



► Monitoring labour markets amid lockdowns to contain the COVID-19 virus:
Essential labour force survey content and treatment of special groups



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Monitoring labour markets amid lockdowns to contain the COVID-19 virus: Essential labour force survey content and treatment of special groups

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an unprecedented set of measures by countries to contain its spread and reduce the loss of human life. Social distancing and general lockdowns are becoming a part of everyday life in many countries with massive ramifications for labour markets and people's livelihoods. At a time when governments begin to put in place plans to stabilize the economy and support livelihoods, essential household surveys needed to monitor labour markets and inform decision-making are also being severely [impacted](#).

The types of response from national statistical offices (NSOs) vary substantially, ranging from reducing survey content to maintain response rates, increasing content to better understand impacts or not changing content but needing to maintain operations as is, while clarifying to interviewers how to record the different impacts of COVID-19 they will encounter, something which may be ambiguous given the unprecedented nature of the situation.

This note provides guidance for NSOs currently able to maintain labour force survey (LFS) operations on how to apply the latest international standards to maintain a core set of labour force statistics for monitoring in a context of government lockdowns and widespread uncertainty. In particular, it highlights the range of topics to prioritize and provides guidance on the treatment of special cases becoming more prevalent, such as job absences of uncertain duration, business closures, and overall reduced job search activity.

The guidance is being developed amid a rapidly evolving situation. It will need to be adapted to the national context and changing circumstances. The note nevertheless underscores the importance of maintaining consistency in how headline indicators, such as employment and unemployment rates, are measured following the established international standards. At the same time, it stresses the need to expand the range of statistics and analysis reported on beyond basic headline labour market indicators, to support wider monitoring and better inform decision-making.

The note is structured as follows: **Part I** describes some of the primary changes taking place in labour markets as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Part II** highlights key elements of the latest international standards that are particularly relevant to the current situation. **Part III** lists essential indicators and breakdowns as well as related LFS items to prioritize in data collection under current conditions. **Part IV** provides guidance on the treatment of special cases and situations requiring further clarification in data collection. **Part V** illustrates how these clarifications may be introduced in LFS questionnaires and highlights related information that may be captured to link the changes observed more directly to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I. Labour markets and unpaid work in the context of COVID-19

While still early, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on labour markets are already wide-ranging, affecting many if not most people, in many different ways. For health care workers, emergency responders, volunteers and others in critical occupations and industries, it has meant sudden increases in workloads and work hours as well as changes in working arrangements and working conditions. For many other workers, the introduction of social distancing measures, lockdowns and related restrictions to flatten the curve of infections, have had very different consequences including reduced

work hours, teleworking, mandatory leaves of uncertain duration, furloughs, layoffs, job loss and business closures.

At the same time, new job opportunities have become available in selected industries and occupations, while hiring freezes are dominating other sectors. Many of those who would have otherwise been looking for new jobs or to start their own businesses, are now waiting for conditions to improve. Others are turning to alternative sources of livelihood including subsistence farming or becoming unavailable to work because of own illness or increased family care responsibilities. Yet others desisting altogether due to a lack of demand or warranted concerns for their health and safety. Reduced pay and loss of income are already affecting many people. Governments are taking action by announcing emergency relief packages and other measures to support those affected by the lockdowns.

Reflecting these wide-ranging changes under current conditions of lockdowns poses important challenges for labour statistics and the LFS used to produce them. The international statistical standards currently in place provide a robust set of recommendations aimed at capturing these situations. The COVID-19 pandemic and measures introduced to contain it, however, are unprecedented, and will require that some clarifications be made to the standards, in order to support continued and targeted monitoring.

II. Standards on work, employment and labour underutilization statistics

The latest international standards underlying key indicators to monitor labour markets were adopted in 2013 by the [19th ICLS¹](#). At the time, a number of important revisions were introduced in response to the 2008 financial crisis and ensuing job crisis with the explicit objective to enable headline labour market indicators to better reflect changing conditions over time, across different contexts, and for different groups. These very recommendations are now critical to support continued monitoring of labour markets amid the spread of the COVID-19 virus. While countries differ in the degree to which they have implemented these standards in the national LFS, they nevertheless provide a solid basis on which to guide decisions regarding priority information to collect, treatment of special cases, and range of indicators and statistics to produce.

Improved measures for labour market monitoring

Among the key features introduced by the 19th ICLS standards is a narrower concept of employment to capture persons with jobs and businesses that generate an income. In the current context, statistics aligned with the new concept of employment will enable more targeted monitoring of the immediate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the market economy, on people's abilities to generate income through their work, and on the extent of job losses.

To measure employment, the standards introduced an updated set of guidelines on how to treat persons absent from their jobs in the reference period. Under current conditions, with massive disruptions in supply chains, government lockdowns and other restrictions in place, capturing information on absences from employment will be particularly important to assess some of the labour market impacts of the pandemic. Consistent treatment of specific reasons for absence, with some required clarifications as outlined below, and following the underlying principles embedded in the standards will be important to support ongoing monitoring.

