

COVID-19 and quality of life among informal workers on Barú Island (Colombia)



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the living conditions of vulnerable populations in Colombian island regions, specifically focusing on Barú Island in Cartagena. A mixed research approach was used, including a Sequential Explanatory Design (DEXPLIS). The first phase involved a structured questionnaire with 392 participants (confidence level: 95%, margin of error: 4.4%), while the second phase included two focus groups. Results reveal that while people value their informal tourism-related occupations, the pandemic's impact has been significant. The study concludes that evaluating individuals' life situations requires understanding their access to rights and the perceptions, feelings, and representations linked to those circumstances.

Keywords: Cartagena de Indias, Afro-Colombian Caribbean, Informal economy, Tourism.

Covid-19 y Calidad De Vida Entre Trabajadores Informales De La Isla De Barú (Colombia)

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el impacto de la pandemia de COVID-19 en las condiciones de vida de las poblaciones vulnerables de las regiones insulares colombianas, centrándose específicamente en la isla de Barú, en Cartagena. Se utilizó un enfoque de investigación mixto, incluyendo un Diseño Explicativo Secuencial (DEXPLIS). La primera fase consistió en un cuestionario estructurado con 392 participantes (nivel de confianza: 95%, margen de error: 4,4%), mientras que la segunda fase incluyó dos grupos focales. Los resultados revelan que, aunque la gente valora sus ocupaciones informales relacionadas con el turismo, el impacto de la pandemia ha sido significativo. El estudio concluye que la evaluación de las condiciones de vida de los individuos requiere comprender su acceso a los derechos, las percepciones, sentimientos y representaciones vinculadas a esas circunstancias.

Palabras Clave: Cartagena de Indias, Caribe Afrocolombiano, Economía informal, Turismo.

COVID-19 e qualidade de vida entre trabalhadores informais na Ilha Barú (Colômbia)

RESUMO

Este artigo examina o impacto da pandemia da COVID-19 nas condições de vida das populações vulneráveis nas regiões insulares da Colômbia, concentrando-se especificamente na ilha de Barú, em Cartagena. Foi utilizada uma abordagem de pesquisa mista, incluindo um Projeto Sequencial Explicativo (EXPLIS). A primeira fase consistiu em um questionário estruturado com 392 participantes (nível de confiança: 95%, margem de erro: 4,4%), enquanto a segunda fase incluiu dois grupos de foco. Os resultados revelam que, embora as pessoas valorizem suas ocupações informais relacionadas ao turismo, o impacto da pandemia foi significativo. O estudo conclui que a avaliação das condições de vida dos indivíduos requer uma compreensão de seu acesso a direitos, percepções, sentimentos e representações relacionados a essas circunstâncias.

Palavras-chave: Cartagena de Indias, Caribe Afro-colombiano, Economia Informal, Turismo.

Introduction

This article analyzes the effects that the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 Coronavirus had on socioeconomic conditions and quality of life in the populations of informal workers who offer tourism services in Colombian island regions, taking as a case of analysis the island of Barú, made up of the districts (corregimientos)¹ of Ararca, Barú and Santa Ana, attached to the insular zone of Cartagena de Indias. This analysis acquires great relevance since, with the measures decreed by the World Health Organization -WHO-, taken up by the Colombian government and replicated by its departmental and district governments, airports were closed, and local authorities imposed restrictions on the mobility of people (DANE, 2020), a situation that dramatically affected productive, commercial and service provision activities, almost wholly paralyzing the economy, with devastating effects on sectors related to the tourism and recreation industry (UNWTO-OMT, 2020).

The above situation profoundly affected the informal offering of products and/or services, especially for those who derived their livelihood from the services provided to tourists (ECLAC-CEPAL, 2020). For this reason, informal workers on Barú Island suffered the ravages of these measures, affecting their personal and family subsistence possibilities and further deepening the poverty that characterizes these populations. Indeed, according to the Cartagena Cómo Vamos report (2018), 2018 the island zone of Cartagena de Indias, made up of 20,693 inhabitants who live on both Barú Island and Tierra Bomba, presented the highest poverty indicators. 96.7% of the population of the district of Barú had at least one unmet basic need, while in Santa Ana this percentage rose to 95.8%, only surpassed in the island context by Caño del Oro, which had 98.9%. According to this same report, the island area had 55.1% of households in conditions of misery, with the district of Barú occupying first place in extreme poverty, with 60.8%, followed by Santa Ana, with 54.6%.

It is noteworthy that the high indicators of poverty and extreme poverty of the populations of Barú Island contrast with a dynamic economic activity related to the growing arrival of tourists to the island, primarily to Playa Blanca - the only public beach resort on Barú Island, located in the district of Santa Ana, and which brings together informal workers from the rest of its districts - which began in 2014 to have an average influx of 4,500 bathers per day, a figure that on weekends and holidays can range between 10,000 and 11,000, far exceeding its maximum capacity of 3,124 people, as indicated by Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia (2019). To the above, we must add the nearly 2,000 merchants who work and live in Playa Blanca in more than 300 businesses, including hostels, bars, and restaurants (Montaño, 2019). Undoubtedly, and despite the overload on the environment (Caviedes Rubio & Olaya Amaya, 2018), the transformation experienced in its infrastructure and connectivity with the continent after the construction of the bridge in 2014, which connects the island with the mainland (Del Valle & Roldán, 2015), led to an increase in tourist activity in Barú, gave a boost to formal and informal employment and increased the financial flows of the majority of the inhabitants, who chose to offer their services to this high number of visitors.

