



# Poor-Quality Employment: Who Is Deprived in Our Labour Markets?

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RESEARCH



## ABSTRACT

Job quality is becoming a higher policy priority among governments in both developing and advanced economies. In public policy and economics a ‘good’ job tends to mean a well-paid job. Other social sciences, however, recognise that employment is a multidimensional phenomenon that requires careful conceptualisation and measurement to account for other employment conditions that also have a significant impact on the wellbeing of workers. These include job stability, types of contracts, and autonomy levels.

This paper summarises recent research on this topic, addresses issues of data availability, and presents empirical evidence from both Latin America and Europe to show how multidimensional deprivations or clustered disadvantages in the labour market can be measured by means of a dedicated measure of poor-quality employment. It illustrates how, in both regions, this concept better captures deprivation in labour markets than simpler indicators of wages or informal employment, which are unidimensional and do not reflect the fact that many workers are deprived in more than one aspect of their employment conditions. This conclusion should matter to public policy, which tends to focus on different aspects of deprivation separately, if at all, without considering that multidimensional deprivations compound each other and thus affect the well-being of workers very negatively.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Job quality is becoming a higher policy priority among governments in both developing and advanced economies. This has led the UN to include a goal in the list of Sustainable Development Goals that not only focuses on full employment, but also on the objective of “Decent Work”. In advanced economies, the increased flexibilization of employment relationships has long generated debates about ‘bad jobs’ [1] and the new ‘precariat’ [2]. While the emergence of more flexible employment relationships has led to higher levels of job rotation in developing and emerging economies [3], generating a significant proportion of short-term or subcontracted employment within the formal sector [4], informal employment has not decreased as the proponents of deregulation had hoped [5].

The extensive literature on job quality has illustrated that wages generally do not compensate for employment conditions that are considered detrimental to a worker’s well-being, such as unstable and insecure employment (e.g., zero-hour contracts, working in the gig economy, or being hired by a third party), physical or mental health risks, or a lack of career prospects [6]. Analysing the relationship between employment conditions and wages in the USA, Maestas et al. found that ‘accounting for differences in preferences for working conditions often exacerbates wage differentials and intensifies measures of wage inequality’ [7]. Yalonetzky et al. found similar evidence using data from Europe [8].

These developments raise three important questions that we cannot easily answer at present. The first one is *diagnostic*: if wages alone should not be used as an indicator of job quality, how do we then conceptualise and define poor-quality employment? Further, how do we hierarchise the quality of employment—who are the *most deprived* workers in a labour market?

The second is one of *micro policy*: how can we best help and support workers in bad jobs, especially those who have difficulty finding better ones? What can the different social actors (governments, employers, and unions) do to improve the employment conditions of the labour force? More succinctly, what should the regulation of employment look like?

Third are concerns relating to *macro policy*: how do employment conditions and other socio-economic outcomes interact? Does poor-quality employment decrease with economic growth? How are poverty, inequality, and poor-quality employment related? Does poor-quality employment undermine productivity as well as welfare states in advanced economies? In developing countries, is poor-quality employment making it impossible for governments to establish functioning social protection systems?

It is therefore not enough to monitor the quantity of jobs, but also their quality. Specifically, policy makers need to know *how many* workers have poor-quality jobs. Establishing such a baseline is particularly important in the light of developments that will have a significant impact on labour markets, such as new technologies, migration, or population ageing. We must also examine whether these shifts (and the changing nature of work more generally) will deteriorate or improve the employment conditions that sustain our welfare states, given that the latter largely require stable contributions and taxes generated in the labour market [9, 10].

This paper will first address some of the problems associated with the conceptualisation and measurement of poor-quality employment, and then discuss available data sources. Throughout, we discuss both emerging and advanced economies, highlighting differences and policy implications. Second, we propose a methodology for defining and measuring multidimensional deprivations in the labour market, illustrated with empirical examples from Latin America and Europe. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this approach for policy makers.

## 2. CONCEPTUALISATION: DEFINING POOR-QUALITY EMPLOYMENT

Sam has a stable job with a zero-hour contract,<sup>1</sup> earns the minimum wage, and works irregular hours and shifts. Marisol has a temporary job with regular hours that pays 1.5 times the

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<sup>1</sup> A zero-hour contract is a type of employment contract used in UK, wherein the employer is not required to specify a minimum number of working hours that the employee may be employed for. Since 1998, these contracts must pay at least the minimum wage and should provide basic social security benefits [11]. However, they are known for not providing workers with a secure and stable level of income. Workers often find themselves working for multiple employers and juggling erratic work schedules along with their family life.

minimum wage, but that will end in three months. Kaali is self-employed in the gig economy and works approximately 60 hours per week for three different platforms, and his earnings fluctuate significantly depending on demand for his services.

Do Sam, Marisol, and Kaali have bad jobs? Who has the *most* precarious job? And how can social or public policy best support them?

Although broad agreement on how job quality may be conceptualised does exist [12, 13],<sup>2</sup> there is no official or internationally established measure of what constitutes a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ job [1, 6, 13]. Such a definition requires establishing a cut-off line across the labour market to define which combination of which employment conditions is not acceptable. In advanced economies, the closest the literature has come to thinking about this is by defining an ‘in-work poverty’ threshold. This threshold can be defined in relative terms (e.g., as 60% of median incomes as in the EU) or in absolute terms (e.g., as a minimum or living wage).<sup>3</sup> However, in-work poverty is a unidimensional concept that only takes account of wages. Implicitly, it assumes that low wages are an indicator of poor employment conditions, but it does not consider that the situation of a low-income worker with an unstable job is significantly more precarious and perhaps worse than that of a worker with ‘only’ low wages. In fact, research shows that workers with low earnings typically *also* suffer multiple other deprivations. Conversely, other workers face very poor employment conditions, even if they are not classified as low income [16].

In developing countries, the informal sector has served as a cut-off line that separates good jobs from bad jobs.<sup>4</sup> According to this definition, the informal sector encompasses workers employed in very small businesses or who are self-employed. Those in informal employment have few of the rights associated with employment, including minimum wages or contributions to social protection systems [17]. Conceptually, the informal sector is a multidimensional definition, which comprises the size of the employer and regulatory considerations. It further *assumes* a negative relationship between multiple job characteristics.<sup>5</sup> Such an assumption can create difficulties: first, jobs in the informal sector can be quite good, provided they generate enough income for a worker, especially as emerging economies develop [4]. Second, the growing prevalence of non-standard employment contracts has made many formal jobs very precarious. Third, in countries where the level of informal jobs is high (e.g., more than 50%), governments will find it difficult to establish policy priorities and identify those workers who are most in need of targeted support.<sup>6</sup>

It is therefore important to distinguish between conceptualising ‘job quality’ (or whichever term may be used to describe it) and poor-quality employment. Job quality refers to the multiple characteristics of a job that are desirable, while poor-quality employment refers to a subset of jobs with characteristics that are considered undesirable or detrimental to a worker’s well-being (see discussion below).<sup>7</sup> However, key to defining such a “distinction” is the question of *perspective*. Are we considering the criteria of governments, employers, unions, or workers?