¹ ILO. (2013). Resolution I concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization. 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians. Geneva: ILO.

New measures of labour underutilization were also introduced to support wider assessments of how labour markets respond to changing economic conditions. Importantly, the standards highlight that unemployment alone is not sufficient as an indicator of labour market performance. Rather unemployment needs to be complemented with other measures of labour underutilization, including time-related underemployment and the potential labour force. Alongside the new measures of underutilization, the standards further underscore the importance of identifying a minimum set of nationally relevant indicators. Measures highlighted of particularly relevance in the current context include: indicators for workers with reduced work hours due to economic reasons, workers with excessive work hours, discouraged job seekers, recent job losers and, depending on the national context, workers in informal jobs.

Monitoring unpaid forms of work

Alongside these improvements to labour market statistics, the standards also introduced a set of concepts and guidelines to promote measurement of unpaid forms of work including own-use production work (covering production of goods for own final use and unpaid care and domestic work), volunteer work and unpaid trainee work. Monitoring participation particularly in volunteer work and own-use production work, will serve to provide a much wider understanding of the different ways in which people and communities have responded to cope and build resilience during the pandemic.

Establishing priorities for measurement

While providing a comprehensive set of concepts and guidelines to monitor labour markets and unpaid forms of work, the standards emphasize the importance to establishing priorities for measurement. Not all indicators are needed with the same frequency nor using a single data source. The standards provide clear guidance to select a minimum set of labour market indicators for frequent measurement, and plan for monitoring of other work-related topics at longer intervals. Prioritization will be particularly important under current conditions and should take account of the national context, ongoing challenges to maintain LFS operations, options for retrospective survey data collection once conditions improve, as well as availability of alternative and complementary data sources, in particular data from establishment surveys, administrative records, rapid assessment surveys, opinion polls, as well as big data.

Maintaining consistency in measurement

Consistency in measurement will be essential to retain a coherent set of headline indicators of the labour market that are responsive to the changing conditions and that, at the same time, support comparisons over time and across contexts. Introducing temporary amendments or significant revisions to the operational definitions used in LFS is not recommended. Amid the challenges of maintaining LFS operations, coverage and response rates, introducing changes in definitions or treatment of selected groups can severely impact the overall quality and integrity of the data.

Sudden revisions can also result in a loss of credibility and trust by users if changes are not discussed or well communicated, and if the resulting statistics are not able to reflect the varied impacts taking place on the labour market and for different population groups. Consistency and stability in measurement during this time will be paramount to enable monitoring, maintain transparency, and support informed assessments.

III. Essential LFS statistics and data items during the COVID-19 pandemic

Priority statistics and indicators derived from LFS

As promoted by the international standards, countries will need to prioritize a select but diverse set of indicators to monitor the wide ranging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic already visible. The range of relevant indicators is likely to differ depending on the national context, extent of restrictions implemented to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus, as well as their impact on LFS operations.

At minimum, the set should include core labour market indicators such as: labour force participation rate, employment to population ratio, labour underutilization measures covering rates of unemployment, time-related underemployment and the potential labour force. Likewise, it should include shares of selected groups, such as persons employed not at work, persons working more hours than usual, persons working less hours than usual, discouraged job seekers, recent job losers, among others.

Deeper disaggregation and analysis will also be necessary to identify groups particularly affected and inform targeted policy actions. Particularly relevant will be breakdowns and analysis of:

- Persons absent from work by reason for absence, duration and pay (as applicable);
- Persons employed working more/less hours than usual by reasons;
- Persons outside the labour force by degree of labour market attachment and by reasons for not seeking or not being available to work; and
- Recent job losers by reasons for last job ending, and broad characteristics of their last job (occupation, industry, status in employment).

Additionally, breakdowns of the employed by selected job characteristics will be needed to monitor impacts on different industries and types of workers. In particular, breakdowns by occupation, industry (branch of economic activity), status in employment (as self-declared) and institutional sector of employment (public/private/households). Further disaggregation of workers by formal/informal nature of the job, type of place of work, job tenure, and job-related social protection (i.e. pension, health insurance coverage) will also serve to shed light on impacts among workers with different working conditions and degree of job stability.

To monitor differential impact for various groups of the population, the above indicators and breakdowns will need to be prepared at a minimum, for the population as a whole and disaggregated by sex and broad age groups. Where feasible taking into account the quality of the LFS data achieved (e.g. coverage, representation, precision), breakdowns by other relevant characteristics such as broad geographic regions and place of residence (urban/rural) would also be relevant.

Priority LFS data collection items

Priority data items to produce the above minimum set of indicators and breakdowns are shown in **Box 1**. Countries that are able to maintain LFS operations at present should ensure that questions needed to produce this essential information are included.

Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's incomes and livelihoods, pending on national circumstances, it may also be important to include one or a small set of questions to assess receipt of selected government benefits and income support programmes, including special emergency or relief packages activated to support persons during the COVID19 pandemic. Depending on the eligibility requirements of these programmes, questions may be targeted to all respondents of working age, the

household reference person, or selected groups such as: self-employed workers, persons not currently employed, recent job losers, etc.

Measurement of employment-related income in the LFS during this time should be assessed carefully in light of the national context and ongoing challenges to maintain survey operations. Countries that already include a battery of questions on income in the LFS should take into account the potential impact of retaining this topic on response levels, interview length and respondent burden, as well as the overall quality of data on income derived from the LFS. Alternative strategies to assess impacts on income may be considered, including for example the use of an add-on module with retrospective questions to be attached to the LFS in the future, once government-mandated lockdowns and related restrictions are lifted.

Box 1. Priority LFS data collection items	
Employed	Not employed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employed, at work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Small jobs recovery*</i> ○ <i>Family helper recovery*</i> • Employed, not at work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Reason for absence ○ Duration of absence ○ Pay during absence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Source of pay • <i>Main destination of production*</i> • Main job characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Occupation ○ Industry ○ Status in employment ○ Institutional sector (public/private/households) ○ Type of place of work ○ Job tenure ○ Social protection coverage ○ <i>Informal nature of job*</i> • Hours usually worked per week • Hours actually worked • Reasons for more/less hours worked • Desire to work more hours • Availability to work more hours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job search (4 weeks / 30 days) • Method of job search • <i>Duration of job search*</i> • Reasons for not seeking • Desire to work at present • Availability to take up employment • Reasons for not being available • Last employment in previous X months <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Duration since last stopped work ○ Reasons for last job/business ending ○ Occupation ○ Industry ○ Status in employment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receipt of government benefits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Unemployment benefits ○ Others as per national context 	
* As per national relevance	

Should conditions permit, other relevant data items may also be considered. This could include questions to capture multiple job-holding status; changes in the working schedules, working time arrangements and place of work in the reference week, so as to capture shift work, telework, asocial hours of work, night work, weekend work, paid/unpaid overtime, etc.; use of ICT technology to enable or facilitate work, main activity as self-declared, and overall wellbeing.

Over the longer term, pending on national priorities and conditions, modules to capture participation in unpaid forms of work may also be considered. This could include modules exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions on people's involvement in unpaid care and domestic work, volunteering and subsistence production of foodstuff and other goods for household use. While retrospective data collection may not yield accurate information on time-spent in these activities, valuable information can nevertheless be captured on the range of activities conducted, gendered division of unpaid work, and their impact on well-being, work-life balance, and household livelihood.

IV. Treatment of special cases during data collection

The current context of government lockdowns, related restrictions and widespread uncertainty, poses a number of challenges to identify the employed, unemployed and other groups of workers highlighted above, following the international standards. It becomes necessary to provide a few additional clarifications on how to continue to apply the international standards for countries experiencing these conditions. The clarifications provided aim at maintaining the underlying intention of the criteria necessary to produce core headline indicators and promote consistency in measurement.

Identification of persons employed

The standards state the criteria under which a person may be considered employed, in the reference week. Two separate groups are identified: *persons employed, at work* and *persons employed, not at work*².

Persons employed, at work

Identification and treatment of *persons employed, at work in the reference week* should continue to be based on the existing rules currently in place in the national LFS, aligned with the international standards, to identify all persons who worked at least 1 hour in the reference week in any kind of paid job or business activity.

Overall, it is not recommended to change the sequence of questions used to identify the employed. Countries that face such a requirement to reduce overall questionnaire length are advised to review the relevance of each question to identify the employed using as basis data from a previous survey round. This is particularly important for recovery questions which may be necessary for comprehensive identification of persons with small, part-time or casual jobs, helpers in family businesses and, depending on the national context, workers in agriculture producing mainly to sell.

Removing recovery questions to identify persons with small or casual jobs can negatively impact the overall levels of employment captured, limiting the usefulness of the information to monitor changes in employment levels during the COVID-19 pandemic. Is it also possible that recovery questions for small, part-time or casual jobs may become more relevant in a context of reduced working hours and job loss for many workers.

Interviewer training should reinforce that persons in the following situations are classified as *employed, at work*:

- Persons teleworking in the reference week; persons working reduced hours; persons performing a reduced set of tasks related to their job or business, even if their usual work premises are temporarily closed; self-employed persons open for business even if no clients

² Para 27.

are received; persons employed through/on digital platforms; persons participating in training required by their job or business.

Persons employed, not at work in the reference week

For persons who indicate having a job/business, but not working in the reference week, the standards provide a set of criteria to assess that the absence is temporary and short, and that a job attachment continues to exist. This includes the reason for absence, total duration of the absence, and receipt of remuneration during the absence.³ The main reason for absence stated is particularly important in deciding whether additional criteria are required or not.

