



▶ ILO/Cinterfor Notes

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▶ The role of vocational training in confronting the effects of COVID-19 in Latin America

- ▶ The COVID-19 pandemic will have severe and prolonged effects on the economy and employment worldwide, affecting incomes and the well-being of millions of people. The ILO estimates that 25 million people around the world could lose their jobs¹, while for Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLAC estimates a 1.3% contraction of regional GDP, which could lead to a rise in unemployment rates of up to ten percent². For its part, on its website dedicated to the subject, the OECD highlights the magnitude of the impact of the crisis on employment and household income, in the midst of an event whose complexity makes it extremely difficult to undertake economic projections³. The Director General of the ILO has referred to how this crisis has shed light on the fragility of our economies.
- ▶ Social distancing measures implemented in the countries of the region and the strong impact on economic activity and employment are affecting vocational training institutions. Nearly all of them have suspended their face-to-face training activities and are operating with distance learning in various ways, as we shall discuss below.

Challenges that vocational training institutions (VTIs) are facing and some responses

The first challenge for VTIs has been to remain operational, in touch with their teachers and participants and providing services to the community, despite having suspended their face-to-face sessions in classrooms⁴. This challenge has been met mainly

by the expansion (or, in some cases, the launching) of their distance training provision, or e-learning⁵.

It has emerged from the survey conducted by ILO/Cinterfor⁶ that many VTIs in the region have expanded their quotas for distance learning courses, or offer new courses through their training platforms, or have contracted with outside vendors the MOOCs they offer, usually free and open to the whole population. Several

1 ILO, https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_738742/lang--en/index.htm retrieved on 27/03/20

2 ECLAC, <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/covid-19-will-have-grave-effects-global-economy-and-will-impact-countries-latin> retrieved on 27/03/2020

3 OECD, <http://oecd.org/coronavirus/en/?fbclid=IwAR1XVKLmzftaEnYdSwTs3n1xlx806217y1KqvGxMgeDJT89ac7pfLRgCYEA#id-7> retrieved on 28/03/20

4 As mentioned by participants at the ILO/Cinterfor video conference held on 26 March with 22 VTIs, this agrees with what is stated in the literature that has emerged regarding the education sector's responses to the pandemic; for example, in IDB, Social policies in response to the effects of COVID-19. This online conference was attended by 31 managers from 22 training institutions and 2 ministries of labour (Peru, Argentina) that engage in training activities, from 15 countries in Latin America and Spain.

5 Designations include virtual training, virtual learning platforms, and other terms.

6 Preliminary results of the survey conducted among all of ILO/Cinterfor's member institutions (March 2020) at: <https://www.oitcinterfor.org/node/7744>

of these new courses being offered are short, generally linked to soft skills or to topics related to handling ICTs.

The increase of the distance training offered (as regards the number of courses on offer, the variety of these courses and the number of students to be covered) has several important dimensions to be taken into account by institutions and bottlenecks to be overcome, especially in cases where distance training was not a priority area for institutions in normal times.

Another challenge has emerged in relation to the technological infrastructure of both the institutions and the country as a whole, to facilitate participant access to ICT. In this regard, some VTIs say they have explored possibilities such as delivering tablets to disadvantaged populations, or extensive purchases of data packets from Internet service providers, in order to ensure connectivity for teachers and participants. This is also a dimension in which socio-economic differences translate very clearly into inequities relating to opportunities to access and use technologies meaningfully. Broadband availability and access is still not sufficiently extended throughout the region; the CAF (Development Bank of Latin America) has indicated that the penetration rate of mobile broadband is less than 50% (v 72% in the OECD) and only 44% of households have Internet connection, with great differences in speed and tariffs between countries and subregions⁷.

As for the type of distance provision, the good news is that there appears to be good prior preparation among VTIs, since the vast majority have learning management systems (LMS) that have enabled them to react faster. Some VTIs are moving to offer the contents of their face-to-face plans online; others have contracted with external providers to offer existing training packages; these are generally short courses and many of them focus on soft skills. There are institutions that are activating training mechanisms for their trainers so that they can both develop content and material for distance learning, and also handle virtual learning areas. In terms of content, there are also several cases that refer to developing or making available databases and repositories of online courses, free of charge.