The wide array of academic and institutional perspectives on job quality helps us think about which job characteristics contribute negatively to a worker’s well-being, to the economy, or to society as a whole. We must also define which employment conditions matter to which social actor, and how conflicting interests between them can be managed in the light of their broader socio-economic impact. For example, deregulated labour markets and flexible employment conditions are generally considered essential in the modern labour market. Employers want

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<sup>2</sup> Green et al. for example use earnings, prospects (e.g., job security), intrinsic job quality (e.g., intensity or autonomy), and working time quality as index dimensions [14].

<sup>3</sup> Definitions of working poor are generally measured by means of a relative cut-off line, which is not very useful when median incomes may decrease in a cost-of-living crisis [15]. Meanwhile, there is no international official definition of what constitutes a living wage in different countries. Only NGOs have attempted to produce such definitions (see for example [www.wageindicator.org](http://www.wageindicator.org)), but these are not based on official data.

<sup>4</sup> Even in the case of advanced economies, it is important to note that many people may be working informally (e.g., undocumented migrants or platform economy workers).

<sup>5</sup> The concept informal sector assumes that a worker has no contract, works in a small firm or is self-employed, and does not contribute to social security systems. However, precise definitions of informality vary and have changed over time.

<sup>6</sup> India’s National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme discussed by Kabber in this volume is an example of a policy that targets the most vulnerable workers, but so far only does this based on household income.

<sup>7</sup> In the case of the UK, the Work Foundation has proposed such a measure of ‘Insecure Jobs’ [18].

to be able to match their supply of labour with business cycles and profits. Governments, however, require low unemployment rates *and* employment relationships that contribute to sustaining social protection mechanisms, tax systems, as well as economic productivity. Unions require legislation that supports their efforts to represent workers and to organise collectively. Meanwhile, individual workers may have very different needs depending on their own personal circumstances: some may want long-term stable employment, while others may prefer part-time or flexible working arrangements that can be accommodated with family life, education, health, and age requirements. Importantly, individuals may be willing to sacrifice wages in exchange for better employment conditions, such as a reduced number of hours worked [7].

Reconciling these sometimes contradictory approaches and perspectives in an effort to measure job quality is difficult, not least because it would require significant improvements in the way we generate internationally comparable data on labour markets.<sup>8</sup> As Muñoz de Bustillo et al. show, measures of job quality developed by unions, employers, or governments can look very different [6 p87–150]. Equally, the literature on the subjective (and potentially adaptive) preferences of workers provides us with unclear evidence, in part because they fluctuate little over time or across countries and because they show no clear relationship with objective criteria of job quality.<sup>9</sup>

At the risk of oversimplifying, any conceptualisation of what constitutes poor-quality employment would have to whittle down the long list of variables that the different social actors consider important into a relatively short list. The literature on multidimensional poverty, which has had to struggle with similar issues of conceptualisation, resolves this conundrum by using normative value judgements based on some form of collectively expressed consensus (such as the Sustainable Development Goals) as well as consultations with experts and stakeholders to establish the dimensions, indicators, weights, and cut-off lines that compose multidimensional poverty [20 p192]. In regard to employment, such a process also involves drawing on the judgements of experts (e.g., stakeholders in the labour market), empirical results (e.g., on particular aspects of job quality), deliberative insights (e.g., the qualitative literature on job quality or worker focus groups), legislative and regulatory specifications, theoretical inputs (such as the capability approach on the instrumental and intrinsic value of particular job characteristics), practical constraints (such as data limitations), and criteria of policy relevance (such as policy or political priorities for allocating resources).

Ultimately, it is the mandate of governments to act in the interests of the common good. In labour markets, this means protecting workers from employment conditions that could have a detrimental impact on their lives, ensuring that the welfare states and other social protection mechanisms are sustainable, encouraging productivity and investment in human capital, and serving as an insurer of last resort. Governments also often responsible for mediating between contradictory interests of the social actors (for example, by negotiating minimum wage levels). A normative framework for defining ‘bad jobs’ should therefore mirror these concerns and this perspective, especially as any such definition should be designed to inform public policy.<sup>10</sup>

Before discussing how such a public policy perspective translates into definitions, we must look at available sources of data as these also determine what can and cannot be measured.

### 3. DATA AVAILABILITY AND ITS INCIDENCE ON MEASUREMENT

As data are central to this discussion, this paper dedicates an entire section to discussing how we measure the performance of labour markets. It is important to highlight from the outset that any measure of deprivation in the labour market requires *individual level data from a single source*. Consequently, as this section will show, it is very difficult to obtain internationally comparable data for this purpose.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As both the ILO and the EU found in their respective attempts to define decent work and job quality. See the discussion in [19] for details.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Muñoz de Bustillo et al. [6 p245], who relate their European Index of Job Quality to the variable job satisfaction.

<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that other social actors should not define their own indicators if their perspective or purpose is different from that of the government.

<sup>11</sup> Green et al. (2024) provide an excellent discussion of the importance of generating better data on job quality [42].

Broadly speaking, we currently possess of four different types of data: labour force surveys, household surveys, ad hoc employment surveys, and administrative data. Each set of data responds to different objectives and does not easily connect with other datasets, making it difficult to link up information. The following discussion hopes to illustrate this point.

Labour force surveys (LFS) were originally set up to measure employment and unemployment. As both variables are of vital importance to models of macroeconomic performance and in fact play a role in setting interest rates, significant policy effort has gone into measuring this.<sup>12</sup> Most countries also use their LFS to measure wage levels. These surveys are based on large samples and are carried out frequently (e.g., every three months). In the case of Europe, the EU-LFS database also contains some information on employment conditions (such as detail on temporary jobs, shift work, hours and overtime worked, the existence of a second job, and job duration), but the list is still quite limited compared to the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) discussed below. The UK's LFS also includes some variables on employment conditions, but falls short in its gathering of earnings data for the self-employed. Here, the most precise survey of the quantity of employment is the employer-based Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE). However, ASHE gathers little additional information on employment conditions.

A second group of data is household surveys, which across the EU have been harmonised in the European statistics on income and living conditions (EU-Silc) database. Although the exact phrasing of questions often varies from country to country, they generally include quite detailed data on different types of income and earnings and some information on employment conditions. They have the key advantage that employment data can be linked to a greater number of personal and household characteristics, such as the number of dependents. Although also based on large samples, the surveys are often not carried out with the requisite frequency required to analyse developments in the labour market in a timely manner. In addition, household surveys are sometimes longitudinal or are complemented by panel surveys, which are ideal for understanding employment trajectories.