- Persons with a job or business, not working due to working time arrangements (e.g. flexible work schedules, job rotation, compensatory time-off, time-banks) or because that is the typical nature of their work (e.g. periods of activity followed by periods of no activity during the production cycle in agriculture, persons who carry out their work only on specific weeks every month) are directly treated as *employed, not at work*.
- Persons absent for reasons such as public holidays, vacation or annual leave, sick leave due to own illness or injury, or maternity and paternity leave are directly treated as *employed, not at work*.
- Persons absent for other reasons, require additional information on the total expected duration of the absence and/or continued receipt of remuneration to confirm the continued existence of a job attachment⁴. This includes reasons such as parental leaves; education leave; other personal leave; mandatory leaves; furlough; layoff; disorganization or suspension of work, lack of clients, capital or materials; strike or lockout; government lockdown; quarantine; disaster; insecurity etc.

Under current conditions, many persons are likely to fall in this group. However, because of government lockdowns, broken supply chains, etc., many workers may not know when, and if, they will be able to return to their jobs or businesses. A number of clarifications (see below) will be necessary to handle potentially high levels of UNCERTAIN answers, and at the same time ensure consistent treatment of persons in different situations to enable their classification as employed or not employed following the principles outlined in the international standards.

Total expected duration of absence of three months or less: This criterion aims to establish that a job attachment continues to exist and that the absence is, indeed, temporary. The standards emphasize a set total duration of the absence as a way to establish that there is an expectation of return within a relatively short period. In practice, the expectation of return is generally assessed at several points in the questionnaire, starting with the question on whether the person was “absent from a job or business to which he/she will return” and again in the question on “total duration of the absence of 3 months or less.” No further tests of the expectation to return are emphasized by the standards. Only for absences of a “duration longer than three months” and “indefinite layoffs” does the standards indicate the need for a

³ Para 29(a).

⁴ Para 29(c).

“guarantee” or “assurance” of return to the same economic unit to be treated as employed, not at work⁵.

In the context of sudden government lockdowns and related restrictions, many workers are unlikely to have clarity or an assurance regarding the exact date when they will be able to resume work –as a result they may answer UNSURE if will return within 3 months. To handle these situations, where relevant, persons who are unsure whether they will return within 3 months, but who have an expectation to return to the same job or business once the restrictions are lifted, should be considered as meeting the criteria for temporary absence from employment.

Nevertheless, in those cases, countries should endeavour to separately identify “persons with a total expected duration of absence of less than 3 months” and those with an “unknown total duration, but an expectation of return once the government restrictions are lifted.” This clarification of the standards to enable ongoing measurement may need to be re-evaluated on an ongoing basis, particularly if government lockdowns and related restrictions remain in place for a prolonged period spanning more than 3-6 months.

Continued receipt of remuneration: This criterion similarly serves as evidence of continued job attachment⁶. The emphasis on “remuneration” is meant to indicate that the pay must be provided by the employer. No additional details are provided. However, in line with the concept of employment, it should include remuneration expected or received, cases where remuneration is paid in full as well as cases of partial or reduced pay. In consequence, it should also include cases where the employer pays part of the workers’ remuneration, in parallel or as a complement to income transfers provided by the government. In such cases, the criterion of continued receipt of remuneration from the employer, including partial remuneration is met, thus providing evidence of continued job attachment.

However, it does not include government transfer schemes, including emergency schemes to support persons affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, where the employer does not contribute to pay at least some part of the remuneration. Similarly, it does not include severance pay or other termination benefits, nor government transfers such as unemployment benefits, universal or means-tested programmes⁷. Where relevant, and to the extent possible, countries should endeavour to separately identify persons in such situations through the questions on “continued receipt of payment” and/or “source of pay”.

Finally, the international standards provide flexibility on how to combine the above criteria to determine whether persons are classified as “employed, not at work” or “not employed”. Specifically, countries may apply one or the two criteria together⁸. That is:

- Total expected duration of absence, and/or
- Continued receipt of remuneration.

Taking into consideration the wide range of situations possible, to enable adequate treatment of persons with dependent jobs and those with independent jobs, to the extent possible, it is

⁵ Para 31(g).

⁶ Para 29(c)(i).

⁷ Paras 31(c) and 31(d).

⁸ Para 29(c)(i).

recommended that persons are considered as having a “continued job attachment” when one of the two criteria are met.

Thus,

- Persons with absences that require further evaluation of continued job attachment should be treated as “employed, not at work” if any one of the following applies:
 - They expect the total duration of the absence to be less than three months
 - They have an unknown duration of absence but expect to return to the same job or business once the restrictions in place (where applicable) are lifted
 - They continue to receive remuneration from their employer, including partial pay, even if they also receive support from other sources, including government schemes.

