

# A Tale of Two Crises in Peru Livelihoods and Social Reproduction During the 1980s and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Article abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the livelihoods of people around the world. Structural economic constraints are highlighted at such moments of crisis, while those most affected have recourse to their repertoire of managing strategies. This case study of people from Allpachico, a Peruvian peasant community, compares their responses to the current crisis with their responses to one in the 1980s, showcasing similarities in strategies (especially reciprocity and the sale or exchange of necessary reproductive tasks and products) and differences in the form they take. In the 1980s, women's work and kin reciprocity helped people access use-values. By 2020, neoliberalism had transformed the national economy and Allpachiqueño migrants overwhelmingly had precarious informal and contract work. Reciprocity and reproductive tasks are still central to livelihood, but now tend to be monetized rather than involving use-values. As that earlier crisis shattered both secure employment and peasant farming to lay the basis for neoliberalism, so now it appears that the COVID-19 pandemic, through the monetization of government support and reciprocity alike, is accelerating financialization in the form of financial services and debt.

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# A Tale of Two Crises in Peru

## Livelihoods and Social Reproduction During the 1980s and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the livelihoods of people around the world. Structural economic constraints are highlighted at such moments of crisis, while those most affected have recourse to their repertoire of managing strategies. This case study of people from Allpachico, a Peruvian peasant community, compares their responses to the current crisis with their responses to one in the 1980s, showcasing similarities in strategies (especially reciprocity and the sale or exchange of necessary reproductive tasks and products) and differences in the form they take. In the 1980s, women's work and kin reciprocity helped people access use-values. By 2020, neoliberalism had transformed the national economy and Allpachiqueño migrants overwhelmingly had precarious informal and contract work. Reciprocity and reproductive tasks are still central to livelihood, but now tend to be monetized rather than involving use-values. As that earlier crisis shattered both secure employment and peasant farming to lay the basis for neoliberalism, so now it appears that the COVID-19 pandemic, through the monetization of government support and reciprocity alike, is accelerating financialization in the form of financial services and debt.

**Keywords:** Financialization; monetization; reciprocity; reproductive work; crisis; livelihood strategies; COVID-19 pandemic; Peru; gender

**Résumé:** La pandémie de COVID-19 a ravagé les moyens de subsistance des populations du monde entier. Les contraintes économiques structurelles sont mises en évidence dans ces moments de crise, tandis que les personnes les plus touchées ont recours à leur répertoire de stratégies de subsistances. Cette étude de cas sur les habitants d'Allpachico, une communauté paysanne péruvienne, compare leurs réponses à la crise actuelle avec leurs réponses à

celle des années 1980, mettant en évidence des similitudes dans les stratégies (notamment la réciprocité et la vente ou l'échange de tâches reproductives et de produits nécessaires) et des différences dans la forme qu'elles prennent. Dans les années 1980, le travail des femmes et la réciprocité de la parenté ont aidé les gens à accéder aux valeurs d'usage. En 2020, le néolibéralisme a transformé l'économie nationale et les migrants d'Allpachico ont majoritairement un travail informel et contractuel précaire. La réciprocité et les tâches reproductives sont toujours au cœur des moyens de subsistance, mais elles tendent désormais à être monétisées plutôt que d'impliquer des valeurs d'usage. Tout comme la crise précédente a brisé les emplois sûrs et l'agriculture paysanne pour jeter les bases du néolibéralisme, il apparaît aujourd'hui que la pandémie de COVID-19, par la monétisation des aides publiques et de la réciprocité, accélère la financiarisation sous la forme de services financiers et de dettes.

**Mots-clés :** financiarisation ; monétarisation ; réciprocité ; travail reproductif ; crise ; stratégies de subsistance ; pandémie de COVID-19 ; Pérou ; genre

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## Introduction

Global reports of the impacts of COVID-19 proclaim that we are in a period of social and economic crisis. While the idea of widespread crisis implies that a period of stability is under challenge, for many with volatile incomes, uncertainty is the norm (for example, Vigh 2008). People under recurrent stress develop repertoires of strategies to mitigate their circumstances. These frequently include reciprocity with kin and others and sharing or selling the necessary reproductive tasks people cannot live without (prepared food, doing laundry, etcetera). Although such strategies may endure over time, by comparing the content of what is shared and how at different historical moments, we can gain insight into how social relationships take advantage of and are exploited by new economic structures, such as financialization.