It is important to point out that advanced economies do not systematically and regularly measure informal work. This is important in the context of changing labour markets, for example as a result of the emerging gig economy or an increasing number of migrants, who are more likely to work informally. Official estimates suggest that around 11% of employment in the private sector in the EU is informal, ranging from 2.7% in the UK to 20.8% in Poland [21].

A third group of surveys are *ad hoc* surveys of employment conditions. Here we find both surveys of workers and employers, sometimes also unions. Often, these surveys address specific issues, such as workplace relations, employment conditions, health, skills, and vocational training (e.g., UK's Employment and Skills Survey). The key problem with these surveys is twofold: they are undertaken irregularly and they are based on smaller samples. For example, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) undertakes a comprehensive survey on employment conditions across 32 countries. The European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) includes a broad range of variables, including income, job stability, unpleasant working conditions, task autonomy, career prospects, and work intensity.<sup>13</sup> The limited sample size of around 1000 households per country means that any analysis of sub-groups in a population is not statistically robust (e.g., by age groups, industrial sector, migrant status, education level, regions, or ethnic minorities). In addition, it is only carried out every five years, which makes it impossible to track specific changes in the labour market that develop quite quickly, such as the boom of the gig economy.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the EWCS has been instrumental in furthering the study, conceptualisation, and measurement of job quality in Europe and beyond.

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<sup>12</sup> The United States labour force surveys perhaps the best example of this type of survey, as it includes 500 pages on measuring the quantity of jobs, but almost no questions on their quality. See Carlin and Soskice (2024) [43].

<sup>13</sup> In 2021, the EWCS was carried out by telephone and is therefore called the EWCTS. The survey covers EU Member States, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

<sup>14</sup> It is equally impossible to track changes in job quality over time in relationship to other developments, such as macroeconomic growth or the unemployment and participation rates.

Finally, governments are also increasingly making administrative data available to researchers. While administrative databases capture very precise information that allows for an extremely granular *and* longitudinal analysis as they include an entire population over time, these data do not include information on which governments do not hold administrative records. An obvious example is any type of informal employment that may be captured by surveys but will not be included in administrative records.

Even better are databases which link up survey and administrative sources so that official records can be complemented with survey data. And in the best cases, administrative records can be linked up from different databases (e.g., education, employment, health, and pension records) *and* complemented with survey data.<sup>15</sup> However, some governments have progressed further along this route than others, which are lagging and have not yet integrated their administrative records, let alone made them available to researchers through transparent procedures.

These four different types of data, with their respective advantages and disadvantages, mean that it is difficult to measure job quality or poor-quality employment effectively and robustly across a broad range of countries.<sup>16</sup> This paper frequently cites examples from the EU, which has at least harmonised databases from its member states (e.g. household or labour force surveys). Beyond the EU, it is even more difficult to obtain internationally comparable data on earnings, employment conditions, and personal or household characteristics, as surveys are not routinely harmonised across regions. In Latin America, for example, harmonised labour force or household surveys are *not publicly* available.

Given the complexities of this data landscape, methods used to inform the debate on job quality were initially based on dashboards that collated indicators from different data sources.<sup>17</sup> For example, they included labour force participation and unemployment rates from labour force surveys, data on job stability and social security contributions from household surveys, and variables on employment conditions (e.g., autonomy, job prospects or work-life balance) from elsewhere. Such dashboards have the advantage that they can present information from different sources alongside each other, but their use of aggregated macro-level indicators like unemployment rates means they are inadequate for assessing the quality of employment at the level of the individual worker.

In addition, as Leschke and Watt have argued, they are not good for informing public policy and can be difficult to interpret [25]. For example, if wages go up but job rotation and/or the proportion of short-term contracts (or informal employment) increases, has overall job quality improved or deteriorated? [13, 25, 26, 27].<sup>18</sup>

Some studies have therefore proceeded to aggregate measures of job quality [14, 28, 29]. These methods allow policymakers to track whether job quality has improved or not over time, as well as permitting the analysis of certain subgroups within the population, such as male versus female workers, younger versus older workers, ethnic minorities and migrants, or across particular groups in the population. Measuring job quality as an aggregate measure also allows for the analysis of trade-offs between job quantity and quality, or between other variables such as access to collective organisation and bargaining or indicators of worker well-being [6 p449].

What such aggregate measures fail to do is to consider the idea that poor employment conditions may compound each other—that there is cumulative disadvantage with the problem that workers like Sam, Marisol, and Kaali are possibly affected by several poor-quality employment conditions *at the same time*.

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15 See for example the Chilean Registro de Información Social.

16 Limited internationally comparable data means that reports from institutions such as the ILO or World Bank still do not include variables on basic employment conditions such as types of contracts, job durations, or contributions to social security, let alone more complex characteristics of employment such as task autonomy, job prospects, or health risks [22, 23].

A review of the World Bank's Development Indicators database reveals that the only employment variables available are related to labour force participation (by education level, sex, and industrial sector), unemployment rates and vulnerable employment, where the latter is defined as 'contributing family workers and own-account workers as a percentage of total employment' [23].

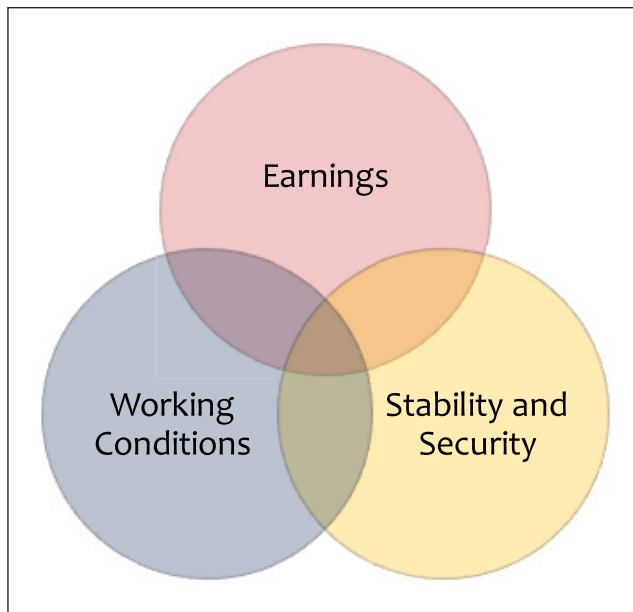
17 See UNECE [24] for a list of such measures.

18 For a detailed review of these methodologies see Muñoz de Bustillo et al. [6], which reviews the existing indicators, but also highlight their shortcomings.

## 4. METHODOLOGY: MEASURING POOR-QUALITY EMPLOYMENT

Given the need for a multidimensional perspective, including drawing parallels between multidimensional poverty and poor-quality employment in the labour market, this paper uses the Alkire and Foster (AF) method for constructing a synthetic measure of poor-quality employment [30]. Although this method is used most frequently to measure multidimensional poverty [31], it has also been widely applied to many other subjects, such as health, social exclusion, or vulnerability. The AF method is a well-known axiomatic strategy used to summarise multidimensional information using a counting approach with a double cut-off.