The previous situation, which favored the economic income of the inhabitants of Barú and promised to counteract their historical poverty situation, suffered a severe setback with the arrival of Covid-19, whose socioeconomic consequences were devastating for the subsistence of their families, whose economic income depended on the services offered to tourists, and who stopped arriving to the island since March 2020, when the presidency of the Republic of Colombia ordered mandatory preventive isolation of all

¹ In Colombia, a "corregimiento" is a population center that does not reach the status of a municipality and is therefore under the jurisdiction of a municipality or a department - in the case of non-municipalized areas - to improve the provision of services and ensure citizen participation in local public affairs.

people in the cities of the country, to contain the infections and deaths caused by Covid-19 (Maza et al., 2020).

Therefore, this article aims to answer the question: What is the perception of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socioeconomic conditions and quality of life of informal workers linked to tourist activities on Barú Island? This article has been divided into five parts to answer this question: In addition to this introduction, the following section analyzes the evolution of Barú Island as a tourist attraction before the crisis caused by COVID-19; the third part explains the methodology used to assess the perceptions of the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic on informal workers in Playa Blanca; the fourth part shows a characterization of informal workers on Barú Island, as well as the results of the analysis of the worker's assessment of the effects that the pandemic had on their socioeconomic conditions and quality of life. The final part is about the conclusions.

Evolution of Barú Island as a tourist attraction

What is known today as Isla de Barú was a peninsula artificially converted into an island. At the end of the 16th century, the city of Cartagena, in the process of growth as the main Spanish port in New Granada, needed to connect its port to the Magdalena River to articulate trade with the cities of the interior (Vidal & D'Amato Castillo, 2016). This condition moved the Spanish Empire to start the Canal del Dique project, an internal water infrastructure; however, over the centuries, this canal has had several modifications due to problems of blockage and sedimentation. The construction of this canal separated the peninsula from the continent, turning it into an island, which was connected to the town of Pasacaballos by a ferry and small boats. It was not until 2014 that it was reconnected to the continent using a bridge that improved access to this island, especially for visitors looking for recreation (Flórez, 2011).

Today, Barú Island belongs to the archipelago formed by the Rosario Islands in the district of Cartagena de Indias in the Colombian Caribbean region. It has an area of 60 km² and is located 45 minutes from Cartagena by boat and 75 minutes by land, on the road to the Mamonal industrial complex. Barú territory is like a tongue that juts out into the sea, with some bodies of water along its path. It is made up of three towns: Ararca, Santa Ana and Barú; in addition, it has marine and terrestrial ecosystems, including 3,000 hectares of mangrove forest and 500 hectares of natural beaches² that today make it an object of tourist attraction. It is also part of the territories of the Colombian Caribbean that have become a destination for national and international tourists. It has a privileged position between the city of Cartagena de Indias and the Rosario Islands, close to the forts of San Fernando de Bocachica and San Luis, in addition to the islands of San Bernardo, which are a focus of internationally famous tourist attractions, a situation that places it as part of the routes between Cartagena and the Rosario Islands (National Natural Parks of Colombia, 2019).

One of the main attractions is Playa Blanca, which is almost 4 kilometers long (National Natural Parks of Colombia, 2019). Its beaches are of coral origin, making it one of the most striking in the area, not only because of the white sand on its beaches but also because of the navy blue of its surrounding sea (Aguirre-Mendoza et al., 2019). This is the only public beach on the island, as the rest of its beaches are in private hands, which is why between 1,500 and 2,000 workers converge to offer their services to the more than 4,500 tourists who visit this beach daily - a number that has grown exponentially and doubles on weekends or during holiday seasons - as a direct consequence of the attractions of this island and the

² Barú belongs to the Los Corales del Rosario y de San Bernardo National Natural Park (NNP). It is one of the areas that make up the National Natural Parks System, attached to the Caribbean Territorial Directorate, created with the aim of preserving flora, fauna, natural scenic beauties, geomorphological complexes, historical or cultural manifestations for scientific, educational, recreational or aesthetic purposes.

growth of tourism experienced by the city of Cartagena de Indias and its surroundings due to, in turn, growing consumption of ecotourism and sun and beach experiences (Montaño, 2019).

Playa Blanca began to be visited in the 1960s by a very small number of tourists who, in many cases, came from Cartagena de Indias in private boats intending to fish and enjoy the beach and the crystal-clear sea. It was also frequented by some locals who had a place of recreation there for the weekends (Siegert, 2006); however, with the arrival of these visitors, the offer of drinks began to emerge, followed by food. But it would be in the 1980s, when Cartagena was consolidated as a tourist destination with the impetus of its declaration as a Historical and Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 1984 by UNESCO, that this beach would become famous and would begin to be visited more frequently, generating an offer of drinks and food to meet the growing demand.

Although in the 60s and 70s many inhabitants of the different towns of Barú went to Bocachica to offer their services to tourists and sell their products to this district of Tierrabomba Island -which had the greatest tourist activity in those years, linked to the offer from Cartagena-, it was at the end of the 80s and beginning of the 90s when there was a gradual decline of Bocachica as a tourist destination. Playa Blanca began its consolidation as a destination for visitors. This process occurred largely due to the growing articulation between Cartagena tourism and the new offer of the Rosario Islands, which experienced investments and adaptation of its infrastructure while promoting an attractive offer for visitors, displacing the historical attractions of Bocachica. (Torres Martínez & Díaz Taborda, 2017) . This fact not only favored the Rosario archipelago and its marine attractions as the most sought-after destination in the area, but also promoted Playa Blanca, which began to be part of the new circuit of national and international tourism offerings.