Human resources, including the availability of distance trainers, constitute another bottleneck for VTIs. Being a face-to-face trainer is not the same as being a distance learning trainer, and most VTI teachers in the region have no experience of being online course

tutors. Because of this, there are some VTIs that are investing in online courses to support trainers in the development and delivery of distance learning.

Another important element among the actions that some VTIs and specialized agencies in the region are taking, is the certification of skills. Over the coming weeks, several VTIs and agencies such as CONOCER or ChileValora will need to come up with ingenious and innovative responses to provide evaluation and certification, using non-contact digital tools, which could perhaps have a long-term impact on how skills certification is carried out globally or regionally.

In addition, among the challenges faced by training systems and VTIs is their coordination with other public policies, both to contribute to the immediate response to the crisis, and with a view to future efforts towards recovery. This includes labour market policies, both active and passive; covering the regular policies designed and also those generated to address the health, economic and social emergency. It is, therefore, key that VTIs should move in coordination with ministries of Labour, Social Development, and Economy and Finance in areas such as the synchronization between vocational training and employment services, especially in relation to vocational guidance, incorporating updated and prospective information on changes in the sectoral composition of employment, as well as in unemployment insurance, in order to provide opportunities for training and retraining people who have lost their jobs, thinking about the post-crisis recovery period.

For the time being and beyond any actions the training institutions have already set up, it would be desirable for them to participate in the design and implementation of emergency policies for the most vulnerable populations; for example, in relation to employment, care, food, housing, and health, identifying opportunities to contribute to their skills, services and infrastructure.

Another major challenge for training policies is maintaining and strengthening provision for the most vulnerable populations, which include the lower income strata in general terms, also cross-cut by the gender variable at all socio-economic levels. On the one hand these groups are those with fewest opportunities (as regards both access to the required technology and habitual use of ICTs) to take advantage of distance learning offered in the current context of social

⁷ See: The digital divide: A challenge and an opportunity for Latin America. In www.caf.com (reviewed on 30 March 2020)

distancing. Moreover, women, in these groups as in all others, have the fewest opportunities of reconciling their care-related tasks with the possibilities of both training and telecommuting. A special focus and differentiated strategies are therefore necessary in order to avoid exacerbating differences and social exclusion as regards training at this juncture.

Finally, it is important that significant resources should be invested in the field of anticipating training needs and professional profiles for jobs that will be created in the post-crisis or recovery period. While it is difficult to forecast what the new normal will be once the crisis has been overcome and it is not known for sure how long it will last, what does emerge clearly in all analyses is that the pandemic will have a lasting impact on the economy and the world of work. This most likely also implies that new occupations will emerge and other old ones will tend to disappear or radically change in substance, all of which will imply the need for reconversion, for the reskilling and upskilling of large contingents of the workforce in economies globally. Training systems and institutions should be very alert to new skills that will be demanded and adapt their information and anticipation systems, and the training they offer, accordingly.

To provide a better response, let us learn from past crises and responses provided by the ILO

The most immediate precedent involving a global economic and employment crisis is the great recession of 2008-2009, which originated in the financial crisis of the central economies. Many of the lessons learned during and after that crisis, reflected in various instruments, are relevant now and should be considered.

On that occasion, within the ILO, the 2009 International Labour Conference adopted the Global Jobs Pact (GJP)⁸. This pact included a set of policies aimed at boosting economic recovery, focusing on investment, employment and social protection, and stressing the importance of vocational training and skills development to alleviate the effects of the crisis on employment, particularly for the most vulnerable groups.

Among its priorities for training policies and skills development, it indicated that investment in this area should focus on: accelerating the return to employment of workers unemployed as a result of the crisis;

convert and expand the human capital of workers during downtime periods as an investment in future productivity and competitiveness; train workers for the kind of jobs that will be created as a result of economic stimulus packages and investment, so as to reduce the shortage of labour and the loss of jobs as a result of the mismatch between skills offered and those that available jobs require.