The AF method first establishes the dimensions that constitute a specific multidimensional measure. In this case, and following the OECD, the three dimensions selected are generally deemed important by the job quality literature [27]. Figure 1 presents a visual illustration of how these three dimensions potentially overlap.



**Figure 1** Dimensions of Poor-Quality Employment.

These three dimensions can then be populated with available variables from a particular survey. For example, excessively high levels of job rotation in a particular country may make it desirable for the 'stability and security' dimension to include the variable job tenure. This is especially important when the duration of employment entitles workers to specific rights or benefits such as maternity leave, severance pay, or unemployment insurance protection. In other countries, such as those in the Middle East, extremely high temperatures make it undesirable or dangerous to work outdoors and without protection. Here, the variable 'place of work' should be included in the 'working conditions' dimension, taking into account the character of the workplace.<sup>19</sup> And in Europe, where more data on employment conditions is available, we can potentially include variables on work intensity, job prospects, or autonomy.

Any official proposals, such as those from governments or international institutions on measuring poor-quality employment should engage with relevant and expert stakeholders to ensure that the component dimensions, indicators and cut-off lines of such a measure reflect a high degree of consensus among the social actors and the relevant governments.

The dimensions included in the measures below are based on the framework developed by the OECD, which considers earnings, employment security, and working environment.<sup>20</sup> We have adapted this framework to accommodate data availability in each region (Latin America and Europe). Equal weights are assigned to each dimension, and equal weights are also assigned to each sub-dimension. Once the dimensions and variables that compose a measure of deprivation have been selected, the AF method uses a double cut-off strategy that allows the measure to focus on those workers with more overlapping deprivations [20].

<sup>19</sup> Based on discussions with stakeholders in Egypt, held at the American University of Cairo in February, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> A precise formulation of this methodology can be found in Sehnbruch et al. [4].

The first cut-off or deprivation cut-off of the AF method dichotomizes each achievement vector to identify those individuals who are deprived in each indicator. Then, the weighted sum of deprivations provides a counting vector that captures the accumulated distribution of deprived conditions. A counting vector computes the sum of the weighted number of deprivations suffered by an individual, denoted as  $ci$ . A second cut-off ( $k$ ) is a threshold that identifies individuals in poor-quality employment. Specifically, if an individual has a counting vector which is higher or equal than the cut-off  $k \geq 33.33\%$  they will be considered as having poor-quality employment.

The headcount ratio ( $H$ ) is the sum of the individuals who are in poor-employment quality (i.e. having at least  $k$  deprived dimensions) compared to the total population of workers under consideration. The average deprivation share or intensity ( $A$ ) is the average number of weighted deprived dimensions ( $ci$ ) among those considered to have poor-quality of employment.

The poor-quality employment measure ( $M_o$ ) is the product between the percentage of individuals identified as being deprived and the average deprivation share ( $M_o = H \times A$ ).  $M_o$  is what this paper refers to as the measure of poor-quality employment. In other words, it is the weighted sum of deprived dimensions among those who hold poor-quality jobs in relation to the total number of possible deprived dimensions for all individuals. This measure is decomposable into subgroups and contributions from each dimension and indicator to the overall result (Alkire & Foster, 2011). This decomposability permits the identification of which groups in the labour force are more likely to be deprived and which employment characteristics contribute more to this result. This property can be useful in defining policy priorities for improving employment conditions. The following section illustrates how such a measure would work with two examples from Latin America and Europe.

## 5. EMPIRICAL EXAMPLES

This section presents examples from Latin America and Europe to illustrate the methodology detailed above in terms of its results and potential applications in public policy. The purpose of including examples from both advanced and emerging economies is to show how the methodology can be adapted to the respective contexts of different countries or regions, including the normative value judgements that underlie the definition of such a measure.

### 5.1. LATIN AMERICA

Within [Table 1](#) below, all available employment variables harmonised for Latin America have been included.<sup>21</sup> The only countries omitted from this study are Nicaragua and Venezuela due to data quality issues, with the measure presented below adapted from Sehnbruch et al. [4]. Due to data limitations the dimension ‘employment stability’ had to be replaced by a composite variable that reflects the occupational status of workers, namely, whether they are wage-earners with a contract or are self-employed. Also, the variable of ‘tenure’ used by Sehnbruch et al. [4] as a proxy measure of employment stability is not available for all countries in the region. Finally, the only comparable variables that can be included in a Latin American measure of ‘bad jobs’ on working conditions are contributions to a pension system and working hours. Here, the contributions serve as a proxy for other benefits (e.g., health and unemployment insurance, or maternity benefits), while excessive working hours is a basic measure of work-life balance among other issues. If this method were to be applied to individual Latin American countries, further variables could be added to the measure [4, 17, 32].

As discussed above, the overall cut-off line for this measure is one third ( $k = 33\%$ ). To be considered as having poor-quality employment, a worker must be deprived in at least one dimension of the overall measure (e.g. earnings, occupational status or employment conditions). The level of deprivation is then identified by the intensity score. The intensity score  $A$  then measures how deprived a worker is.

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<sup>21</sup> The table explains which variables were included in the measure of poor-quality employment for the Latin American region, the reasons why they were included, and which cut-offs and weights were chosen. For a detailed discussion of how these weights were determined, see [4, 32].