Driven by the tourism industry, in the 1990s, the communities of Ararca, Santa Ana and Barú began to transform their traditional forms of production: From subsistence farmers and fishermen, they began to sell their services as labor for construction projects and home improvement for individuals; likewise, the sale of services in domestic activities was strengthened. While this was happening, some material progress was also being carried out for the districts, hotel projects were implemented, and some private properties were allocated to offer entertainment and rest to visitors. This activity grew and strengthened in the 21st century; however, it was with the paving of its main road between 2011 and 2012 and the construction of the Barú bridge -called Campo Elias Teran Dix - in 2014, which improved accessibility by land, increasing the number of visitors to Playa Blanca and other places on this island of Barú.

The above also motivated the growth of the demand for goods and services and the number of informal workers, who increased their economic dependence on the economic flows generated by the dynamics of tourism (Del Valle & Roldán, 2015). For example, in 2005, 80% of workers worked in informal settings and only 20% were linked to formal jobs - 7% in the tourism sector - with salaries, in some cases, lower than the minimum established by the National Government. This panorama would improve with some projects carried out in the hotel and tourism sector - for example, the appearance of several private and chain hotels, such as the Hotel Decameron , inaugurated in 2009 -which began to energize the fragile economy of this island, along with an increase in formal employment. By 2015, despite the persistence of poverty, the economic panorama had changed. According to Del Valle & Roldan (2015), informality decreased to 73%, while formality increased by 27%, primarily due to the economic boost from investments in infrastructure for tourism development that the island experienced.

Given the growing economic dynamism generated by tourism on the island of Barú, the Cartagena Chamber of Commerce projections predicted that by 2020, the relationship between formal and informal employment would be in balance. However, the global health crisis that occurred in 2020, as a result

of the global pandemic caused by the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), had negative repercussions on the labor dynamics of Colombia, Cartagena de Indias, and the island of Barú, causing a dramatic decline in employment. These negative repercussions and the decline in formal and informal employability that occurred on the island of Barú, as well as in other cities and tourist sites, were derived from mobility restrictions, confinement, lower company sales, reduced salaries, layoffs, company closures, and of course the suppression of consumption in entertainment and tourism.

In this regard, informal workers linked to economic activities derived from tourism on Barú Island were severely affected since they did not enjoy any protection from employers. In addition, they lost all of their income from tourism activities. Therefore, this article aims to analyze the perception of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socioeconomic conditions and quality of life of informal workers linked to tourism activities in Playa Blanca on Barú Island near Cartagena de Indias.

Theoretical considerations

According to what happened with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is evident that the population of the Island of Barú could be harmed not only in their economic and social conditions but also from subjective aspects related to their quality of life and their human and community development. On the one hand, under the Human Development paradigm, human beings are no longer a means for economic growth: other essential components must be considered, such as the increase in the skills and options of individuals, so that they can be able to satisfy their own needs (Sen, 2000; Singer, 1998). In this way, Human Development not only indicates an economic point of view but is: a) multidimensional - it relates the individual, social, and environmental dimensions; b) integral - the elements of development are related as a whole; c) adaptive - it implies preserving the historical sense of the individual and at the same time enhancing their capacity for change (Pérez de Armiño, 1999). However, to promote Human Development, society must create conditions in which people, both individually and collectively, achieve the supply of vital material elements: worthy cultural goods and services of all kinds that guarantee the realization of their political and social potential, ensuring equal opportunities and sustainability over time (Sen, 2011).

However, Sen (2000) goes beyond the notion of basic needs, encompassing development as freedom, a perspective that is supported by several fundamental pillars. In the first instance, the utility must be considered an incomplete description of people's performance since it responds to a traditional economic paradigm. This approach ignores many vital aspects of an individual's decision-making, such as social concerns, the well-being of future generations, or ethical issues. To do this, the capabilities of human beings must be enhanced by increasing the process of fundamental freedoms they can enjoy. According to Sen, (2010), these capacities are limited by poverty, social deprivation, the informal economy, abandonment of public services and intolerance of State intervention (Baquero & J., 2009; Cuadra, Flores & Orellana, 2013; Herrera & Gutiérrez-Goiria, 2021; López & Arroyo, 2012; UNDP-PNUD, 2014; Tezón & Guataqui, 2020; Riccardi, Maza, Romero, 2024).

In this sense, the limitations found in sectors where the informal economy prevails, linked to tourism in the Colombian Caribbean, become evident in the face of the mandatory preventive social isolation protocols produced by COVID-19. These limitations, while making the objective impact on the Quality of Life -CV- of the inhabitants evident, also show subjective consequences in terms of the social perception of the phenomenon. Most of the research and applications have been carried out in mental health. In the field of informal work, they have generally separated the objective aspects of the quality of life -social indicators- from the subjective or perceived aspects. Ardilla (2003) argues that the main factors taken into

account in the study of the Quality of Life are the following: a) Emotional well-being; b) Material wealth and material well-being; c) Health; d) Work and other forms of productive activity; e) Family and social relationships; f) Security; g) Integration with the community (Rodrigues Dutra et al., 2022; Tapias Ortega, 2017; Urzúa & Caqueo-Úrizar, 2012).