Consequently,

- Persons with absences that require further evaluation of continued job attachment should be treated as “not employed” if the following applies:
 - Expected total duration of absence is greater than three months
 - or
 - Unknown total duration of absence and No or unknown expected return to the same job or business once the restrictions in place are lifted (where applicable)
 - and
 - No receipt of any part of their remuneration from the employer.
- Their treatment as “unemployed” will depend on whether they fulfil the criteria of “job search” and “availability” as specified for the measurement of unemployment.

Persons in time-related underemployment

The international standards define persons in time related underemployment as those “in employment, who, during a short reference period, wanted to work additional hours, whose working time in all jobs was less than a specified hours threshold, and who were available to work additional hours given an opportunity for more work”⁹. Identification of this group requires assessment of four criteria: (a) being employed in the reference week, as defined earlier, (b) desire to work more hours, (c) working less hours than a set threshold, and (d) being available to work additional hours. Some flexibility exists for countries to adapt the measurement to the national context. As with the identification of persons employed, some additional clarifications to the above criteria may be warranted to ensure the continued relevance of this measure in the current context of government lockdowns and related restrictions.

- *Desire to work more hours than (reference week/usually)*: The underlying intention of this criterion as part of the measurement of time-related underemployment is to assess the current interest of the respondent, as self-declared, in working more hours taking into consideration their personal circumstances –as opposed to existing concrete opportunities for additional work. The additional work hours may be “in the same job, in an additional job(s) or replacement job(s)”¹⁰. Under a context of government lockdowns, care should be taken to ensure that persons who indicate that they want to work more hours, but cannot do so because of existing restrictions are adequately classified as “wanting to work more.”

⁹ Para 43.

¹⁰ Para 43(b).

Another important element of this criterion is the hours' concept used as reference. The international standards provide flexibility for countries to choose as reference the hours usually worked per week or the hours actually worked in the reference week¹¹. Use of the former (e.g. *At present, do you want to work more hours per week than you usually work?*) will capture longer-term situations of time-related underemployment, whereas the latter will capture shorter-term situations (e.g. *Thinking about the hours that you worked [last/on reference week], at present, would you want to work more hours?*).

Under current conditions, measuring time-related underemployment with reference to hours actually worked will enable more direct monitoring of the impacts of the pandemic on labour markets. However, to maintain consistency in the indicator series, countries should aim to retain the same reference hours' concept as currently in practice. Nevertheless, to support monitoring, countries should aim to also capture persons who worked less hours than usual in the reference week and the reasons for working less hours with a view to identify those whose working time has been impacted for reasons related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- The *hours' threshold* referred is “based on the threshold between full-time and part-time employment”, which can be based on respondents' self-perception or on measures such as “median or modal values of the hours usually worked of all persons in employment or on working time norms...”¹². Under current circumstances, countries that apply an hours' threshold based on “median or modal values” using as basis information on hours actually worked, should establish the threshold using data from a period before the spread of COVID-19. For example, the previous year/12 months or the same month/quarter of the previous year.
- *Available to work more hours in [subsequent short reference period]*: The intention behind this criterion is to assess whether the respondent has available time to take-up additional hours of work in a short subsequent period. The reference period should reflect the typical length of time required in the national context between leaving one job and starting another” (i.e. *Could you start working more hours within the next...?*)¹³. Under the context of government lockdowns, care should be taken to ensure that persons who indicate that they are available to work more hours, but cannot do so because of existing restrictions are adequately classified as “available to work.” Interviewer training and examples may be provided to improve interpretation, for example, available to work from home.

Unemployed persons

The international standards define the unemployed following three key criteria that must be met simultaneously. That is, unemployed persons includes all those that were: (a) not employed in the reference week/7 days, (b) actively looked for work or to start a business in the specified period (4 weeks/30 days), and (c) were available to take-up employment in the specified period (reference week and/or subsequent 2 weeks/14 days)¹⁴. Also included are “*future starters*” that fulfil the criteria

¹¹ Para 43(a)

¹² Para 43(c).

¹³ Para 43(d).

¹⁴ Para 47.

established for their treatment as unemployed, namely, having an agreed date to start a new job within a short subsequent period and being currently available to take-up employment¹⁵.