This paper takes up these issues in the context of Peru by comparing the dramatic situation in the 1980s with that of the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic. In the 1980s, Peru experienced massive economic and social problems, including hyperinflation and rising unemployment, along with civil insurgency and government repression. In 2020, contagion rates of COVID-19 rose amid a meltdown of the health system, and incomes evaporated due to stay-at-home orders, especially for informal sector workers, who represent over 70 percent of the workforce (Lust 2019). While the two periods reflect

escalated hardship, particularly for low-income and working-class Peruvians, neither was preceded by stability. The 1960s to the 1980s in Peru were turbulent times, both economically and politically. As the country rebuilt after the worst of political violence and economic breakdown in the 1990s, natural resource-based neoliberalism replaced the earlier state-led collective/industrial economic model. While the 1990s and 2000s were undoubtedly less volatile than the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, this relative calm has camouflaged many problems, including the expansion of precarious employment, ineffective state institutions, and endemic corruption in the political system. Thus, if what came before each crisis was not stability, neither can it be expected that what comes after will constitute improvements for precarious populations.

This article analyses these two crises to examine livelihood strategies for families in communities in Peru's central highlands over the intervening period. We frame the analysis in the transition to neoliberalism as the 1980s crisis ended and in the current movement of the Peruvian economy towards financial capitalism. Empirically, we focus on ethnographic data from a community that co-author Vincent calls "Allpachico." At the beginning of the 1980s, livelihood strategies of Allpachiqueños reflected dual dependence on peasant agriculture and wages from employment. As the latter became near negligible due to hyperinflation and finally vanished, the former could provide a stopgap for livelihoods but not a total solution. Sharing use-values in social networks and the work of women helped people get by. In the 1990s, as the national political and economic situation stabilized during the authoritarian and neoliberal government of Alberto Fujimori, Allpachiqueños migrated farther afield. More of them turned to informal and contract work in the absence of stable jobs. Thus, the conditions in which they were making a living when the pandemic crisis arrived in early 2020 were quite different from those in the 1980s. Cash was more common than use-values in sharing, while women's reproductive work remained central. By comparing the livelihood strategies of Allpachiqueños in each of the crises, this study finds similarities involving kin-based reciprocity, collective mechanisms, and the use of one-off activities and women's reproductive labour to provide income or access resources for subsistence. Based on the differences between the two periods, we argue that the use-values that dominated mutual support in the 1980s have given way to a central role for money in the current period, highlighting the ongoing financialization of capitalism in Peru.

## Reciprocity, Reproductive Work, Monetization, and Financialization

This article makes an empirical contribution to longstanding and more recent debates about reciprocity, reproductive work, and financialization. Reciprocity is a staple theme in anthropology, with classic works (Mauss 2016; Sahlin 2017) providing the framework for grounded discussions of sharing, gifts, obligations, and exploitation in societies all over the world (for example, Weiner 1980). The concept has been especially important in the Andes, where it has been identified as a core cultural trait (Alberti and Mayer 1974; Murra 1972; Rostworowski 2005). Most discussions of reciprocity in the Andes centre on formal rituals involving men (Mayer 2002). Allen (1988) provides an exception, as she highlights reciprocal relations between wives and husbands through complementarity in gender division of labour. This framing builds from daily reproductive work usually carried out by women—cooking, cleaning, providing clothes, childcare, and so on.<sup>1</sup> Within and beyond the Andes, a large literature also notes that reproductive work may be reciprocally exchanged among women in networks of mutual support (for example, Stack 1974; Wilhoit 2017). In this paper, we employ this more extensive pattern of reciprocity among people in pursuit of livelihood rather than addressing the Andean discussions.

Not only can reproductive work be reciprocally exchanged among kin and others, it can also be sold. When households experience shortfalls, women, who are usually those who put food on the table, repurpose the tasks they are most familiar with to earn money or exchange for other needed goods (Vincent 1998). This is evident throughout the Global South where informal street selling, especially of food, is a common income-earning activity popular with consumers (Hansen, Little and Milgram 2013). This work tends to be highly gendered, although tasks usually designated as feminine may be carried out by men when they are sold in a market (Overå 2007).

