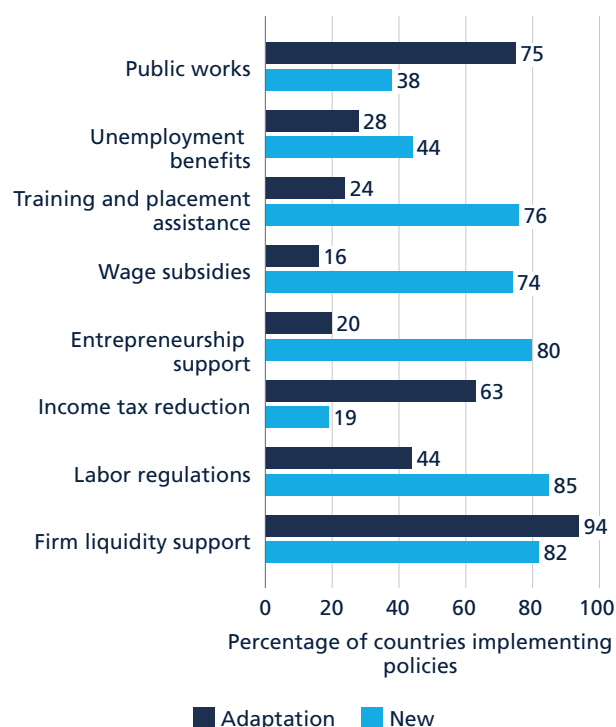
Source: COVID-19 SPJ Policy Inventory. Own elaboration.

Note: Expenditures based on 117 programs (17 are income support, 39 are labor-related CT, 61 are non-labor CT). Non-labor CT include unconditional cash transfer policies for households; labor-related CT include unconditional cash transfer policies to formal workers, informal workers, independent workers, and farmers; and income support include unemployment benefits, wage subsidies, income tax reduction, and public works.

**value of all other labor market policies, including public works, unemployment benefits, and wage subsidies.** However, the budget allocated to cash transfers for workers remain twice as large as the amount allocated to non-labor cash transfers (Figure 4). Governments have allocated on average US\$686 million for increasing workers' income through traditional labor market policies, while the average budget for cash transfers directed to workers is US\$714 million, compared to US\$304 million for non-labor-related cash transfers.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, average expenditure on labor-related cash transfers is higher than non-labor-related cash transfers. This is especially true for LMICs and UMICs, while LICs follow the opposite pattern. This might be explained by LMICs' and UMICs' increased ability to target specific types of workers.

**FIGURE 5**

**Percentage of countries with at least one new policy or adaptation of an existing one—by labor market policy category**



Source: COVID-19 SPJ Policy Inventory. Own elaboration.

Note: Graph based on number of countries implementing each category of labor market programs.

**Most countries have adopted a combination of new and adapted policies**

**The labor market policies adopted by governments are a combination of completely new initiatives and adaptations of existing policies** (Figure 5). Around 60 percent of labor market policies adopted by governments are new, while the remainder are adaptations.

**Most programs related to training and placement assistance, entrepreneurship support, wage subsidies, and unemployment benefits were newly created in response to the economic downturn.** For most of these policies, this is true irrespective of countries' income level and may result from the lack of pre-existing active labor market policies in LICs,

<sup>12</sup> Some of the programs have much lower budgets and the spread of the distribution is large, as shown by the median expenditures by type of policy. The median budget allocated to traditional labor market policies for income support is US\$174 million, the median budget for cash transfers directed to workers is US\$41 million, and the median budget for non-labor-related cash transfers is US\$47 million.



LMICs, and UMICs. In the case of unemployment benefits, while most policies are new there is some regional variability: policies were mostly new in LMICs and mostly adaptations in UMICs, probably because unemployment insurance (UI) schemes are scarcer in the former than in the latter.

**Almost all countries in the sample adapted pre-existing firm liquidity support programs.** This is expected, as firm liquidity programs included deferrals of existing loan payments and postponements/grace periods for firms to meet their social security obligations. However, among firm liquidity programs, most governments that introduced access to credit guarantees developed these funds in direct response to the pandemic. Regarding income support policies, public works policies were also largely adaptations of existing programs.