Thus, in the face of these study objectives, the first theoretical definitions of the concept of QoL emerge, demonstrating how its conception fails to integrate both aspects into a whole. There are authors who maintain that QoL refers to the expectations that one has regarding the resources offered by the living space: access to public services such as education, health, housing and economic income (Moreno Jiménez & Ximénez Gómez, 1996). On the contrary, it is also maintained that the concept should be studied only subjectively since it implies a composite measure of physical, mental, and social well-being, as perceived by each individual and each group. Following this line, Szalai (1980) referred to QoL as the subjective evaluation of well-being and satisfaction with life (Cella & Tulsky, 1990; Chaturvedi, 1991).

Following this line of thought, the Colombian Caribbean scenario, in terms of the informal economy, demands not only the fight for their rights but also that, once they are achieved, they meet the conditions expected by the subjects under these vulnerable situations. This refers to the fact that the development of the territory not only implies the fulfillment of a right in an objective way - access to education, health and work - but also that these rights can be used subjectively: that access generates satisfaction and well-being in the lives of the subjects and not the opposite (Tezón & Guataqui, 2020). This confirms that the concept of Quality of Life proposed in this article does not only mean living with satisfied rights but also that these reflect quality and dignity to each community's inhabitants (Castellano & López, 2021; López, 2009). The human act is not made up only of behaviors; that is, they are not responses that adapt to a stimulus always with the same response, but instead, they occur in the face of different social, historical, political, and cultural situations (Aparicio-Baquen et al., 2021).

In summary, by promoting the concept of Quality of Life and its impact on the population working for tourism in Barú, it is necessary to define the functions that articulate this problem concerning this theoretical path. That is, in the face of specific situations of vulnerability, presented due to the pandemic, the guarantee of a better Quality of Life is based on achieving certain specific functions such as: a) Orientation - of the norms so as not to divert the right to consequences contrary to those expected, providing the true key to its application in order to strengthen human dignity and values-; b) Protection - legal guarantees that make possible the guarantee of rights as well as the monitoring of their application in order to protect human integrity. The integrity of rights cannot be limited to access to them, but to social effectiveness - and c) Critical - discerning the social conditions in which rights are implemented to allow the transition from formal rights to real ones - (Neves da Silva et al., 2022; Velarde-Jurado & Avila-Figueroa, 2002).

Materials and methods

This article aims to analyze the perception of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socioeconomic conditions and quality of life of vulnerable populations that offer tourist goods and/or services informally on Barú Island (Map 1). To this end, it has been supported by a mixed methodology, with special attention to the Sequential Explanatory Design -DEXPLIS- in which both qualitative and quantitative analysis converge to achieve a holistic approach and guarantee greater rigor and exploration of the data. The preference for this type of approach lies in the need to capture the objective and subjective dimensions that coexist in social reality (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza-Torres, 2018). In particular, the analysis of the socioeconomic and quality effects on the population under analysis is so complex that it requires

exploring different levels, that is, from statistical techniques and from the particularities, experiences, desires and expectations that emerge from the narratives and stories of the subjects involved.

In order to comply with the proposed methodological design, in the first phase, a structured questionnaire was designed and validated among experts, consisting of 52 questions that inquire about various aspects, including the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents, the economic activity carried out before the COVID-19 pandemic and the perception of the effects of COVID-19 on their economic activity and quality of life. The questionnaire was applied to a sample of 392 people, assuming as inclusion criteria: a) Belonging to the Community Council of the Black Community of Santa Ana on Barú Island, in Cartagena de Indias, and b) Offering tourist goods and/or services from informality in Playa Blanca, the only public beach resort on Barú Island. A finite population was assumed, and a confidence level of 95% and a sampling error of 4.22% were taken as a reference. The process of selecting participants and applying questionnaires was carried out during the month of August 2021, following a random sample, thus giving the same opportunity to each of the observational elements to participate in the sample.

In a second complementary phase, two (2) focus groups were conducted, following an interview guide designed to characterize the relevant aspects of their economic activity before COVID-19 and assess the perception of the effects of COVID-19 on their quality of life. The two focus groups brought together 17 participants (a first group of 10 men and a second group of 7 women), all residents for more than 13 years in Isla de Barú, particularly in the district of Santa Ana, and offering tourist services from informality in Playa Blanca. The final phase consisted of an analysis combining the results obtained through the quantitative and qualitative methods. The similarities and differences obtained by the different approaches studied were investigated in this sense. To do this, the analysis categories determined by two analysis objectives were presented: a) the economic impacts and b) the social impacts derived from COVID-19 among informal workers in the tourism sector of Isla de Barú. The perception of the quality of life of informal workers is articulated in terms of these effects through the inter-method combination, integrating quantitative and quantitative data.

Results and discussion

The questionnaire results applied to those who offer goods and/or tourist services informally on the Island of Barú show that more than half are men (56.12%). Likewise, the average adult predominates, corresponding to those aged between 35 and 64 years (64.54%), followed by a notable participation of young adults (34.4%). The average age is 40.61 years, with a standard deviation of 11.25 years. It is worth noting that most respondents identify as Afro-descendants (96.94%). The socioeconomic stratum with the highest participation is Stratum 1 (94.64%), the lowest on the scale, according to the provisions of Law 142 of 1994, which establishes the regime of public utilities and dictates other provisions. Finally, although the majority has a permanent romantic partner (80.61%), the percentage of those who live in a civil union is high compared to those who are married (74.23% vs 6.38%) (Table 1).