These themes of reciprocity and reproductive work have been at the centre of feminist economics and the more recent literature on “care work” (*cuidados*) coming out of Latin America (Vega Solís 2019). Recent ethnographic studies from different parts of the world have theorised this as the “monetization of reciprocity” (Botoeva 2015) or as the “financialization of everyday life” (James 2021). Gulzat Botoeva describes the monetization of reciprocity as the replacement by money of previously diverse services and things people gave one another. Consolidating such exchanges in the form of money opens the door to financialization, in which profit is sought from financial service provision

(including credit, loans, banking charges, etcetera) rather than from production. Such processes are ambiguous and nonlinear, building from complex operations and meanings of money (Jessop 2015; Villarreal 2014). Cristina Vega Solís reviews recent discussions of the commodification of women’s reproductive work or care work in tandem with their re-appropriation through collective initiatives, for example, the organization of soup kitchens, during times of crisis (2019). Along similar lines, Verónica Gago’s (2017) work examines the complex “baroque economies” of the informal sector, which combine known resources and relationships with new ones, allowing not only for mutual support but also for exploitation, especially through financialization as women tap their networks to repay debt (see also Palomera 2014; Stensrud 2017). Microcredit offers a clear case of how social relations are mobilized to make loan repayments, in effect reformulating social life to support financial capital (Federici 2014; Karim 2008). If financial services offer benefits (James 2021), they also extract value from sociality and the work done to keep households going. The enduring kin, social, and community ties of Allpachico discussed in this article reflect broader trends in how people navigate the contemporary world, which is increasingly characterized by the uneven monetization and financialization of social life and relations (see also Vincent 2018a, 2018b).

## **Methodology**

Most of the evidence in this article is from co-author Vincent’s long-term ethnographic fieldwork (beginning in 1984) in “Allpachico.” Allpachico is a pseudonym, referring to a legally recognized peasant community (*comunidad campesina*) in the department of Junín. The *comunidad campesina* is a collective polity that manages communal territory and productive property. While earlier research was conducted through participant observation, during the pandemic this was impossible. Instead, information was obtained through social media posts and phone calls to co-author Vincent’s long-time research assistant, Teodora, who is based in Lima. Close members of Teodora’s family are in Allpachico, and there has been some limited travel and daily telephone communications among them. In addition to this evidence based on the same community over time, information gathered by co-author Chanca as well as research conducted by Peruvian university students in Huancayo and regional communities provides further supportive information. News reports and other primary sources supplement these findings.

## The 1980s Crisis in Allpachico: Context

In the 1980s, Peru suffered a political and economic crisis of immense proportions. The state-led project from the 1970s of collectivist agriculture and nationalized industry had drastically failed, leading to strikes and hyperinflation.<sup>2</sup> This discouraged both agrarian production and commercialization. At the same time, *Sendero Luminoso*, the Shining Path guerrilla movement, began a lengthy period of political violence throughout the country. The ensuing crisis broke apart strong unions, national industries, and a vocal peasant faction, setting the stage for neoliberal transformation under the Fujimori regime in the 1990s (Balbi 1997).

These broader transformations were reflected in Allpachico. The community is within 300 km of Lima and about 20 km from the Mantaro Valley, a fertile agricultural and busy commercial zone with a history of smallholder capitalist agricultural development, early development of wage labour, and economic pluriactivity (Long and Roberts 1984). Allpachico has limited resources: about 1100 hectares in total, of which about 200 are arable, and 600 are suitable for pasture; the rest is too steep or rocky for either. For over 100 years, peasant agriculture has been either supported or replaced by remittances from migrant workers. By the 1980s, decades of combining male migrants' waged work and peasant agriculture had led to a vibrant political consciousness as peasant-workers. This image was challenged as new jobs were scarce, while those who had them were frequently on strike and their wages quickly lost value. No one had savings, banks were not commonly used, and the funds raised in support of a future electrification project were kept by the treasurer rather than in a formal savings account.

The comunidad saw its numbers bolstered by migrants returning to their families to farm. While the comunidad was active, higher levels of government were almost totally absent. There were a few food handouts from the government, delivered through local groups like the mothers' club. However, in general, people's perception of the state at the time was that it provided very little.

## Livelihood Strategies in the 1980s

These conditions informed the complex ways Allpachiqueños managed their lives in the 1980s. In the absence of stable income, reciprocity was essential to people then and has been in the years since, whether in periods of widespread

crisis or more personal upheaval. Kin provided the most durable support, but others were also tapped across a spectrum of relationships from the more solid to those that were more ephemeral. In the context of active agricultural production, large families, and hyperinflation, reciprocity took the form of shelter, goods, or access to resources that could be mobilized to get by. For example, in 1987, Raúl returned to his parents' house in Allpachico when he left Lima, where he had worked selling things informally on the street. He brought his partner, Nancy, and they used Allpachico as a base as he sought employment in the region, using tips from people he knew. He helped farm in the interim. In 1988 he had a contract in La Oroya, where his father worked for Centromín, the state-owned mining and smelter complex. Raúl and Nancy lived in his father's room in the workers' accommodations.

