

VALUE EXTRACTION WITHOUT END

Migrant itinerancy and informality

PROJECT

INFORMALITY IN
TIMES OF COVID 19

Life History 2

RUPTURES21

TOWARDS NEW ECONOMIES,
SOCIETIES AND LEGALITIES

THE IEL COLLECTIVE






INFORMALITY IN TIMES OF COVID-19 is a project of **RUPTURES21: TOWARDS NEW ECONOMIES, SOCIETIES, AND LEGALITIES of THE IEL COLLECTIVE**. The project explores challenges posed by the pandemic to informal workers, their families, and public policies in general. By highlighting the contributions made by the informal economy to the general economy and wellbeing, and using Colombia as a case study, the project calls for attention to be paid to the precarities that accompany informal work and how these turn into ultra-precariities in moments of crisis such as COVID-19.

In this second life history we seek to highlight the difficulties encountered by groups of workers who are not only in situations of informality, but also have an irregular migratory status. For these workers, the health crisis means facing tougher challenges to earn a living, and facing aggravated exploitation dynamics which are found in the interaction between the formal and informal economies.

Ruptures21 gathered the information for this story based on semi-structured interviews (in person and through various means of communication), following the guidelines provided by the Ethics Committee of del Rosario University.

Funding bodies and partnerships:

University of
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WARWICK
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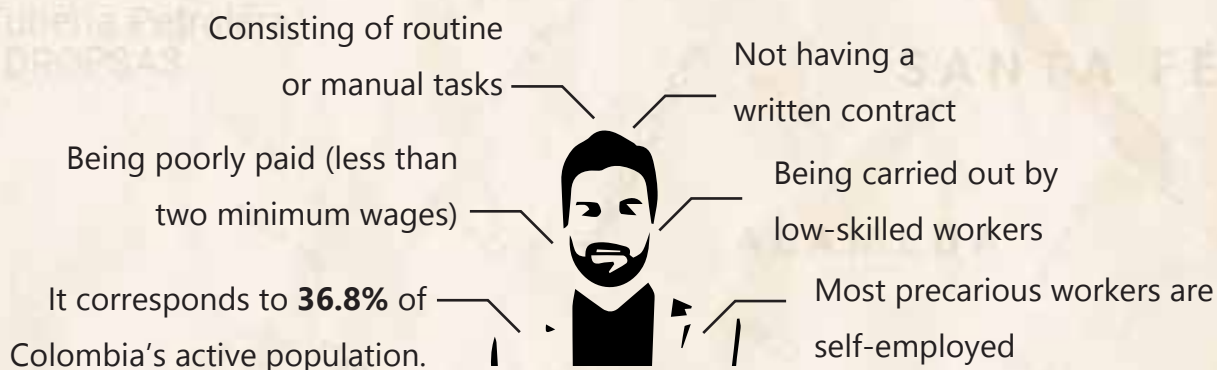
ALIANZA EFI
economía formal e inclusiva

 **OEM**
OBSERVATORIO PARA LA
EQUIDAD DE LAS MUJERES

LaboUR Observatorio Laboral de la Universidad
del Rosario

1.

The protagonist of this story is in precarious employment, in line with the classification discussed in Report 1 and Report 2 of this project. This class of employment is characterised by:



2.

The contribution made by informal workers to the GDP is slightly over

25%, according to data from 2015.

3. **969,337**

informal workers are in the construction sector

4.

7.36%

of informal workers work in an outdoor uncovered location, as is the case for the protagonist in this story.

5.

2.56%

of informal workers work on a construction site, as the protagonist of this story occasionally does.

6.

According to the Ruptures21 aggregated data,

55.42%

of migrants in Colombia are not employed.



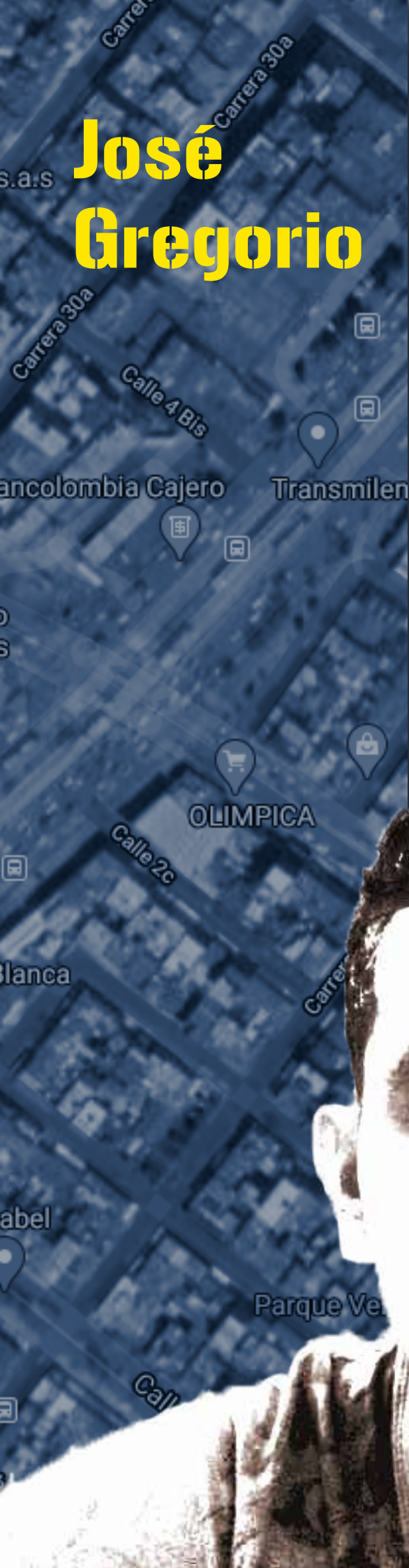
Do you have a work contract?