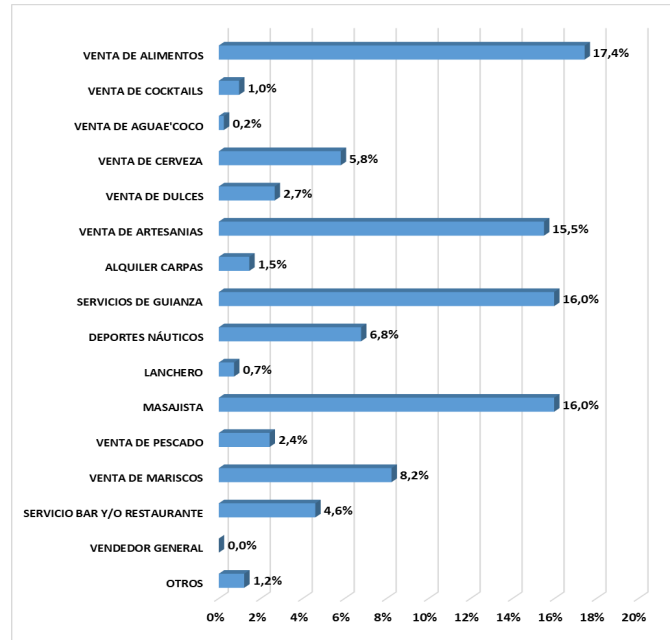
Table 1. Sociodemographic aspects of informal workers in the tourism sector of Barú Island (Colombia)

VARIABLES	INDICATORS	%
GENDER	MALE	56.12%
	FEMALE	43.62%
	NS/NR	0.26%
	Grand total	100%
AGE RANGE	YOUNG ADULT	34.44%
	MEDIUM ADULT	64.54%
	ELDERLY ADULT	1.02%
	Grand total	100%
MARITAL STATUS	SINGLE	12.50%
	MARRIED	6.38%
	CIVIL UNION	74.23%
	SEPARATED/DIVORCIATED	3.06%
	WIDOWER	3.32%
	NS/NR	0.51%
	Grand total	100%
ETHNIC CONDITION	ROOT	0.00%
	INDIGENOUS	0.77%
	AFRICAN-DESCENDENT	96.94%
	NONE	0.00%
	NS/NR	2.30%
	Grand total	100%
SOCIOECONOMIC STRATUM	STRATUM 1	94.64%
	STRATUM 2	0.26%
	STRATUM 3	0.00%
	STRATUM 4	0.00%
	NS/NR	5.10%
	Grand total	100%

On the other hand, the main activities carried out by informal workers in the tourism sector on Barú Island are the sale of prepared foods (17.4%), masseuses (16%), guide services (16%), and the sale of handicrafts (15.5%)³. It should be noted that residents of Barú carry out these types of activities, and they have a long family tradition, in the same way as it happens among the natives in San Andrés Island (Román Romero et al., 2022) (Chart 1).

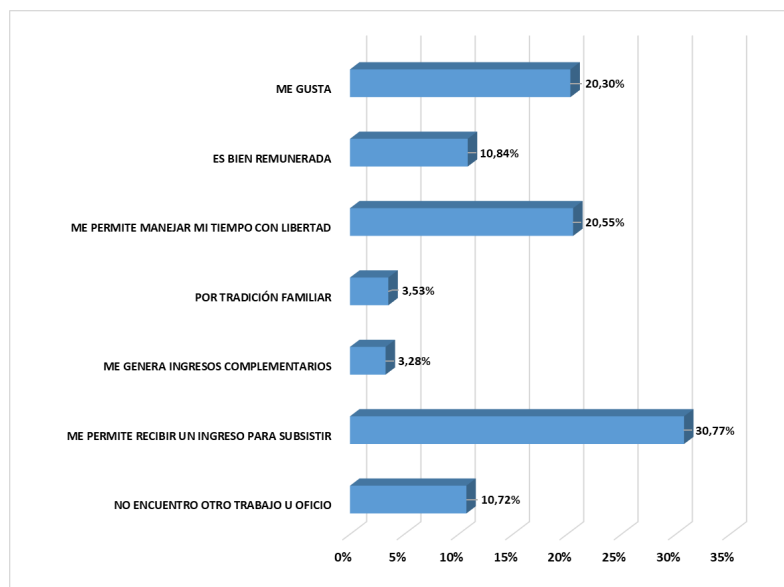
³ Although in this research, boatmen represented less than 1% of economic activities, this group is made up of more than 50 members who, in addition to traditional tours, offer specialized services to small groups of tourists, consisting of snorkeling, diving, and tours along the coast, among the islets and/or private beaches, among others.

Chart 1. Economic activity carried out by informal workers in the tourism sector of Barú Island (Colombia)



On the other hand, 69.39% of respondents say that they have been carrying out their informal activities on the island for at least 7 years, every day of the week (59.95%). 83.16% do not carry out any other activity, meaning their current job is their only source of income. Several reasons led informal workers in the tourism sector of Barú Island (Colombia) to carry out their current activity, including the possibility of earning enough income to survive (30.77%), the alternative of being able to manage their time freely (20.55%) and the fact that it is an activity that they like to do (20.30%) (Chart 2).

Chart 2. Reasons for engaging in current activity. Informal workers in the tourism sector of Barú Island (Colombia)



In addition to the above reasons, some structural determinants prevent them from performing other work activities, including the low levels of educational training of this population - the highest level of schooling for 42.6% of those surveyed in high school, while 26.28% only completed several years of high school, without graduating - and the limited job opportunities they have due to the precarious conditions of industrial and commercial development in this area.