Raúl's mobility was not unusual. Allpachiqueños frequently travelled in search of income: migrants returned to the community, residents moved to Lima, the Amazonian lowlands or elsewhere if they had heard of an opportunity, and women and children got on buses and trains to sell small packets of food. The large families and frequent travel meant that information about a job or other income possibilities was part of what was shared within networks.

Reciprocity also included sending produce from Allpachico to children in Lima, especially by those who knew someone who worked on the railway. The children brought commercial goods to their parents when they visited. These were important symbolically if not always central to livelihood, as the offering of home-grown produce or goods not locally available served as a material marker of the relationship.

While parent-child relations were strongest, people also leveraged wider kin networks. For example, Raúl's partner Nancy was from a neighbouring community. Raúl's sister, Teodora, used Nancy's parents' house as a base when she sold hot drinks during the fiesta there. These ties facilitated the borrowing and lending of donkeys to transport produce, teams of bulls to plough fields, money to get back to the workplace after workers had spent everything at a fiesta, and so on. This particular network shows parent-child and sibling reciprocity, as well as with in-laws. *Compadrazgo* (the relationship between parents and godparents of a child) provided another common mechanism for establishing reciprocity.

While money appears in these transactions, inflation was constant and combined with government price and wage controls in contradictory ways.



Workers at the state-owned Centromín received wage increases at six-month intervals, by which time they were worthless. Still, households with male wage income remained the local elite since their income could be converted into purchases that could then be exchanged (frequently staple foods bought in bulk). This situation led people to prefer exchanges not mediated by money, and especially to avoid giving credit. In 1987, the daughter of Laura, a single mother living in poverty, went to a village shop to ask for half a kilogram of sugar to be charged to her mother's account. The shopkeeper considered and then told the child to have her mother bring a load of *muña* the following day.<sup>3</sup> Observing this, an older widow with no local children called the child and gave her some noodles to get a load of *muña* from Laura too.

It is no coincidence that many of these examples centre on women. As the story of Laura shows, women's versatility in terms of the work they performed (domestic or agricultural), flexibility in terms of schedule,<sup>4</sup> and their willingness to be compensated with goods or take lower wages made them critical actors in household livelihood. Reflecting widespread global patterns, women's domestic work was particularly amenable to earning bits of income, for example, when time-consuming special foods like hoof jelly or tamales were made to sell, going door to door. Women with no wage-earning man in the household were especially diligent in seeking out opportunities to help others fulfill necessary daily reproductive tasks: Laura might help someone prepare for a fiesta, wash clothes, help harvest, and clean the patio as she sought cast-off clothing for her children, food, access to draft animals or other resources.

In the pursuit of livelihood, people engaged in a myriad of exchanges and one-off ventures. Again, women were especially likely to be involved. In 1987 Teodora would go to the highland communities to buy a sheep, or she would send her husband. Her husband or another man would slaughter the sheep, while she sold its meat and fleece. Calculating the weight without reliable scales was risky, and sometimes she lost money. She and others gleaned potatoes from a commercial farmer in the area and occasionally got hired as day labourers in the harvest.

Men were more associated with waged work. Older men who did not have jobs and dedicated themselves to farming would generally be available to work as *peones* (farm labourers) for families with land but inadequate labour (usually the migrant worker families).

Apart from some minor food handouts, the government provided little help. This left the collective framework of the *comunidad* and other local committees to fill gaps. The *comunidad* provided logistical infrastructure for much of this, while women's organizations often carried out the work. They regularly organized fundraising "*actividades*" (activities) such as selling grilled chicken at fiestas to supply necessities to the school or the medical post.