No, there they do not give contracts.

Did they give you facemasks or something for protection?

No, this we covered ourselves.

(Interview fragment)



José Gregorio

Born in 1995 in El Sombrero, Guárico state, Venezuela

Migrant and “rebuscador”.¹

Since he arrived in Bogotá 9 months ago, lives in La Estrada neighbourhood, Engativá, Bogotá.

Pays 350 thousand Colombian pesos monthly rent for a room.





Itinerancy and survival

After many calls at various times, we managed to reach José. It is 9pm, this is the only hour he is free; he works all day. When we ask him “do you have a lot of work?”, he only says “some, yes”. We tell him that we won’t take long in the interview, assuming that he was tired. We speak for more than an hour and end up running out of time.

José is a young Venezuelan who, like many Venezuelans, has opted in the last few years to migrate to another country in Latin America or

other parts of the world in search of better opportunities. For many of them, Colombia is only a step in this migration. For others like José, it is the destination. He refers to himself as undocumented or illegal, while describing the tribulations of traveling through the Arauca border by foot and then by bus to Bogotá. He travelled for almost three days. At his destination “two cousins were waiting for me”. He left his wife and daughter in Venezuela.

José arrived in Colombia nine months ago. During the first six months he worked as an “albañil” (construction worker). In the last two months he has been constantly changing role, almost week by week.

Do you send money to your family?

I send it to them... when I can



Half the time in “rebusque”, the other half... as well.

His legal status in Colombia is a fundamental determining factor in thinking about almost any aspect of his life. The first question is: how does a person with these restrictions obtain the necessary income to live, and to send some

1. Translator’s note: The term “rebusque” can be compared to the concept of making ends meet. “In Colombian popular jargon, this term refers to a way of life that entails struggling for survival through multiple mechanisms for action.” Mendoza, P. (2011). “Del arte de “rebuscar” o del nuevo rostro de los trabajadores”, Revista Colombiana de Sociología Vol. 34 No. 2, 121

money to their family in Venezuela? In his situation, José has resorted to various activities. Some of these can be classified as informal work, while others are not covered by the concept of informality. This happens precisely because of his irregular migratory status; the economic activities carried out by José are imperceptible to official figures and categories.

During his time in Colombia, José has worked a diverse range of roles which sometimes change from one day to the next. One day he was an assistant construction worker, another day selling food, another day a “rappitendero” (delivery driver for an internet platform), and another day selling disinfectant dispensers.

I worked in construction and I also worked in “Rappi”. I was in construction for about six months, but my boss got a contract out of the city, but because I am illegal I cannot go to do this work because they asked me for insurance (...) this was a problem for him.

Assisting in construction work is a role that is generally done informally, but it is connected to formal economies through the buying and selling of construction and finished materials. This role as a construction worker is a clear illustration of popular or working class roles, due to the large scope of services that it provi-

des and because it relies on hiring cheap labour and on long working days. Those who use the services, however, are the middle and upper class who regularly need someone to upkeep their properties, or a plumber or painter.

In the first days of quarantine, a variety of protective gear and means for disinfecting hands and feet became very popular. Seamstresses began making large amounts of face masks with different features. They also made mats to disinfect the soles of shoes. Some people with protective suits and disinfectant spraying machines began walking through neighbourhoods offering a disinfection service to houses and vehicles. One of the most popular mechanisms is a metallic device which dispenses antibacterial gel using a pedal; José sold these devices in all of the city, from the Olaya neighbourhood (in the south-east of the city) to the Minuto de Dios neighbourhood (in the north-west of the city). José travelled more than twenty kilometres by public transport carrying two or three of these devices. He did this work for approximately two weeks, until the effort became too much and the competition intense.

An irregular migration status makes people invisible and, as demonstrated by this story, even limits access to irregular work, including that offered through new digital platforms in very unstable conditions. This invisibility makes it almost impossible to track and exposes immigrants to abuse.

And the work as "Rappi", how was it?

Ah... well... this is a bit of a long story (...) when the pandemic started, two of us Venezuelans were trying to figure out what we could do. We decided to buy a Rappi account (...) it isn't a secret that there are Colombian people here who create accounts (...) and sell them. We had the idea, asking here and there, [so] we decided to get some borrowed money. (...) We bought an account, [which] we both worked for, starting in level one we got two hundred and eighty thousand pesos (approximately 80 USD). [The] money that we made during the week [arrived] in [the account of the application], but this was under the name of the person that had the account (...). We worked [my friend and I], that is to say, we went out in the morning – of course, he was the one who lent me the bicycle – we went out in the morning, and we accompanied each other, so that when he was tired, I took the bag and if a request came in then I went (...) we took turns.