Economic impacts of COVID-19 among informal workers in the tourism sector of Barú Island

Barú Island, like other tourist destinations in Colombia, was affected by the mobility restrictions decreed by the National Government to contain the spread of COVID-19 (DANE, 2020). In island areas, these measures had a catastrophic effect due to the impossibility of the arrival of tourists (Román Romero et al., 2022). 98.47% of informal workers on Barú Island classified the degree of impact of the pandemic on their economic activity as high since they were forced into confinement, which meant the cessation of economic activities and the total fall of their economy and income. Since they all depend on informal activities associated with tourism, with the closure of the beach during the restriction stages (between March and October 2020), their income became zero (68.37%), which was considered a very “hard” period since going through that situation of inactivity for months affected not only their finances but also their mood, as they suffered from worries associated with supporting the family:

“For example, we suffered quite a bit economically because here on this island, we depend on tourism, and if there was no tourism, we were screwed, as they say, so we received little help from the government, so this situation hit us hard, hard.” GrupFocM_Masj2

90.58% of those who had yet to return to their activities at the time of this research stated that it was very likely that they would resume them. While doing so, 42.68% received help from family and/or friends to support themselves and/or their family, while 29.28% lived off of scraping by activities other than their usual ones. It is noteworthy that few indicated having received support from the Mayor’s Office (8.72%), the National Government (2.8%), or the Governorate of Bolívar (0.62%). This is worrying if one considers that 87.24% of those surveyed are heads of household and 73.21% have between 2 and 4 people in their care (Table 2), and could not cover their basic needs, including food and school attendance for the children and young people in their care:

“(…) because many of us have children studying and suddenly our ability to get ahead depends on that, with the unemployment of this situation many people honestly did not even have enough to eat a kilo of rice” GrupFocM_Masj2 (IB)

Table 2. Economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic among informal workers in the tourism sector of Barú Island (Colombia)

Ask	Response options	%
Impact level of COVID-19 on your economic activity	A lot	98.47%
	Something	1.53%
	Bit	0.00%
	Doesn't know/No Reply	0.00%
	Grand total	100%
Impact on income received from economic activity during quarantine (March-October 2020)	Were null	68.37%
	Decreased	31.12%
	They remained equals	0.00%
	They increased	0.26%
	Doesn't know/No Reply	0.26%
	Grand total	100%
Have you resumed activities after quarantine?	Yes	51.02%
	No	48.72%
	Doesn't know/No Reply	0.26%
	Grand total	100%
If you have resumed activities, how has your income changed?	They have decreased	82.50%
	They remain equals	1.50%
	They have increased	16.00%
	Grand total	100%
If you have not resumed activities, probability of doing so in the future (scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = Unlikely and 5 = Very likely)	1	0.00%
	2	0.00%
	3	1.57%
	4	2.09%
	5	90.58%
	Doesn't know/No Reply	5.76%
	Grand total	100%
If you have not resumed activities, who have you received support from to support yourself and/or your family?	Help from family and/or friends	42.68%
	National Government Aid	2.80%
	Aid from the Government	0.62%
	Mayor 's Aid	8.72%
	Help from another entity Which one?	4.98%
	By account own (search)	29.28%
	Other	10.90%
	Grand total	100%

Although predictions of economic growth driven by increased tourism on the island of Barú and its inhabitants were possible, the impact of measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 caused an unexpected setback in the population and the possibility of increasing their income by improving their quality of life. Informal workers in the tourism sector on Barú Island indicate that, although their businesses did not go bankrupt or were at risk of bankruptcy due to the pandemic (90.9% and 94.9%, respectively), just over a third indicated that they had not been able to open their businesses, at least as they used to do just before the pandemic (36.4%). They also stated that their employer had reduced their working hours (daily or weekly) due to a lack of demand (42.40%). The above effects have resulted in workers losing most or all of their income (70.90%), as well as having no savings to invest in their business (59.7%) and even no possibility of covering their household expenses (37.00%) (Table 3).

Table 3. Economic impacts and consequences for informal workers in the tourism sector of Barú Island (Colombia) Island (Colombia)

Effects / consequences	Questions	Response options	
		Yes	No
Effects	I have not been able to open my business frequently	63.6%	36.4%
	My business broke	9.1%	90.9%
	My business is at risk of broke	5.1%	94.9%
	My employer is at risk of broke	5.1%	94.9%
	My employer broke	20.2%	79.8%
	My employer has reduced my hours (per day, or per week) due to lack of demand	42.4%	57.6%
	Other affectation	1.0%	99.0%
Consequences	I have lost much or all my income	70.9%	29.1%
	I have run out of savings to invest in the business	59.7%	40.3%
	I can no longer pay my rent or mortgage	6.9%	93.1%
	I can't cover my household expenses	37.0%	63.0%
	Other consequence	0.0%	100.0%

In short, these effects worsened the conditions of poverty and employability, which were expected to improve with the boost that tourism growth had been giving after the bridge's construction and road infrastructure improvements. However, the paralysis brought about by the pandemic created a setback in the advances in the quality of life of this sector of the workers of the island of Barú and their families, which will probably take some years to overcome.