While money was a part of many of these strategies, Allpachiqueños favoured exchanging for use-values directly due to hyperinflation. That was possible because people had self-produced goods (crops and livestock especially) or services to trade. When people had cash, it was spent as quickly as possible. In contrast, money takes on a much greater significance in the economic crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Crisis Among Allpachiqueños in 2020–21: Context**

Hyperinflation calmed in the 1990s as neoliberalism found a foothold, facilitating natural resource extraction which fed a booming economy (Mendoza 2013). This neoliberal neo-extractivist model of development manifested in two characteristics relevant here: a high proportion of informal workers and redistribution of resources to alleviate poverty. Between 2004 and 2019, the percentage of the economically active population working informally (for example, on contracts, without contracts, self-employed) declined slightly from 80 percent to 72 percent, despite an almost four-fold increase in the GDP (Frisancho et al. 2020; Lust 2019; World Bank 2021). While some could earn an adequate income through informal work, it was volatile: unpredictable events such as illness or increased competition (for instance, due to the influx of Venezuelan migrants) could destroy their prospects. Instead of policy or structural change to promote stable employment, the Peruvian government has monetized its responsibilities by implementing various cash transfer programs to address poverty. Consequently, over the same 2004–2019 period, the percentage of the population classified as living in poverty dropped from 59 percent to 20 percent (Frisancho et al. 2020). This approach to poverty reduction proved inadequate during the pandemic.

When the global COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Peru, caretaker President Martín Vizcarra implemented a series of measures to prevent the spread of the virus. With the adoption of decree 027-2020 in March 2020, the government declared a national state of emergency which included stay-at-home orders,

restrictions on the internal mobility of the population, curfews in different regions of the country, and discretionary government spending to deal with the impacts of the pandemic. The measures forced businesses and institutions to close, with employees working remotely where possible. Through this emergency decree, a range of different “*bonos*” or emergency cash transfer payments was rolled out. Despite the early and decisive state response, COVID-19 infection rates in Peru have been among the highest in the world (WHO 2021).

While the *bonos* distributed in response to the pandemic have been more generous than in some other countries in the region, the process of actually paying out these transfers has been chequered. Pre-existing problems with the national system used to determine eligibility, the *Sistema de Focalización de Hogares* (SISFOH, Household Targeting System, set up for earlier poverty-reduction cash transfers), prevented many Peruvians who met the criteria from getting the transfers (Chacaltana 2020; Frisancho et al. 2020). Another principal reason observers have given for Peru’s poor performance is that only 40 percent of adults have a bank account in a formal financial institution, making it very difficult to get payments to those who qualify (Trivelli 2020). Compounding these issues, due to the government-mandated shutdowns, many Peruvians who work in the informal sector have not been able to work, generating a socio-economic crisis for a large sector of the country’s population. The number of Peruvians living in monetary poverty increased from 20.5 percent to 34 percent between February 2020 and December 2020 (INEI 2020), with informal workers particularly hard hit (Lavado y Liendo 2020 cited in Frisancho et al. 2020, 9; Lust 2021).

This description of the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis highlights parameters that are very different from the context of the 1980s. Reflecting the broader national context, the economy of Allpachico has also changed radically over the past forty years. Instead of dependence on male migrant jobs in regional mining, income is more precarious. Men based in Allpachico who have jobs tend to be employed on temporary or rolling contracts and have lower relative wages than their fathers’ generation. Migrants live farther from Allpachico, most often in Lima, and women and men work informally. Cash is in demand, rather than being transformed into goods due to hyperinflation as in the 1980s. When the pandemic started, many people had savings, either kept in financial institutions, financialized pensions, or hidden in the house.

If the “worker” part of the former self-image of Allpachiqueños as worker-peasants has faded, so, too, has the “peasant” half. Agriculture has declined: without government support for small-scale peasant agriculture, it cannot provide a viable living. Indeed, the government has implemented policies many see as aimed at eliminating both peasant communities and small-scale production (Vincent 2014, 527). Poor farming prospects and few jobs have led to the outmigration of working-age adults. The population is now less than half of 1980s figures, and a high 33 percent is over the age of 60 (in contrast to about 12 percent for the Peruvian population (INEI 2015)). Vying with farming, wages, and remittances, now pensions provide a significant proportion of local incomes. These come from retired workers, but also the state cash transfer to those over 65 who live in poverty, *Pensión 65*, highlights a much more significant governmental presence in people’s lives than in the 1980s.

These conditions show an economy based heavily on money earned through self-employment, contract work or pensions, in contrast to the combination of wages from permanent jobs along with agriculture at the beginning of the 1980s. The dependence on a monetized economy has also led to relative familiarity with financialized consumption through loans, credit cards or buying on instalments: before the pandemic, representatives of financial institutions regularly visited the community offering loans. This situation is in stark contrast to the lack of interest this sector displayed in poor peasants in the 1980s. We turn now to how people are weaving these possibilities and problems into a livelihood.