Current conditions will impact people's ability to look for jobs as well as to take up employment. This is expected precisely as a result of reduced economic activity, government lockdowns and related restrictions and should be reflected in labour market statistics. Countries should continue to apply the three criteria to identify the unemployed (and the potential labour force as discussed below), following existing international guidelines. In particular,

- *Not employed in the reference week*: This criterion is meant to ensure that persons employed and unemployed are two mutually exclusive groups, and that the unemployed refer to persons without any paid job or business in the reference week. The criterion should be applied as per standard practice.
- *Job search in the specified period (4 weeks / 1 month)*: Is central to the definition of unemployment as an indication that the person has taken action in a recent period to find a job or set up a business. The criterion should be applied following existing practice, without any changes. This includes search of any type of paid job or business undertaking, including small, casual or part-time work¹⁶. Information on the method of job search should be used to validate that an active job search has taken place. Under current conditions, interviewer training may reinforce that job search can take place through formal or informal channels, and include contacting potential employers and/or holding interviews through phone or online communication tools, online job search by posting and updating CVs, professional profiles or ads in job and social networking sites, developing business plans and contacting banks, suppliers, etc. through phone or other means, contacting friends, family or others to identify potential job opportunities, etc. Persons that report using only a "passive job search method" such as reading or browsing job advertisements, are not counted as having taken active steps to find a job or to start a business.
- *Availability to take-up employment*: The intention behind this criterion is to assess whether the respondent has available time to take-up employment in the specified reference period, regardless of existing opportunities to find a job¹⁷. The assessment of time availability may be for any type of job, including part-time, weekend work, home-based work, etc. (i.e. *Could you start working within the next...?*). The criterion should be applied following existing practice, without any changes. Under the context of government lockdowns, care should be taken to ensure that persons who indicate that they are available to take up employment, but cannot do so because of existing restrictions are adequately classified as "available to work." Interviewer training and examples may be provided to improve interpretation, for example, available to work from home, etc.
- *Duration to start new job (future starters)*: As per the international standards, persons who did not look for work in the specified period because they are awaiting to start a new job or business in the future should be asked how soon they will start their future job. Under current conditions, it is likely that persons in this situation may not have certainty regarding the job starting date. In these cases, unknown answers should be treated as indicating that the job is

¹⁵ Para 48(a).

¹⁶ Paras 47(b) and 47(c).

¹⁷ Para 47(d).

not likely to start in less than 3 months, as required to be classified as unemployed, provided they were currently available to start working.

Potential labour force

As per the guidance included in the new standards, the potential labour force is meant to be identified using the same sequence of questions as for the unemployed¹⁸. Essentially, the potential labour force groups together persons who meet some but not all of the criteria to be classified as unemployed. The new standards promote the separate identification of the potential labour force to separately highlight groups of persons who express interest in employment, but either are not available to start working or have not sought employment within the specified short reference periods. For measurement purposes, beyond needing to assess availability and job search (as described above), the standards introduce the criterion of desire to work as a way to ascertain their interest in employment.

- *Desire to work at present*¹⁹: The underlying intention of this criterion as part of the identification of the potential labour force is to assess current interest in starting a job or business taking into consideration the respondent's personal circumstances, -regardless of existing opportunities to find a job (i.e. *If it depended on you, would you want to work at present?*). Under a context of government lockdowns, care should be taken to ensure that persons who indicate that they want to work, but cannot do so because of existing restrictions are adequately classified as "wanting to work." To enable identification of unemployment and the potential labour force as part of a common set of questions, care should be taken to ensure that the question on "desire to work at present" is asked to all persons who did not seek work in the reference period, and before the questions on availability to take up employment.

V. Implications for LFS questionnaire content

Depending on national circumstances, countries may implement the clarifications highlighted above through a variety of means. This may include through clarifications introduced in the interviewer manuals, reinforced interviewer training, inclusion of interviewer aids or examples in the questionnaire, inclusion of additional response categories, and/or follow-up questions, for example for DON'T KNOW or UNSURE answers. In all cases, care should be taken to reduce potential inconsistencies in treatment due to interviewer variability, as well as potential changes in the underlying meaning of the questions or response options.

Interviewer aids and examples to help contextualize critical questions

Overall, countries can introduce a number of the above clarifications by including examples in selected questions to help explain the intended meaning of the question, contextualize the questions, and reduce possible omissions. This can be particularly useful in the set of questions to identify persons employed, working in the reference week (e.g. includes teleworking, maintaining the business even if no clients); questions on desire and availability to work more hours (e.g. includes working extra hours

¹⁸ Para 54.

¹⁹ Paras 51(b) and 54.

from home, over the phone, internet, etc.) ; questions on job search (e.g. includes calling employers, posting job ads on websites); and questions on desire and availability to work at present (e.g. includes home-based work, work for a few hours, etc.).

Questions on “absence from a job or business”

Given current circumstances, questions aimed at identifying persons employed, absent from work in the reference week, are likely to be subject to higher than normal levels of UNSURE (i.e. uncertain situation) answers. Suggestions are provided to handle these cases and introduce the recommended clarifications in the context of lockdowns and related restrictions, and promote consistent treatment.

Question on having a job or business but on temporary absence in the reference week

UNSURE answers are likely to appear starting with the first question targeted to identify those persons with a job, but not working in the reference week (*Even though (you/NAME) did not work, last week did (you/he/she) have a paid job or a business?*). If not already included, where feasible, adding a response option for UNSURE, can help route these cases to the question on “reasons for not working in the reference week” to facilitate more consistent treatment. Else, interviewer training will need to reinforce procedures handle cases where respondents are unsure whether to answer YES or NO to this initial question in the current context.