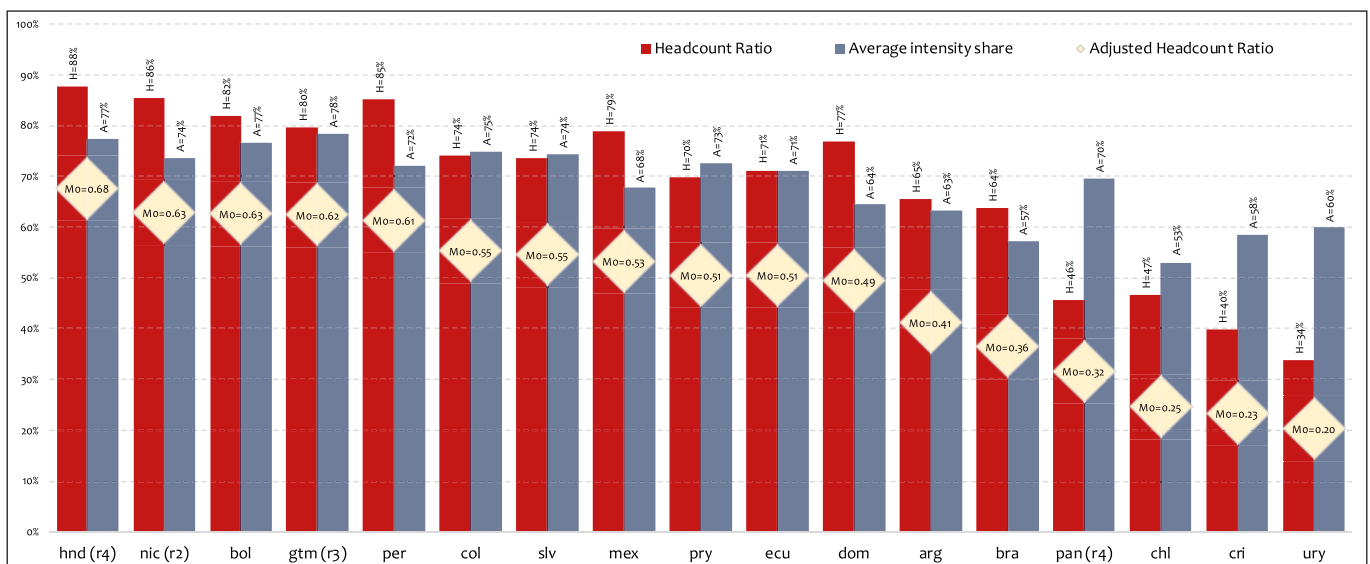
DIMENSIONS	VARIABLE AND CUT-OFF	JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION OF VARIABLE	JUSTIFICATION FOR CUT-OFF
Earnings from employment (1/3)	Total monthly wage less than 6 basic food baskets	Earnings from labour are not just a resource and crucial to not being classified as “working poor”, but also serve as an indicator of an individual worker’s worth in the labour market as they tend to reflect multiple worker characteristics (such as gender, age, education level, or years of experience).	6 food baskets were chosen because they allow for one worker and one dependent (which is the Latin American average) to live above the poverty line with a small amount of extra income, which is necessary to function in the labour market.
Occupational Status (1/3)	No formal written contract, or non-professional self-employed/ own account workers	The occupational status of a worker (dependent vs independent) serves as an indicator of the legal rights and entitlements associated with a job.	Informal wage-earners are not protected by employment legislation,  have no employment rights or collective representation, and would find it difficult to sustain any kind of legal recourse in relation to their employment situation.  The non-professional self-employed are neither insured nor protected in case of an inability to work.
Other Employment conditions (1/3)	No contributions to a pension system <sub>b</sub> . (1/6)	Pension contributions serve as a proxy variable for health, accident, disability or unemployment insurance as contributions to these insurance systems are normally linked together in a single payment mechanism. These contributions are essential to sustaining both individual resources over the life-cycle and social protection systems.	Individuals not contributing to the pension system are unlikely to achieve sustainable income over the life-cycle and will require government support if they have a health issue, retire or otherwise become unable to work. Note that the self-employed are not obliged to contribute by law but may do so on a voluntary basis, although few self-employed workers do.
	Works more than 48 hours (1/6)	This variable serves as a proxy for work-life balance and reflects concern over the strong positive correlation between long hours and negative impact a workers’ physical and mental health.	This cut-off is based on statutory working hour limits in Latin America.  Note that data on involuntary part-time employment is not available.

**Table 1** Dimensions, variables, cut-offs and weights.

**Notes:** *Weights in brackets. a. This variable is not available for Chile and Bolivia (2020), Honduras (2019) and Costa Rica (2008). B. Due to data limitations, the variable affiliation to a pension system was used in the cases of Ecuador, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Bolivia and El Salvador.*

Figure 2 below shows the results of this measure for all Latin American countries included in the study, where H is the headcount ratio (the total proportion of deprived workers), A is the intensity ratio that describes how deprived they are on average, and  $M_0$  is the final measure of deprivation that combines the headcount ratio with the intensity score ( $H \times A = M_0$ ). The graph shows that headcount ratios are quite high in the region overall, although they drop as countries develop.

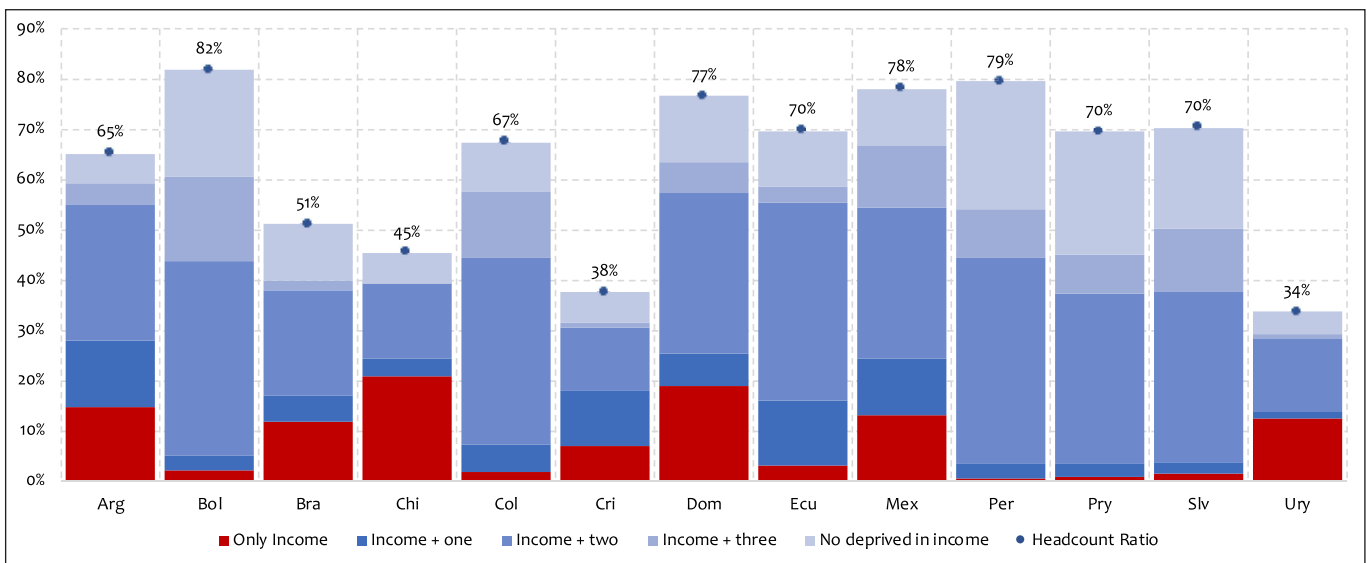
**Figure 2** Headcount Ratios (H), Intensity Scores (A), and Multidimensional Employment Deprivations ( $M_0$ ).



In most countries, headcount ratios are higher than the intensity scores, except in the four most developed countries in the region (Panama, Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay). Therefore overall, the high intensity scores in the region suggest that most workers are deprived in more than one dimension, which means that labour policies should take this into account. It is not enough just to look at poor workers or informal workers.