### **Livelihood Strategies in the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis**

Because of the fieldwork challenges, rather than focusing on those *in* Allpachico, we focus on those *from* there, some of whom are in the community, along with complementary information from the central highlands.

The opportunities available to people have changed significantly since the 1980s. Most importantly, it has been impossible for most to return to Allpachico due not only to government-mandated restrictions on travel but because the community itself has put barriers in place and required anyone permitted to return to spend time in quarantine. Only a handful of people has gone back. While others might have wanted to, as Teodora has commented, there was no way of making a living there. Unlike in the 1980s, when families could absorb their migrant kin into helping with farm work and provide enough food for all, many fields are not in cultivation. After so long, migrants have lost the

physical ability to carry out the demanding work of farming. Their children never developed any knowledge of this, as co-author Chanca recounted for an acquaintance in a community in Huancavelica. This family had managed to return to their place of origin and did sow crops, with the help of family living there, but it was difficult and unaccustomed work.<sup>5</sup>

The pandemic hit at the beginning of the harvest season, which meant that those people in Allpachico who did work land could feed themselves while their produce lasted. The 2020/21 agricultural year has been more difficult for several reasons. Expanding the amount of land under cultivation requires powerful machinery to prepare fields that have been fallow and invaded by weeds. Money for inputs is in short supply. Climate change has wreaked havoc on production, with delayed rains at the start of the season, heavy rains at the end, and early frosts. Yields were low as a result. Further, hiring labourers to help requires an unaffordable monetary cost, while the older residents are unable to carry out much heavy work. Thus, while some may try to grow a bit more than they usually would, the tendency is to keep the workload manageable within the family. The family labour supply is smaller than in the 1980s due to reduced family sizes and travel restrictions.

Reciprocity among kin remains the most significant aspect of livelihood strategies. In 2020, reflecting a typical pattern from the 1980s but in a new and reduced way, some of those who had harvested food had the opportunity to send produce two separate times to relatives living in Lima on a truck organized by the local municipality. This reflects the more active role of the municipal government as compared to the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> While some of the food was consumed, other items were herbs or dairy products like cheese that the recipients could sell to get much-needed money. The lower agricultural production meant that some Allpachico-based households had no crops of their own to send; instead, they gathered wild plants or bought food from others. In return, city migrants who could access soap and sanitizer would send it back to those in the village, where such necessities were in short supply and could therefore be sold.

While the exchange of goods figures into this strategy, in the background is the need for cash, with items being transferred as often for their exchange value as for their use-value, or in ways that combine the two. Far from being the hot potato it was in the hyperinflationary 1980s, cash has now become paramount. Transport provides a good example. In the context of long lockdown periods and vastly inflated bus fares, travel depends on knowing someone with a car.

Access to personal vehicles is far more common now than it was in the 1980s and getting a ride has become entrenched in the reciprocal exchanges. However, since using a car costs money, this requires that the person travelling pay the costs. Two of Teodora's children have been able to visit occasionally. One works as a driver and can sometimes travel to Lima or transport kin. The other lives in Allpachico's district capital and had suffered an injury that required him to travel to Lima for specialized treatment, most often relying on his brother-in-law, who has a car.

The need to buy the means of subsistence has eradicated savings. As Teodora said at one point, when co-author Vincent asked her about how this crisis compared to that of the 1980s, she had learned how to tighten her belt, eating one meal a day. Before the pandemic, she earned a modest income from selling her homemade soup in front of the house in Lima, able to save when sales were good to tide her over the hot summer or when the neighbourhood water supply was shut off. For much of the time, such sales have been prohibited, although her daughter, who also makes food for sale, has managed to continue at times since she knows someone who can deliver the food to clients' houses – again reflecting the importance of transport. Such deliveries of food, a product of prime necessity, are allowed. The sale of prepared food provided a strategy for poor Peruvians in the 1980s and the years since.<sup>7</sup> This reliance on income from necessary reproductive work highlights the continued centrality of women's roles in times of crisis. Teodora's daughters-in-law in Allpachico and the district capital are likewise busy raising guinea pigs and chickens to sell, to have money to buy from the weekly trucks that supply communities.