Question on reasons for not working in the reference week

The question on reasons for not working in the reference week will be particularly critical to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on labour markets. There may be a need to review the list of reasons included to ensure it covers new reasons likely to appear for example “own/family quarantine” and “government lockdown”. Alternately, interviewers will need clear instructions on how to code such answers, or probe further to enable coding. Adding directly a response category for “due to the COVID-19 crisis” should be considered carefully, as it may not fully capture all situations. More detailed guidance is provided in the next section.

Question on total duration of absence

The question on total duration of absence is likely to pose important challenges where government lockdowns and similar restrictions are in place. Here it will important to distinguish between persons who do not know the total expected duration of the absence, but have an expectation of returning to the same job or business once the restrictions are lifted and those who are altogether unsure if they will be able to return. Depending on the national context, countries may use different strategies.

Option 1. is to add new response categories to the existing question, as illustrated in **Box 2**. In this case, an option is included to capture persons who do not know the total duration of absence but expect to return once restrictions are lifted. Answers to this category are treated as “employed, not at work”, in the case of countries that apply one criterion to establish the continued existence of a job attachment. In cases where response options are not read aloud, interviewers should be trained to probe so as to distinguish between NO, BUT EXPECTS TO RETURN ONCE RESTRICTIONS ARE LIFTED (3), and UNSURE TO RETURN (4).

BOX 2. Question on total duration of absence: New response category	
<p>QX. In total, will (you/NAME) return to that same job/business within [3 months or less]?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. YES →EMPLOYED 2. NO 3. NO, BUT EXPECTS TO RETURN ONCE RESTRICTIONS ARE LIFTED →EMPLOYED 4. UNSURE TO RETURN 9. DON'T KNOW [PROXY ONLY] 	<p>QX. In total, will (you/NAME) return to that same job/business ...</p> <p style="text-align: center;">READ</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Within [3 months or less] →EMPLOYED 2. After [3 months] 3. Once restrictions are lifted →EMPLOYED 4. WILL NOT RETURN →NOT EMPLOYED 5. UNSURE TO RETURN 9. DON'T KNOW [PROXY ONLY]

Option 2. Is to add a follow-up question for those persons who indicate answer DON'T KNOW (or NO depending on the question formulation) to the question on total duration of the absence. This is illustrated in **Box 3**. In the case that UNSURE answer options are included, these cases should also be routed to the new follow-up question for confirmation and to ensure consistent treatment across respondents.

BOX 3. Question on total duration of absence: New follow-up question	
<p>QX. In total, will (you/NAME) return to that same job/business within [3 months or less]?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. YES →EMPLOYED 2. NO 9. DON'T KNOW 	<p>QX. In total, will (you/NAME) return to that same job/business...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Within [3 months or less] →EMPLOYED 2. After [3 months] →QY OR NOT EMPLOYED* 3. WILL NOT RETURN →NOT EMPLOYED 9. DON'T KNOW <p><i>*depending on question ordering, QX=2 will skip to question on continued receipt of income (QY) or be treated as "not employed"</i></p>
<p>QX2. (Do/does) (you/NAME) expect to return once restrictions are lifted?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. YES →EMPLOYED 2. NO →NOT EMPLOYED 3. UNSURE TO RETURN 9. DON'T KNOW [PROXY ONLY] 	

Option 3. Alternately, countries that are not able to introduce response options or follow-up questions may need to resort to interviewer instructions and reinforced training to ensure that cases where the respondent expects to return to their job or business once restrictions are lifted are treated as indicated (i.e. coded in a way to classify them as employed, not at work). This approach is the least recommended, as it may be subject to interviewer variability. Additionally, it will not enable further evaluation during data processing and analysis.

Question on continued receipt of income during absence

Answers to the question on continued receipt of remuneration could also be affected by current conditions. In this case, it will be important to ensure that respondents are coded YES if (a) they continue to earn an income from their business or receive any part of their pay from their employer; or (b) at the time of the interview have not received pay but have an expectation of receiving pay, including reduced or partial pay. By contrast, it is also important to ensure that persons receiving some form of payment or income, but not from their employer are coded NO. This can be handled through

interviewer training and instructions (see [Box 4](#)) and, where possible, through the use of several questions.

BOX 4. Clarifications for question on continued receipt of remuneration

QY. (Do/does) (you/NAME) continue to receive an income from (your/his/her) job or business during this absence?

(INTERVIEWER: Include partial pay and pay expected in the future,

Exclude if income from other sources only –e.g. government benefits, other aid)

1. YES
2. NO
3. UNSURE
4. DON'T KNOW [PROXY ONLY]

Where possible, including a separate question to capture the source of the income received can serve to improve consistent classification as per the international standards. It is also valuable information on its own right.

