

ABSTRACT

“Flexible” employment relationships (namely, direct fixed-term, seasonal and casual contracts; employment through labour agencies or subcontractors; and employment not observing legal regulations) facilitate workforce adjustment to fluctuations in labour requirements, and tend also to reduce labour costs more generally. As it has extensively been described in the literature, flexible employment forms, that tend to be over-represented in jobs requiring less schooling and skills, usually are lacking in terms of dimensions such as pay, access to social benefits, union membership, and collective bargaining coverage.

It has often been speculated that sustained economic growth during a reasonably long period, accompanied by an improving labour market situation, would be a favourable condition for the reduction of the incidence of such flexible, lower-quality employment relationships. However, prolonged economic growth may not suffice to ensure the expansion of good, better protected jobs, as employment practices in each country naturally depend on other factors, among which regulatory, enforcement and compliance trajectories in the area of employment protection are central. Longitudinal and cross-country research results, referring to diverse regional contexts, have repeatedly highlighted the role of legal labour regulation in explaining the comparative frequency of the different types of employment relationships, as well as the fact that its actual labour market effects depend on the degree of compliance with legal norms.

The study reported in this article is expected to contribute to the understanding of these issues by looking at the use made of flexible employment forms in the private sectors of three Latin American countries - Argentina, Chile and Peru – during the period that runs from the early 2000s to the early 2010s. Even though having implemented dissimilar economic policies, these countries have in common the fact that economic growth was practically uninterrupted throughout this period, showing persistently high (Argentina and Peru) or moderate (Chile) rates, and also share improving global labour market indicators. At the same time, relevant regulations followed distinctive courses in each country, and each has its own tradition in enforcement and compliance.

The article is organised as follows. In the next section, general economic and labour market trends in each country during the 2000s-early 2010s are recorded to clarify the shared context. In section 2, the incidence and structure of flexible employment in the private sector are examined, and in the third section some of the distinctive features of flexible employment are described. In section 4, and although their respective impacts still require rigorous investigation, the possible influences that might have converged in each one of the three selected countries to shape the configuration and evolution of employment practices, and therefore the job structure, are loosely discussed focusing in regulatory trajectories, and enforcement and compliance traditions. The last section presents some comments intended for future research.