Such reproductive and one-off work echoes what happened in the 1980s. Significantly while the sale of domestic reproductive work, such as prepared foods, is still mostly undertaken by women, there are more men getting into it (see also Overå 2007 for Ghana). This is related to the long-term precarity embedded in the structure of the economically active population. In the current situation, anyone who can will turn to either setting up shops (like Teodora's daughter, or someone interviewed as part of Peruvian university student work [Alarcón Soto et al. 2021]) or selling in informal markets in cities. Co-author Chanca reports a significant increase in informal sales in Huancayo, including used household goods (again, reaching into household reproduction), as people tried to access needed cash. The municipality of Huancayo estimated that in July 2020, the number of people engaged in informal street peddling had

increased 60 percent from the year before because of the loss of income related to the shutdowns, despite such sales being banned due to concerns over social distancing (RPP Noticias 2020).

Collective strategies have also been invoked. During the 1980s, Peruvians began to organize community-based food programs known as *ollas comunes* (soup kitchens) or *comedores populares* (diners offering food at low cost, using food handouts and volunteer workers). Throughout the pandemic, these have again flourished throughout Peru as a self-help strategy where people either eat for free or pay a minimal amount. A recent estimate was that there were 1,300 *ollas comunes* in Lima alone (AFP Noticias 2021).

In another register, in the 1980s in Allpachico, women's groups held activities to raise money for public services such as the school or the medical post in the absence of government support. In the years since, people have mobilized this mechanism to raise funds for specific private purposes. Most often, this is to pay medical bills. Several activities were organized to pay for Teodora's son's costs related to treating his injury. Teodora's daughter, for instance, sold grilled chicken at one special event while her daughter-in-law, living in Allpachico, sold grilled trout at another. Help was also received from the injured man's high school graduation cohort. Interestingly, Teodora kept a notebook in which she recorded the names of the donors and the amounts they donated. Such careful attention to the financial details reflects the monetization of social and kin reciprocity (Botoeva 2015).

Government support has also become monetized. Cash transfers offered during the pandemic were supposed to be based on need, as reflected by the SISFOH. However, distribution was slow and patchy, with many having to wait for months in severe hardship (Cuadros 2020a, 2020b; Vásquez-Rowe and Gandolfi 2020). When someone in a family network did receive one of the funds, it was frequently shared with others, perforce in small amounts of around 10 or 20 dollars. This could be done by cell phone or bank transfers, facilitating sharing over great distances. For example, Teodora's long-estranged husband, Rogelio, was living in Allpachico and received one of the bonos. Although he had not supported their children after the marriage fell apart, he did send small sums to his two daughters in Lima who passed on some of it to their mother. Teodora did not receive any government support until August when she in turn shared with her children. This monetized reciprocity is a highly significant

vector of financialization through the price financial institutions charge to transfer funds.

In such conditions, money lenders have also come to the fore, both through informal and formal financial institutions. For instance, Teodora's son in Allpachico sought and was approved for a loan from a financial institution to sow crops. Teodora dissuaded him from this since farming was so uncertain now. He would have used his house to guarantee the loan. Losing it would have meant destitution and being compelled to leave the community. Teodora counselled him to just concentrate on producing enough food to eat. Others have taken out loans. An interviewee in Peruvian student research, for instance, used up their savings and took out a loan to start a small shop in the city of Jauja (Alarcón Soto et al. 2021, 27).

Thus far, Allpachiqueños have been hesitant to take on debts from formal institutions. Co-author Chanca discovered that in Huancayo informal money lenders are doing active business, however. Despite higher interest rates, he learned that borrowers appreciate avoiding the complicated and time-consuming bureaucracy required when dealing with a bank or credit union. Banks, as Teodora has told co-author Vincent countless times, “*no te perdonan:*” they don't forgive. In contrast, an informal money lender can be more flexible with repayment. Co-author Chanca was told by one such lender that only rarely had people defaulted on their loans.

## **Conclusion**

Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the 1980s crises in Peru manifested in devastated incomes and danger. They also share striking similarities in the strategies used by vulnerable populations to achieve livelihood, including reciprocal exchanges, collective supports, and the mobilization of reproductive work beyond domestic use to make ends meet. That these mechanisms have endured highlights the constant spectre of precarity over the past decades.