Additional data items to link labour market outcomes to the COVID-19 pandemic

Coverage of the above LFS data items during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic will support ongoing aggregate level monitoring of changes in key labour market indicators. It will also support structural analysis of employment by main aggregates and deeper analysis to enable identification of groups particularly impacted during this period. This information alone, however, will not be sufficient to attribute the changes observed directly to the COVID-19 pandemic, nor to comprehensively identify persons who have experienced changes in their working situation as a result.

Countries wishing to add a minimal set of questions to more directly link changes in the working situation of respondents may consider inclusion of a targeted follow-up question to the questions on “reasons for...” (i.e. reasons for absence, for working more/less hours than usual, for not seeking work, for not being available, for recent job loss). In particular: ***Is this because of the COVID-19 virus?***

Including a response option (i.e. *due to COVID-19*) directly in the questions on “reasons for” is unlikely to achieve comprehensive identification. It may also limit the analytical uses of the questions on reasons to assess the different impacts of the pandemic, identify priority groups and target policy responses.

Training interviewers to probe further when respondents answer “because of the COVID-19” to the questions on “reasons for...” will help to ensure consistent treatment across respondents. In such cases, interviewers may use probes such as “*Can you tell me what happened exactly?*”, “*How exactly did COVID-19 impact your situation?*” or similar probes. A follow-up question, if included as outlined above, would serve to link various reasons reported by respondents (e.g. own illness, family care responsibilities, lay-off, double-shift, etc) to the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Guidance to identify the primary reason for being absent, where multiple are reported, may be particularly relevant (e.g. government lockdown and mandatory leave; lay-off and illness). In general, priority should be given to the reason that most directly relates to the workers’ employment situation (e.g. employee on mandatory leave), or that signifies a change in the person’s job attachment (e.g. lay-off), as relevant.

As such, “government lockdown” will be relevant for self-employed and family helpers that are required to stop their activity by direct order from government. While employees may also be affected

by government lockdowns, the reason for absence will depend on the mechanism implemented by their employer to handle the lockdown, for example mandatory unpaid leave, lay-off, dismissal, etc.

Reasons that may be related to the COVID-19 pandemic and could be considered for a follow-up question include:

- Reasons for absence/not working in reference week:
 - Job rotation, compensatory time-off
 - Own illness, family care responsibilities, other personal leave, mandatory leave, furlough, layoff, disorganization or suspension of work, lack of clients, capital or materials; strike or lockout; government lockdown (for self-employed); own/family quarantine; fear of infection, insecurity.
- Reasons for working more hours than usual
 - Increased workload, clients or demand; new job; reduction in staff
- Reasons for working less hours than usual
 - Own illness, family care responsibilities, other personal leave, reduction in work hours by employer, less clients/work, lack of materials/capital, mandatory leave; government lockdown (for self-employed); own/family quarantine; fear of infection, insecurity.
- Reasons for not being available to work more hours / take up employment
 - Own illness; family care responsibilities; own/family quarantine; government lockdown; fear of infection, insecurity.
- Reasons for not seeking employment
 - Own illness, family care responsibilities; waiting to be recalled by previous job; waiting to start new job/business; waiting for results from a previous search; gave up looking, no jobs in area; no jobs matching skills; government lockdown (self-employed); own/family quarantine; fear of infection, insecurity.
- Reasons for previous job ending:
 - laid-off/redundancy; place of work shut down/business closed; dismissed; family care responsibilities.

Alternately a short module asking respondents directly if [during/since X period] (...) experienced [any/x] changes in (...) working situation due to the COVID19 virus, may also be considered. Type of changes that may be explored include:

- Changes in working situation (lost job / started new job)
- Changes in working hours (reduced hours / increased hours)
- Changes in working time arrangements (weekend work, night work, shift work, job rotation)
- Changes in place of work (work from home / at a different fixed premise / outside the home without a fixed location)
- Changes in pay/self-employment income (lower income / higher income)
- Changes in unpaid care and domestic work (increased housework / increased care for children / increased care for ill family members / increased care for dependent adults)

VI. Summary

Overall, the current situation of government lockdowns, social distancing and other related restrictions to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus, poses important challenges to LFS data collection. Countries that are able to maintain LFS operations during this period, should ensure that a

selected but diverse set of labour market information be collected to support monitoring and analysis, and inform decision-making.

Maintaining consistency in measurement, following the international standards, will support assessment of the changing labour market conditions and identification of groups particularly impacted by the pandemic. Changes in definitions and core criteria used to measure key headline indicators of the labour market, particularly employment and unemployment rates, should be avoided.

Rather, clarifications to enable ongoing measurement may be introduced as recommended to improve the perceived continued relevance of key LFS questions by respondents and to handle the uncertainty surrounding when government restrictions might be lifted. As conditions are changing rapidly, LFS data collection items and clarifications to enable consistent treatment of special cases should be assessed regularly, with a view to establish their continued relevance.