Social impacts of COVID-19 among informal workers in the tourism sector of Barú Island

With the declaration of a pandemic by the National Government and the measures implemented that paralyzed global tourism, cities with high tourist dynamics have been seriously affected. This has also brought with it social impacts, especially in those tourist destinations with a high participation of informal actors linked to tourism, as is the case in the Caribbean region of Colombia. In the case of Barú Island, the social effects have been very unfavorable: 73.7% of the workers surveyed have had difficulties accessing food. It is noteworthy that a high percentage of respondents reported having had problems getting around (39.4%) and accessing parks, beaches or sports venues (46.0%) (Table 4).

One thing to highlight from the results is that 33.2% of these workers withdrew their children from school. There is no doubt that, with the pandemic, there was a setback in the training processes that profoundly affected the educational quality of the island areas of the Colombian Caribbean. Such is the case of the island area of Cartagena, which by 2019 had the highest levels of official dropouts, including precisely two institutions on the island of Barú: the Santa Ana educational institution with 5.95% and that of Ararca with 5.98%. With the new pandemic scenario, both increased the dropout rates, mainly due to the precarious development of internet connectivity that made the transitional model of virtual education a problem that discouraged parents and students who did not have the technological conditions or knowledge of the digital world necessary to take on this new technological challenge (Cartagena Cómo Vamos, 2020).

Table 4. Types of social impacts among informal workers in the tourism sector of Barú Island (Colombia)

Questions	Response options	
	Yes	No
She had to withdraw her children from school.	33.2%	66.8%
Has difficulty accessing food	73.7%	26.3%
You have trouble getting around due to restrictions.	39.4%	60.6%
Access to parks, beaches, sports and recreation facilities is limited due to restrictions.	46.0%	54.0%
You have limited access to shops, restaurants, nightclubs, bars, beauty salons, due to restrictions	14.6%	85.4%

The social impacts derived from COVID-19 among the population that carries out activities, from informality, on the Island of Barú, have also hurt their quality of life, as a set of conditions necessary to be able to carry out the personal project of a fully human life (Adela Herrera & Andrés Guzmán, 2012). Considering a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest value and five the highest, they assign a low rating to their quality of life (2.95). In fact, among the aspects with the lowest rating are their satisfaction with the income obtained in their home during the pandemic (2.72), their satisfaction with their work-life (2.96), and their feeling of security in their daily life (2.98) (Table 5).

Table 5. Assessment of aspects associated with the quality of life among informal workers in the tourism sector of Barú Island (Colombia)

Ratings	Average	SD
Feeling of security in your daily life	2.98	1.36
Rating your satisfaction with your working life	2.96	1.36
Rating your stress levels	3.41	1.32
Rating of your wear and tear due to the exercise of your activity or trade	3.30	1.39
Rating your satisfaction with the income earned in your household during the pandemic	2.72	1.48
Assessing your quality of life during the pandemic	2.95	1.49

The lack of income for families affected their mental and psychological health. Living in precarious situations, they never thought they would experience significantly impacted their economic and family dynamics. Those who experienced these consequences most intensely were the children, as they felt more pressure from being unable to go out, play, or live their daily lives freely. The attitudes adopted by their parents to prevent contagion were affecting them:

“Not only was the economic situation affected but also our mental health, it was greatly affected because the economic situation also affects our mental health because when we do not have bread, we are affected (...) it is that also as I told you, mental health was affected, our pocketbook was affected since Playa Blanca is our main office because our economic source is Playa Blanca” GrupFocM_ART (IB).

“I have a 3-year-old child who was practically traumatized because I complied with everything I said about health, and if he grabbed and touched the fence 10 times, I washed his hands 10 times, then I felt when he cried as if with resentment when he greeted someone and had to go wash his hands; then I said it as

if with anger because I was also stressed and that too I was not (aware) that I was stressing him out more than me ” GrupFocH_DN2 (IB).

In the new stage of recovery of the economic sectors of Colombia, especially the tourism sector, the inhabitants of Barú Island have several concerns. The main one is associated with the possible decrease in sales (82.5%), followed by unemployment (57.0%) and the increase in coronavirus cases (51.9%), which could lead to a new confinement. Notably, the ability to implement biosafety protocols is not among their main concerns (Table 6). In addition, it is highlighted that, despite the adverse effects derived from COVID-19, informal vendors are convinced that, on an economic level, their near future is hopeful. 84.46% consider that the financial situation of their household will improve, compared to those who indicate that it will be the same (5.7%) or worsen (9.84) (Chart 3). Similar results were obtained among informal vendors of Johnny Cay, in San Andrés Island (Colombia) (Román Romero et al., 2022) (Table 6).

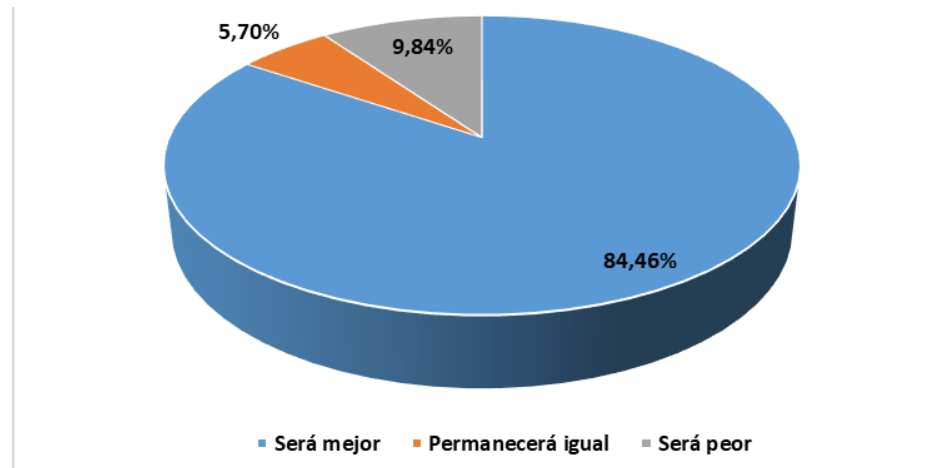
Table 6. The main concerns regarding their economic activity for the coming months are as follows: Informal workers in the tourism sector of Barú Island (Colombia)