How social reproduction strategies are used in the two periods has changed in significant ways, however. While use-values were central to reciprocal exchange in the hyperinflationary 1980s, now exchanges tend to be mediated by money, which we suggest may be evidence of the “monetization” of reciprocity or “financialization of everyday life.” Since the 1990s, the neoliberalizing economy has involved contracts and self-generated precarious and informal



work and the implementation of state cash transfers as a way of resolving poverty. This both monetizes state support and places the onus for generating income on the people themselves, rather than on industry via employment.

Associated with the neoliberalization of the economy and consistent with a global push (including by the World Bank since 2013), “financial inclusion” has become a Peruvian government policy priority. There is now a dedicated bureau within the Superintendency of Banks, Insurance and Pension Fund Administrators (SBS). Former Minister of Development and Social Inclusion Carolina Trivelli (2020), long an advocate, renewed her calls during the pandemic. She laments that only 40 percent of Peruvians have a bank account, and under 7 percent use credit cards (Trivelli 2020). Seven years earlier, a survey of senior financial stakeholders (including Trivelli, then Minister) predicted that full financial inclusion would occur by 2020 (Álvarez Cisneros 2013). The fact that this has not happened suggests the reluctance of many Peruvians, like Teodora, whose views on the risks associated with formal loans were presented earlier. Trivelli (2020, 110) believes that formal institutions and digital banking can facilitate cash flow, formalize the economy, be more efficient, and help people in moments of difficulty; Teodora is worried about the potential of destitution from an unforgiving institution. The Peruvian government has already permitted people to withdraw their pension funds, thus mortgaging their futures to survive in the present. Facilitating loans would only emphasize further that they are on their own, that the government will assist them to indebt themselves, but not to provide them with the stable jobs that would allow them to get out of debt.

Peru is not alone in setting up the structures to promote a “debtfare” (Soederberg 2014) economy, leading to new forms of precarity and exploitation. In the wake of the pandemic, there have been worldwide calls to further embed the monetization of government support, for example through universal basic incomes (Anonymous 2021). Such allocation of funds does nothing to prevent the growing concentration of wealth, instead of economic restructuring to make space for all in the productive economy. Further, the monetization of government support joins the monetization of reciprocity to position social relations to be instrumental in the financialization of social reproduction, with women at the forefront (Gago 2017). Social networks are already a lead vector of financialized extraction through the cost of the money transfer services vulnerable people use to share with one another. While this paper has focused on Peru, the combination of economic crisis, state provision of emergency

cash transfers, and reciprocal support networks are widespread. Just as the global recession of the 1980s set the stage for neoliberalism and the ensuing precarization of worker incomes, so now measures to combat the crisis precipitated by the pandemic are likely to lead to the further financialization of the economy.

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## **Notes**

- 1 The reproductive work we discuss here, the daily work needed to keep people going, is part of a larger system of social reproduction. The latter refers to the full range of work needed to maintain society as a whole over time, including childbearing, the tasks of daily life, and the conditions necessary to the economic and political system (Edhom, Harris and Young 1978; Smith 2018). This is an historical process filled with contradiction, collaboration, synergies, and crisis.
- 2 The accumulated inflation rate between 1985 and 1990 is estimated at 2.2 million percent (Boloña cited in Cameron 1997: 61).
- 3 *Muña* is an aromatic herb that is stored with potatoes to make the worms fall out.
- 4 They emphatically did not have more “leisure” time than men; they simply tended to have more control over how they spent their days, frequently rising very early in the morning to cook for the day so they would be available to help others.

- 5 These findings are supported by other reports. Early in the pandemic, news reports recounted thousands of people struggling to return to their communities of origin from Lima, sometimes on foot under difficult conditions (for example, Deutsche Welle 2020; Gastelumendi 2020). However, a study of return migrants in highland Piura indicates that this was more restricted than the reports suggest (Burneo and Trelles 2020). In general, those who returned had precarious work that was disrupted by the pandemic and did not own their own houses. They returned because the lockdown was prolonged, they had exhausted any savings, were worried about contracting the virus, and wanted to stay with family in their communities of origin. Almost none had received a bono and they had no health care. Some could work on family land, but younger migrants did not have the capacity for farm work. Help from kin and others from their place of origin was central through this time.
- 6 There was a wider practice for municipalities to organize the transport of harvest food to migrants in Lima. For example, La República newspaper (2020a) reported on a municipality in Ayacucho doing this.
- 7 La República newspaper (2020b) tells of an elderly couple in Lima who, not having received any of the government cash funds by July, had taken to selling hamburgers from in front of their house.

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