Some years later, the ILO published a research brief analysing the lessons learned from the implementation of training and retraining programmes that emerged in response to the crisis⁹, organized around six focal points:

Algunos años después, la OIT publicaba un informe de investigación analizando las lecciones aprendidas a partir de la implementación de programas de formación y reconversión implementados en respuesta a la crisis⁹ organizadas en torno a seis ejes:

1. *Impact of the economic cycle on training programmes*

Countries' response capability depended on having programmes in place that could be scaled up quickly; leveraging existing training programmes channelled additional funding authorized under emergency measures faster and more efficiently than creating new ones; policy coordination and collaboration between stakeholders, government agencies and training providers were critical.

2. *Advantages of on-the-job training schemes*

Such programmes delivered more immediate results because content could be tailored to employers' skill demands.

3. *Comprehensive and integrated delivery of training programmes*

Comprehensive and integrated interventions, for example, with guidance services prior to training, were more effective in helping to provide jobs for the unemployed population.

4. *Public-private partnerships*

Contracting out service delivery to private providers enabled governments to deliver more flexible market-oriented training.

5. *Relevance of training to labour market demand*

Availability of high-quality labour market information was considered essential for planning and adapting the training provided; social partners (workers and

⁸ ILO, Global Jobs Pact: <https://www.ilo.org/jobspect/lang--en/index.htm>

⁹ ILO, Lessons from the implementation of training and retraining programmes in response to the Great Recession. Research Brief.

employers) were key to guide policies and training programmes.

6. Importance of targeting beneficiaries of training programmes

Well-targeted training programmes for specific audiences resulted in more cost-effective public policy interventions, especially for low-skilled workers, young people, women, migrants, and older workers.

Regarding the International Labour Standards for periods of crisis, it is relevant to make specific reference here to **R205 - Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation**¹⁰ of 2017. This is a tool providing guidance to countries on the challenges of the world of work during crises, and states that member countries should endeavour to provide opportunities for income generation, stable employment and decent work, especially through integrated programmes relating to training, employment and the labour market. It stresses the need to ensure that the provision of education is not disrupted, or is restored as quickly as possible, and that everyone, including persons who are internally displaced, migrants or refugees, should have access to free, quality, public education, without discrimination of any kind. It adds that second chance programmes should be available, in order to address the key needs arising from any interruption of education and training. Developing or adapting national education, training, retraining and vocational guidance programmes to assess and address the need for labour skills generated by recovery and reconstruction is designated as a task that should be based on the participation of all stakeholders, both public and private. In particular, these efforts should focus on training and the economic empowerment of affected populations, including in rural areas and in the informal economy.

Final reflections

We are experiencing a time of enormous challenges for labour, employment and vocational training policies in particular. It is a time when training has to be able to reinvent itself, adapting and proposing innovative ideas and creative ways to make a significant contribution to the efforts to mitigate the effects of the pandemic during the crisis and after it.

In particular, we wish to highlight some aspects that we should consider and continue to analyse in depth in discussions and communities of practice in the world of training, such as the one centred around ILO/Cinterfor:

- It is imperative that vocational training institutions should keep the engines running and keep in close touch with their community of teachers and students for the duration of the social distancing measures imposed in most countries in the region.
- Distance learning or e-learning through the institutions' virtual platforms is a very useful tool, but it poses particular challenges in relation to preparing teachers and Internet accessibility for participants.
- Training policies must be coordinated with other public policy devices designed and made available to the population and businesses to mitigate the effects of the crisis on employment. In particular, they should coordinate with active and passive labour market policies or the newly generated cash transfers that may be designed in some countries to respond to the crisis (such as minimum income or living wage schemes).
- Training institutions and employment policies should focus particularly on the more vulnerable populations who are at risk of exclusion, as the pandemic will almost certainly increase equity and equality issues related to access to goods and services.
- Institutions will face challenges during the post-crisis or recovery stage, when they should implement well-oiled foresight mechanisms to anticipate training and labour demand, to adapt their provision to the new reality of the productive fabric that they must cater to once the most intense phase of the pandemic has passed.
- VTIs can take advantage of their deeply rooted culture of social dialogue, which has the potential to provide a solid base of social legitimacy for the actions and policies that they contribute to other fields, since it implies reflecting the interests and perspectives of employers and workers affected by this crisis. In addition, it shows to the rest of society the commitment of these stakeholders, who, together with governments, can provide solutions to those most affected by the crisis, as well as an example of how to address the current challenges through participation, dialogue and negotiation, with a view to building broad and inclusive agreements.

¹⁰ https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:R205

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