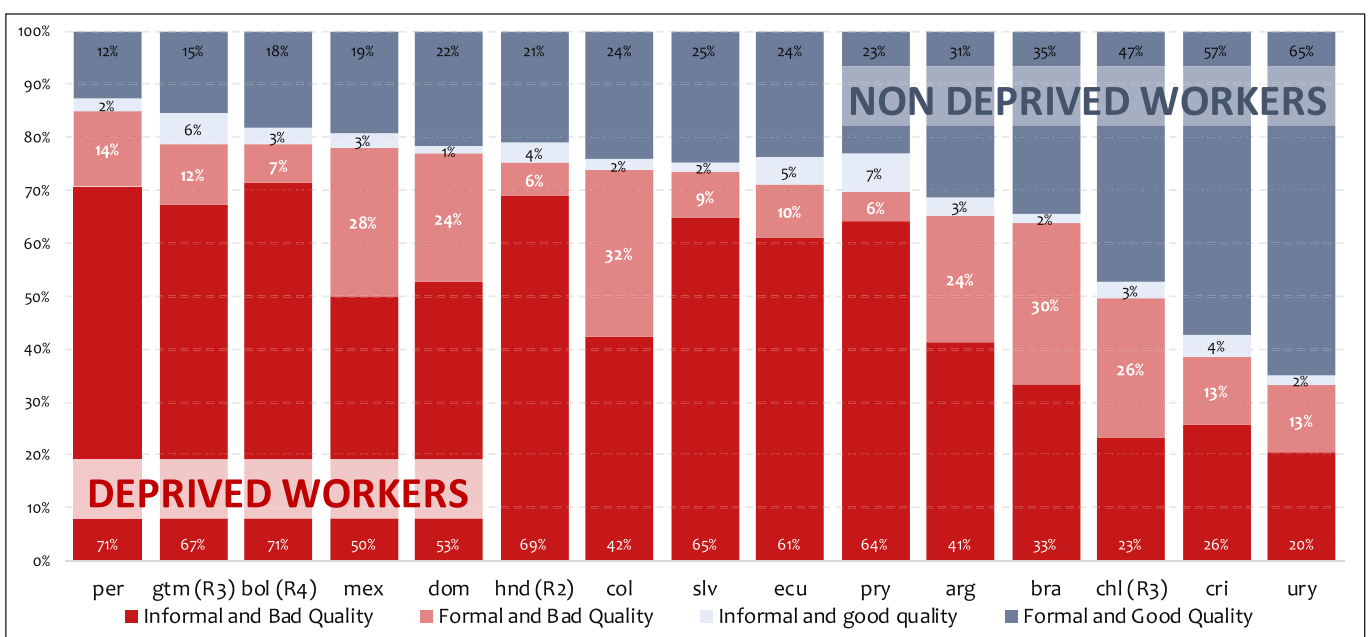
Figure 3 below illustrates this point further by showing that the vast majority of workers in Latin America are deprived in terms of their income and *at least* one other variable. In fact, only a small proportion of workers are *solely* earnings deprived (red segment), while a more significant proportion of workers are deprived across multiple non-pecuniary dimensions (light blue segment). Again, policymakers should take this multidimensionality into account. These are the workers who will find their well-being particularly inhibited by compounding poor employment conditions, which are more likely to trap them in conditions of deprivation for prolonged periods [33].

Figure 3 The Multidimensionality of Deprivation.



One of the key questions that introducing a new measure of socio-economic performance raises is always whether the measure adds something new to our current understanding of the issue. To illustrate that multidimensional poor-quality employment in the labour market is a more precise measure than previous definitions of the informal sector, Figure 4 below illustrates how the two are related. We can see that most informal workers indeed have poor-quality jobs. However, a significant proportion of formal employment also falls into this category. In fact, in some of the more developed countries of the region, where a majority of jobs are formal (such

Figure 4 Informal Sector vs. Multidimensional Deprivation. Source: Authors' own calculations with the BADHOG database (CEPAL). Calculations are based on the most recent available year of data: R2: 2013-2014, R3: 2018, R4: 2019.



as Colombia, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile), a very significant proportion of these formal jobs are of poor quality. Overall, levels of poor-quality employment are therefore significantly higher than levels of informality in *all* countries.

## 2. EUROPE

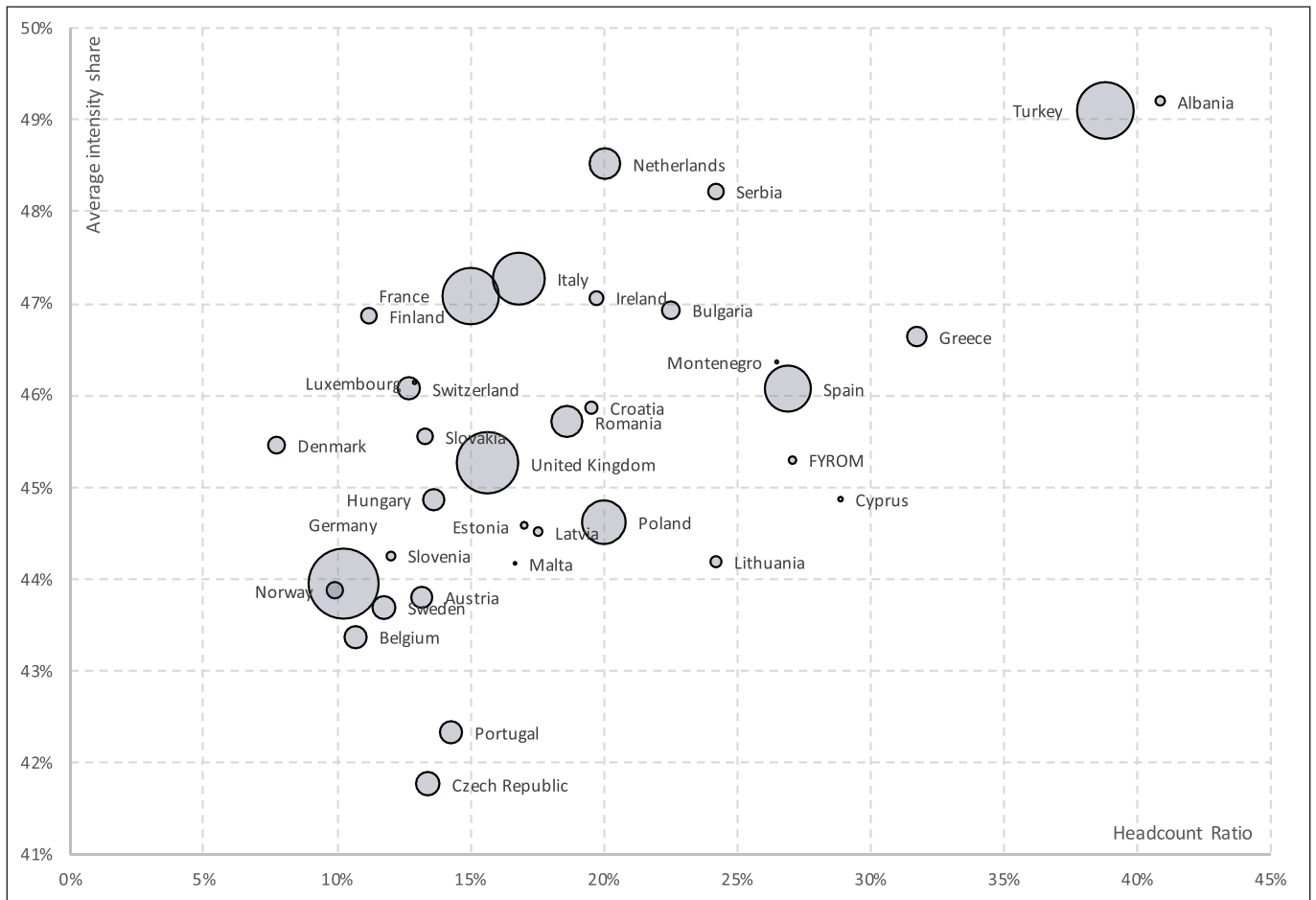
In the European case, a more complex measure of poor-quality employment can be established due to the availability of comparable data on a broader range of employment conditions. Table 2 below lays out which variables could be included in such a measure, along with their weights, cut-offs, and the justification for including them.<sup>22</sup> As discussed in the methodological section, the overall cut-off line for this measure is also  $k = 33\%$ . And again, the intensity score  $A$  then measures *how* deprived a worker is.