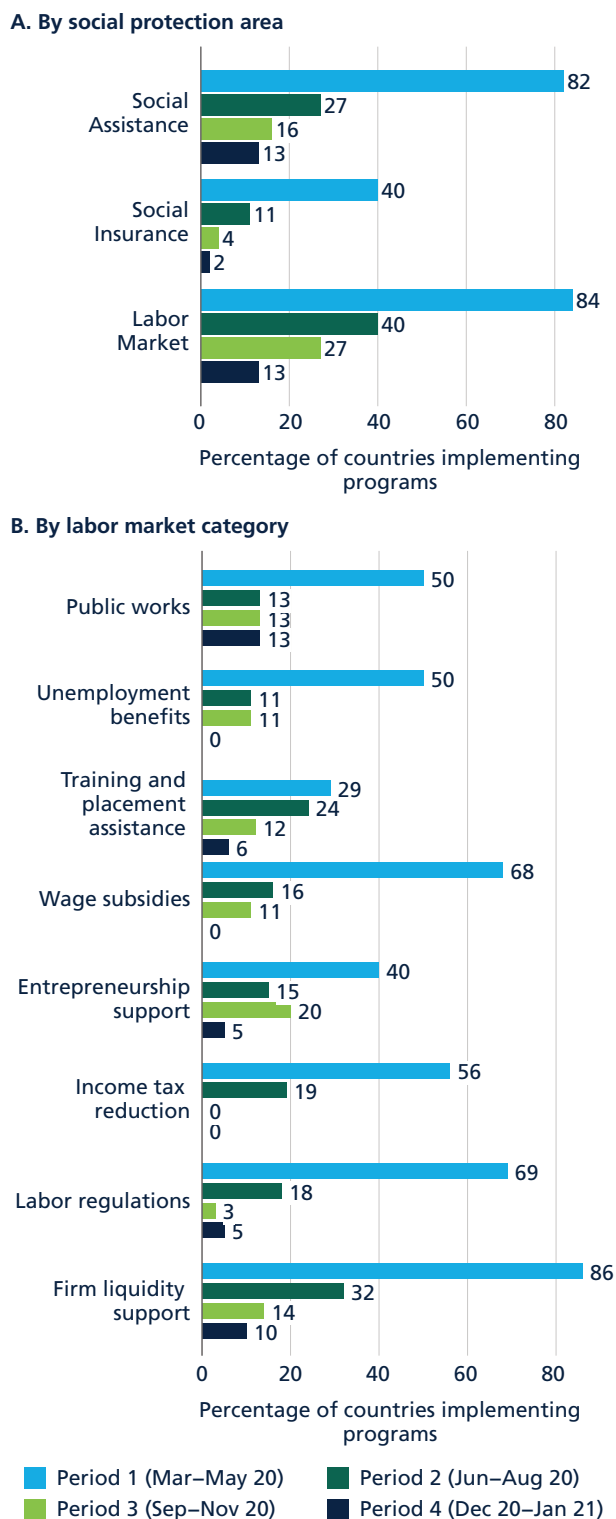
### Labor market policies have remained the most widely used policy over time

**Labor market policies have remained the most widely used over time.** The percentage of countries adopting additional social protection policies has decreased for every three-month period since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the pandemic (Figure 6-A). Yet, the percentage of countries adopting labor market policies remains the highest for each period.

**Despite the decline in new social protection and jobs policies, some governments continue to announce new labor market policies** (Figure 6-B). The number of new policies introduced since the crisis has declined, as many of the policies created at the beginning of the crisis are still active or have been extended. In addition, many new programs were introduced at the beginning of the pandemic as governments were trying to provide rapid assistance.

**The composition of labor policies has evolved over the past year, with policies such as training and placement assistance, and entrepreneurship support gaining relative importance in the period from June to November 2020.** This increase may reflect a shift of policy priorities to prepare and connect jobseekers to labor market opportunities and address the early impacts of the crisis on unemployment. In contrast, interventions such as income tax reduction or deferrals, wage subsidies, and unemployment benefits were not implemented in the last three months (Figure 6-B). Firm liquidity measures, however, have been used throughout the crisis.

**FIGURE 6**  
Percentage of countries with labor market and social protection policies by area and category



Source: COVID-19 SPJ Policy Inventory. Own elaboration.  
 Note: Panel A) is based on 55 countries. Panel B) is based on number of countries implementing each category of labor market programs.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

**Our next JobsWatch brief will explore more developing and developed countries as we expand the COVID-19 SPJ policy inventory.** The extensions will not only provide evidence on more countries but also enable deeper analysis and answer the question whether the findings presented in this brief will hold globally.

**Subsequent analysis can help identify patterns in the policy responses across income or regional country groups and relate them to underlying labor market conditions.** For example, more program data

can shed light on the differences in the labor market policy responses across different types of countries. So far, only broad measures of policy type have been disaggregated by countries' income level. Adding new countries to the inventory will enable more detailed comparisons by region and income group. Further work will shed light on the evolution and timing of the labor policies. Finally, a follow-up brief will provide initial insights on the relationship between the COVID-19 labor market mitigation policies and labor market impacts in developing countries.



# ANNEXES

## ANNEX A

### Countries included in the brief

Region	Country list
East Asia and the Pacific	Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Mongolia, Thailand
Europe and Central Asia	Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan
Latin America and the Caribbean	Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Peru
Middle East and North Africa	Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen
South Asia	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan
Sub-Saharan Africa	Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia

## ANNEX B

### Description of labor market policies included in the brief

Policy	Description
Unemployment benefits	Benefits payable to workers satisfying criteria for membership in an unemployment insurance scheme. These are often paid only for a limited period. Can also include benefits payable to workers either failing to satisfy criteria for membership in an unemployment insurance scheme or who have exceeded the period for entitlement to unemployment insurance benefit. Unemployment assistance is normally means tested.
Public works	Income support for the poor given in the form of cash wages or services in exchange for work effort. These programs typically provide short-term employment at low wages for unskilled and semi-skilled workers on labor-intensive projects such as road construction and maintenance, irrigation infrastructure, reforestation, and soil conservation.
Training and placement assistance	This includes intermediation services such as counseling, placement assistance, job matching, labor exchanges, and other related services. It also includes different training programs such as vocational, cash for training, and workplace training.
Wage subsidies	Includes wage subsidies to employers who maintain existing jobs with and without reduced work time (including zero working hours).
Entrepreneurship support	Programs that promote entrepreneurship by encouraging the unemployed and target groups to start their own business or to become self-employed. Employment measures that help people with physical, mental, or psychological conditions limiting their activities to be involved in the labor market. Other policies aiming to keep workers employed, bring them into employment, increase their productivity and earnings, and improve the functioning of labor markets.
Income tax reduction	Labor income tax deferral or reduction, change in basic personal income tax credits. Only includes labor income.
Labor regulation	Includes changes in the regulation for compensation, dismissal procedures, working conditions, leave policies, and labor inspections.
Firm liquidity support	Includes policies that allow businesses to take out credit, facilitate repayment conditions, reduce or postpone taxes and social security contributions, and provide support for rent and utility payments.

## ANNEX C

### Description of labor regulation policies

Labor regulation policies	Description
Severance payment	Changes in the regulation for compensation and/or benefits an employer provides to an employee after employment is over. Severance packages may include extended benefits, such as health insurance and outplacement assistance to help an employee secure a new position.
Hiring flexibility	Changes in the regulation that allows the extension of contracts or work permits in the situation when terms are approaching, such as automatic contract extension and work-permit requirements relaxation.
Dismissal procedures	Changes in the scope of layoffs, such as total prohibition of layoffs or limiting them only to particular workers; changes in termination procedures including suspension of requirements of notification, consultation or obtaining the approval of a third party, suspension of reassignment or retraining obligation, and/or priority rules for re-employment.
Working conditions/ methods	Regulation that promotes alternate arrangements or schedules vis-a-vis the traditional working day and week. These arrangements might help employers to adjust to the needs of the market. Also, they might allow employees to choose a different work schedule to meet personal or family needs. Working conditions might include changes in the working schedules, relaxation of rest requirements (reduction in uninterrupted daily and weekly rest time), and extension of overtime work. In general, working conditions include flexible time, reduced/part-time, compressed work week, telework/telecommuting.
Leave policies	Changes in leave regulations that might give employers flexibility in declining leave requests (annual, unpaid, on demand, and other). Leave policies might include extended period for leave use and additional types of leave, such as overtime and right to use a part of the next year annual leave - advance leave)
Remuneration	Changes in remuneration regulations that might include introducing a form of hazard pay and higher workload bonuses and some other pay adjustments, such as wage payment deferrals.
Labor inspections	Changes in occupational health and safety requirements, including interventions to improve the capacity or resources, and staffing of labor inspectors to enforce COVID-19 related regulations.
Other regulatory adjustment	Other regulatory adjustments might include relaxation of other aspects covered by labor regulations, such as temporary suspension of preventive examinations and the possibility of carrying out some mandatory trainings entirely by means of electronic communication.

## ANNEX D

### Description of firm liquidity policies

Firm liquidity policies	Description
Credit facilities/ guarantees	Loans made to a business or corporation that allow the borrowing business to take out money over an extended period rather than reapplying for a loan each time it needs money. Includes: revolving loan facilities, committed facilities, letters of credit, and most retail credit accounts.
Loan payment facilities	Relaxation of loan repayment conditions.
Tax relief	Reductions, exemptions, deferrals of corporate income tax, payroll, etc.
Utility and rent support	Transfers, postponement, or reduction of utility and rent payments to assist firms
Social security contributions for firms	Reductions, exemptions, postponements of social security contributions for firms.
Other special measures	Other measures not listed, such as access to public tenders.

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This note was prepared by Luciana De la Flor, Ingrid Mujica, María Belén Fonteñez, David Newhouse, Claudia Rodriguez Alas, Gayatri Sabharwal, and Michael Weber as part of the World Bank's JobsWatch Covid-19: Monitoring Labor Market Impacts and Policy Responses to the Pandemic in the Developing World. It is a joint product of the Jobs Group, the Social Protection and Jobs Global Practice, and the Poverty and Equity Global Practice. The authors would like to thank Sonia Madhvani (World Bank) and Ankit Grover (World Bank) for helpful comments, Ugo Gentilini (World Bank), Mohamed Almenfi (World Bank), Miglena Abels (World Bank) for sharing data, and Loli Arribas-Banos, Benu Bidani, Ambar Narayan, and Ian Walker for their guidance.

The production and publication of this report has been made possible through financial support from the [World Bank's Jobs Umbrella Multi-donor Trust Fund \(MDTF\)](#), which is supported by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office/UK AID, the Governments of Austria, Germany, Italy, Norway, the Austrian Development Agency, and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. All Jobs Group's publications are available for free and can be accessed through the [World Bank](#) or the [Jobs and Development Partnership website](#). Please send all queries or feedback to [Jobs Group](#). Join the conversation on Twitter: [@WBG\\_Jobs](#) #Jobs4Dev.