The account was finally blocked because (...) we went to Rappi to change the bag (...) [and] they told us that [we were implicated in a case of] identity theft (...) and that week I already had two hundred and fifty thousand pesos in the [application account], so that you can have a laugh: I hadn't used the [money], I was saving.

For obvious reasons, José could not continue to work as a delivery driver. Days later he found a job as a door to door salesman for a well-known dairy product company. This work, which is also carried out in complete informality, required him again to cross the city. Every day he had to carry his own work equipment to promote the dairy products in different neighbourhood streets.



Formality copies the strategies that emerge in the popular economy

A constant development of mechanisms and strategies exist for “rebusque” (making ends meet) in popular and working class areas. Some examples include street vendors and use of “perifoneo” (advertising through a loudspeaker-mounted vehicle). These are highly efficient tools which are being copied by the formal economic sector. For example, telecommunications and food companies (amongst others) offer their products through street vending, while also using cheap labour, often sourced from the very same neighbourhoods where these companies are seeking to make a presence. These workers, such as José not only receive very little for their labour, but they are also paid by the job. Additionally, they do not benefit from any sort of social benefits or risk insurance, and do not receive any element of protection. As if this were not enough, these informal workers are responsible for part or the totality of the economic losses which result from their activities.

Due to the restrictions imposed because of the pandemic, José’s latest work involves getting around by bicycle and covering large distances on foot. With limited public transport service to avoid crowding, this additional physical effort has been added to the already long list of burdens which he must take on with no compen-

sation. On average he walks 12 kilometres with his work tools to get to the points of sale, which he must then repeat at the end of the day to return everything to the company. From there he returns home by bicycle.

Currently I am working as a street vendor, opening yoghurt accounts to pay by credit for eight days. [Also] chorizos, sausages, sliced cheese. (...) [Representing a company] we go to distribute the product, that is to say, we ring doorbells, offer the products. If the client accepts, we give them eight-days to pay, eight days of credit (...). We carry two coolers and a “zorra” [trolley], as you call them here (...) and every day we change the area or the neighbourhood. Today we went to La Estrada and yesterday Las Ferias. If the person moves or goes to another place, the company takes 70% of the loss, the other 30% of the loss is on us.

And has it happened to you?

Many times. Since Monday, two or three clients have done this to us.

Conclusiones

- Confronted with the difficulties made apparent by the pandemic, one of the challenges of a new public policy is to map the inequalities faced by migrant men and women, who for various reasons have been forced to leave their place of origin in order to obtain an economic income sufficient to survive and to send money to their families.

- The case of Venezuelans in Colombia is only one example of what also happens to Senegalese and Bolivians in Argentina, or Mexicans in the USA. This means that José's case is not unique, and reaffirms the urgent need for measures at a global level to combat discrimination against migrants, and to focus on their needs, especially in situations of public health emergency.

- It is clear that the concept of informality is insufficient to effectively track current realities. A clear example of this is that none of the statistics or surveys track the diverse strategies which an irregular migrant must resort to in order to obtain an income, nor how precarity has reach new levels during the pandemic.

- Paying attention to the labour relationships which have marked José's life during the last few months and to the distinct forms of value extraction which he has faced due to his condition as an informal worker are necessary starting points to develop public policies which respond, first of all, to the most basic needs, including the protection of rights and the guarantee of humanitarian assistance.

Ruptures 21: Towards New Economies, Societies and Legalities: Ruptures21 responds to the challenges posed by old and current economic, social, and legal dynamics and their impact on the human and non-human world. Through international interdisciplinary and institutional collaborations, Ruptures21 advances novel ways to understand and address global issues. The ruptures which we see today at the international level require a break from set approaches and new ways of acting and being. Ruptures21 is an initiative of The IEL Collective.

Informality in Times of COVID-19: The Ruptures21 project “Informality in Times of Covid-19” brings together socio-legal academics, labour economists, public health experts, anthropologists, cinematographers, graphic designers, web-designers and public policy makers in order to study the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on informal workers and their economies, using Colombia as its main case study. Mixing different means of communication and blurring the boundaries between quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and between practice and academia, outcomes of this project include multilingual reports, life histories, documentaries, online outreach platforms and interventions, and the first comprehensive aggregated database on informality in Colombia. Highlighting both the large yet often forgotten contribution of informal workers to general national economies, as well as the ultra-precarities they face in moments of public health crises, the outcomes of this project make an urgent call for a new set of new social, economic, and health policies in Colombia and similar countries.

Informality in Times of COVID-19 is supported by the University of Kent, the University of Essex, the University of Warwick, and Rosario University. It has been conducted in alliance with the Observatory for Women’s Equity (ICESI University, Colombia), the Labour Observatory of Rosario University (Observatorio Laboral de la Universidad del Rosario (LaboUR)), the Research Group on Public Health and Epidemiology (Rosario University) and AlianzaEFI.

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