**Table 2** Dimensions, Indicators, Weights<sup>1</sup> and Cut-offs.

<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

DIMENSION	VARIABLE, (WEIGHTS) AND CUT-OFF	JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION OF VARIABLE	JUSTIFICATION FOR CUT-OFF
<b>Income (1/3)</b>	<b>Earnings per hour (1/3):</b> below 60% of the country's median earnings	Earnings from labour are not just a resource and crucial to not being classified as "working poor", but also serve as an indicator of an individual worker's "value" in the labour market.	60% of median earnings is used as a standard definition of in work poverty in Europe. Workers earning less than this amount are deemed to be earnings deprived.
<b>Employment stability (1/3)</b>	<b>Occupational status (1/6):</b> Employees with fixed-term contracts of less than 3 years, no contracts, or other forms of non-standard contracts such as agency work.  Or self-employed workers who had no better employment alternative	Occupational status serves as an indicator of the legal rights associated with a job. The self-employed generally are less well insured than wage-earners (e.g. in case of unemployment).	Wage-earners without permanent contracts are less protected than other workers by employment statutes, have less access to collective representation, and would find it difficult to sustain any kind of legal recourse in relation to their employment situation.  Not being voluntarily self-employed suggests a lack of alternative job prospects.
	<b>Duration of employment (1/6)</b> less than 24 months	Job stability is a key component for individual workers and has become an issue of concern as employment contracts have become more precarious. High job rotation undermines social security systems and much needed investments in human capital. Job tenure serves as an indicator of job stability.	2 years of job tenure are necessary for a worker to access rights to protection from dismissal, accumulates a minimal degree of rights to redundancy pay and unemployment insurance.
<b>Working conditions (1/3)</b>	<b>Exposure to health risks (1/12):</b> Individuals are exposed to two or more of the following more than half of the time: (1) Vibrations, (2) Noise, (3) High or low temperatures, (4) Breathing in fumes, vapours or chemicals	Vibrations, Noise, extreme temperatures and polluted air a leading causes of negative health implications such as spinal injuries, loss of hearing, cardiovascular and pulmonary diseases among others.	The evidence on the impact of working conditions that expose workers to health risks or are otherwise unpleasant have been extensively documented. However, their actual impact depends on whether workers have access to and also use appropriate safety equipment or other support mechanisms, which varies significantly by country or industrial sector. At present, there is no available data on this, and any cut off-line is therefore preliminary and requires further research.
	<b>Unpleasant conditions (1/12):</b> Individuals are exposed to two or more of the following more than half of the time: (1) Painful positions (2) Carrying heavy load or lifting/moving people (3) Dealing with angry clients (4) Working in situations that are emotionally disturbing	The working conditions grouped together in this variable are all leading causes of negative health consequences for workers, leading to both physical and mental strain.	
	<b>Task autonomy and work intensity (1/12):</b> Individuals are not able to choose any two of the following: (1) Order of tasks or method of work and (2) the speed or rate of work (3) do not have enough time to get the job done more than half of the time (4) working at high speed more than half of the time	The literature on task autonomy and work intensity suggests that workers feel a lack of control if they cannot exercise some degree of autonomy in their working lives (Karasek, 1979). In turn this has negative implications for the well-being of workers, especially when job demands are combined with a lack of autonomy.	Although the evidence on the impact of a lack of autonomy or high work intensity is extensive, precise standards of what is acceptable and what is not are difficult to find, in part because these variables include a degree of subjectivity. This cut-off line is therefore preliminary and requires further research.
	<b>Working hours (1/12):</b> involuntary part-time work (<20 hours) or excessive working hours (>48 hours).	This variable reflects concern over the strong positive correlation between long hours and job strain. Excessive working hours also negatively impact a workers' physical and mental health, particularly when they do not have control over their working hour schedule.	This cut-off is based on statutory working hour limits

22 The discussion of which cut-offs are used and why can be found in Yalonzky et al. [8].



**Figure 5** shows the results of this measure of poor-quality employment for European countries from 2015 (the last available data point with complete data), in terms of both their headcount ratios plotted against the intensity of their respective deprivation levels. Clearly, poor-quality employment levels vary significantly across countries within Europe, ranging from 7.7% in Denmark to 31.7% in Greece, with Turkey and Albania constituting outliers at around the 40% mark. Some Southern European countries (e.g., Spain, Greece, and Cyprus) have higher levels (closer to 30%). It is interesting to note that several Eastern European countries show both low levels of deprivation and intensity.