Ask	Response options	
	Yes	No
Decrease in sales	85.2%	14.8%
Pay my suppliers, banks or lenders	21.2%	78.8%
Payment by debtors	8.2%	91.8%
Unemployment	57.0%	43.0%
Increase in coronavirus cases	51.9%	48.1%
Access to merchandise or raw materials	12.8%	87.2%
Access to new credits	7.4%	92.6%
Implementing protocols to continue business	15.3%	84.7%

Although most workers see a bright future, there are still some uncertainties about the savings recovery and better living conditions they have achieved in recent years (Chart 3). In many cases, fears about the future are also determined, according to the informal vendors themselves, by the lack of control over the beaches and by the entry of tourist operators with little or no ties to the islanders⁴. This situation affects not only pollution on the beach but also the prices and profits for the community of informal workers, who see this practice as a threat to their livelihood. In any case, they hope that once the economic recovery begins, this situation can be regulated by the competent authorities, given the danger it represents for the sustainability of their economic activities.

⁴ An example of this, obtained from the focus groups, is the annoyance of the islanders with the tourist operators who have their operations center in Cartagena de Indias, Barranquilla, and other cities and who send buses full of tourists to the island with all expenses included -negotiated in advance with restaurants-, imposing lower rates than those established.

Chart 3. Thinking about the near future regarding the economic situation of their household. Informal workers in the tourism sector of Barú Island (Colombia)



Conclusions

This article's purpose was to analyze the perception of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socioeconomic conditions and quality of life of vulnerable populations that offer tourist goods and/or services informally on Barú Island, Cartagena de Indias (Colombia). The findings showed that the impact on the affected island families was significant due to the pandemic, considering that activities towards and for tourism refer to a historical and cultural tradition of local families.

Considering the study on the Quality of Life (QoL) of the population, a positive perception is found about the choice of tourism work; that is, such work still implies the income to subsist, the management of their time, and the pleasure and motivation for said activity. However, it is observed that, based on the actual situation presented during the pandemic, obstacles arise towards the positive perception of the QoL since informal work implies that during economic and social crises, there are no resources or help to sustain themselves. This directly affects their QoL, not only from the objective point of view - lack of employment, decrease in supplies, among others - but also from the subjective point of view, since the families involved express that they do not have guarantees against external threats from their environment.

From the above, the different effects observed in this article emerge, which indicate how Barú workers assume, beyond the economic, the damages in their CV. The comprehensive analysis of this construct then allows us to combine the objective with the subjective. It is understood that the population could see more effects in access to goods - from the objective side of the CV -, taking into account that this situation disrupts not only their income and sources of employment but also the life project of them and their children; the impossibility of opening their businesses; the loss of savings to project their well-being and the difficulty in accessing food. This perception is accompanied by the informality of the island's labor processes.

According to the analysis of informal processes in terms of work, it is evident that a crisis - converted into an external and unforeseen threat such as the COVID-19 pandemic - generates a negative perception of the CV by decreasing the collective feeling of security in daily life and, at the same time, by increasing stress indicators, that is, in the affectation of their mental health. This coincides with the theoretical position of Sen (2000) regarding what is expected of human development since it is not only from the economic point of view but is multidimensional, integral and adaptive (Baquero & J., 2009; Cuadra,

Flores & Orellana, 2013; Herrera & Gutiérrez-Goiria, 2021; López & Arroyo, 2012; UNDP-PNUD, 2014; Tezón & Guataqui, 2020).

In this way, the analysis considers the need for a comprehensive analysis of the QoL (Ardila, 2003). That is to say; if only the objective aspects of the QoL are addressed, the situations can be expressed as positive in pursuit of the satisfaction of working in what they like or in what their families left them as a legacy. However, to consider a comprehensive diagnosis of the QoL, the above must be articulated with the subjective aspects since, in many cases, access to informal work would not imply genuine satisfaction, which grants human dignity to the subjects involved. (Castellano & López, 2021; López, 2009). Following this line of thought, informal tourism workers in Barú provide a clear example where guidance, protection, and criticism are neglected to put their rights into operation to generate a better QoL in the most vulnerable populations (Neves da Silva et al., 2022; Velarde-Jurado & Avila-Figueroa, 2002).

Now, in terms of expectations, many respondents say that things will improve soon, which can be explained by the increase in the number of tourists that the island has had in recent decades due to its consolidation as a sun and beach destination at a national and international level, compared to other traditional activities -agriculture and fishing-. Although these expectations agree with the findings of Román, Maza and Mantilla (2022) in another island region, for the inhabitants of Barú, there are still some uncertainties about the recovery of their savings, as well as the conditions of well-being that they had achieved in recent years thanks to tourism, just before the arrival of the pandemic.

From the above, it is reflected that, when evaluating life situations, it is necessary to take into account whether the subject accesses his rights and how he does so in order to know what perceptions, feelings, and representations this situation generates. Thus, once the objective and subjective aspects of the CV are articulated, we can begin to think about evaluations and interventions based on the reality that affects each subject in his community.

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