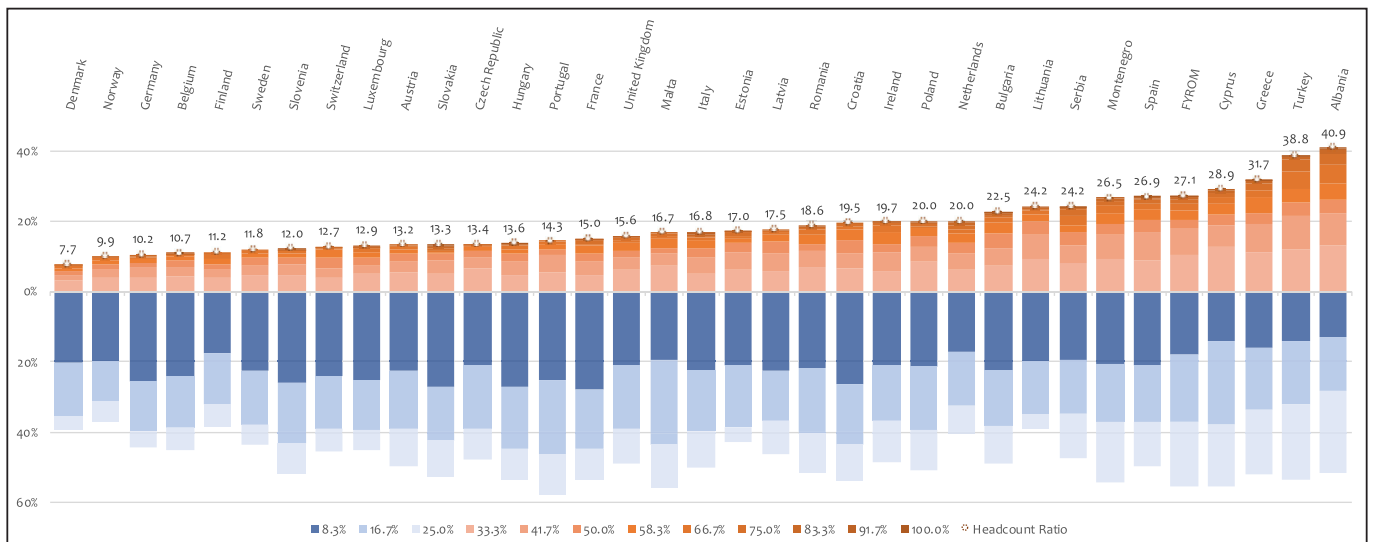
**Figure 5** Deprivation and Intensity of Deprivation in Europe.

Source: Authors' calculations with data from the European Working Conditions Survey, 2015. This is the last available data from this survey as the subsequent 2020 wave was disrupted by Covid.

In terms of the intensity of deprivation, the A scores again show that workers with poor-quality employment are deprived in more than one dimension and/or indicator, but the range of scores is tighter (42%–50%). **Figure 6** explores this issue in more detail.

As in Latin America, **Figure 6** below shows that most workers are deprived in more than one dimension or variable that likely compound each other. The different shades of red in the graph illustrate different levels of intensity of deprivation, while the blue bars below the deprivation

**Figure 6** Multidimensional Deprivation and Non-Deprivation.



line show that even some non-deprived workers experience some poor employment conditions. As the overall measure includes more variables than in Latin America, a greater combination of deprivations and non-deprivations is possible.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper is based on an emerging body of literature that discusses the conceptualisation and measurement of job quality and poor-quality employment in the labour market [34]. Most recently, a study by the World Bank applied this method to a group of 40 developing countries, illustrating that it is a useful tool of analysis in different contexts of development [35]. This literature shows that it is both possible and useful to measure multidimensional employment deprivations regardless of whether countries are developed or not. In both cases, policy makers often ignore the fact that workers are generally deprived in more than one aspect of their employment conditions, and that such deprivations compound each other. Several conclusions that are relevant to policymakers can be gleaned from this work.

First, most empirical studies of this method reflect a compromise between conceptualisation and data constraints. From the discussion on data sources presented above, it should be evident that governments and international institutions should be investing more in generating better, more comparable data on employment conditions and on job characteristics. This is especially important in a context of measuring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals defined by the United Nations. Without such measurement, progress is a vague objective. Employment conditions have been neglected compared to other areas of social development such as income levels or educational outcomes.<sup>23</sup>

Second, measuring multidimensional employment deprivations shows that it is not enough to look primarily at traditional indicators of labour market performance, such as (un)employment rates or wages (or the informal sector in developing countries). While multidimensional measures should not replace such traditional measures, they should be used to complement them, as the mere fact of having a job may not be enough to ensure the well-being of workers and their families. The measure highlights the importance of viewing employment from a *multidimensional perspective*, emphasizing that workers are generally deprived in more than one dimension, which can compound vulnerabilities. Put differently, it is not enough to focus policy attention only on the working poor, on informal workers or on low-skilled workers. All these measures used on their own would miss important characteristics of employment that affect the well-being of employed workers.

Third, the measures presented above emphasise that policy makers systematically neglect some aspects of employment that are important to workers, such as job stability. This points to the need for regulatory reforms that level the playing field for workers with different types of contracts and employment conditions, thus disincentivising employers from using flexible or precarious forms of hiring when this is not appropriate. To strengthen social security systems in developed countries, this could be achieved either through regulatory reforms [36] or potentially by charging employers a premium rate of contributions (e.g., to an unemployment insurance system) for flexible contracts such as zero-hours, part-time, or short-term contracts. In developing countries, this also means that much more policy attention should be devoted to attracting informal workers into the formal economy and incentivising their contributions to social security systems.

Fourth, and following on from this point, the literature on which this paper is based shows that a measure of poor-quality employment is useful for identifying the *most* vulnerable individual workers or groups of workers in a labour market. The measure also allows governments to monitor how deprivation levels develop over time, especially in response to regulatory changes or other socio-economic developments. Perhaps most importantly, it provides them with a more precise tool for focusing fiscal resources, both in terms of income support provided as well as for helping workers overcome deprivation through targeted investment in vocational

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<sup>23</sup> The OECD's Pisa study of educational attainment is a good example of this, as is the World Inequality Database, which has focused attention on income inequality.

training or adult education. Such a focus would be particularly useful in households where poor employment conditions cause other issues that require public support.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the literature on job quality and poor-quality employment illustrates that social and labour policies cannot be viewed or constructed in isolation. For example, reforming a pension system (e.g., by increasing the pensionable age or levels of contributions) may be an ineffective solution if the main reason why workers receive low pensions is because they did not consistently contribute to a system, either because they worked informally or never held a stable job [37].

In emerging economies, labour markets may be so precarious, even in the formal sector, that it becomes impossible to build functioning systems of social protection (particularly health care). Governments must decide whether to invest in generating better quality jobs (for example, by levelling the playing field between different types of contracts as argued by Collins in this volume [40]). Alternatively, they may consider it more sensible to build welfare states only with general tax revenues instead of employment-based contributions [41]. However, such a policy must consider that high levels of multiple deprivations in the labour market have other significant socioeconomic effects, such as lower tax revenue, underinvestment in skills and human capital, a negative impact on physical and mental health outcomes, or poorer educational results as parents have less time for family commitments.


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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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<sup>24</sup> A large body of research demonstrates that poor-quality employment is linked to poor physical and mental health, which, of course, generate higher expenditure in health insurance systems [38]. Similarly, poor-quality employment is linked to lower contributions to pension systems, thus leading to lower pensions in old age, which often have to be supplemented by governments.[39]. Incipient research also suggests that poor-quality employment affects the educational outcomes of children [40].

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