

Gaps between basic salary, inflation, and the cost of living and their implications for sustainable development in Ecuador

Brechas entre el salario básico, la inflación y el costo de vida, y sus implicaciones para el desarrollo sostenible en Ecuador

Divari tra salario base, inflazione e costo della vita, e le loro implicazioni per lo sviluppo sostenibile in Ecuador

Jorge Estrada Rodríguez¹

Email: jorge.estradar@ug.edu.ec

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9573-4995>

Leonardo Alvaro Banguera Arroyo²

Email: leonardo.bangueraa@ug.edu.ec

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0261-2372>

John Emmanuel Tobar Litardo³

Email: john.tobarl@ug.edu.ec

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7762-073X>

Sergio Andrés Escudero Lainez⁴

Email: sergio.escudero@ug.edu.ec

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4416-2470>

Correspondencia: Jorge Estrada Rodríguez¹ Email: jorge.estradar@ug.edu.ec

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1. Universidad de Guayaquil, Guayaquil, Ecuador.
2. Universidad de Guayaquil, Guayaquil, Ecuador.
3. Universidad de Guayaquil, Guayaquil, Ecuador.
4. Universidad de Guayaquil, Guayaquil, Ecuador.

Abstract

The relationship between the basic wage, inflation, and the cost of living is key to analyzing the social sustainability and economic well-being of households in Ecuador. The objective of this study was to analyze the gaps between the Unified Basic Wage (SBU), the Basic Family Basket (CBF), and the Monthly Family Income (IFM) during the 2007–2025 period from a socioeconomic perspective. A quantitative, non-experimental, longitudinal, and documentary methodology was used, drawing on data from INEC and international organizations. The results show that the SBU continues to provide insufficient coverage relative to the CBF, while the apparent adequacy of the IFM depends on assumptions regarding income earners. The study also reveals a deficit in real liquidity, which is offset by strategies of economic resilience and persistent family adaptation.

Keywords: purchasing power; household liquidity; economic vulnerability; social resilience; decent work.

Resumen

La relación entre el salario básico, la inflación y el costo de vida es fundamental para analizar la sostenibilidad social y el bienestar económico de los hogares en el Ecuador. El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar las brechas entre el Salario Básico Unificado (SBU), la Canasta Básica Familiar (CBF) y el Ingreso Familiar Mensual (IFM) durante el período 2007–2025, desde una perspectiva socioeconómica. Se empleó una metodología cuantitativa, no experimental, longitudinal y documental, utilizando datos provenientes del INEC y de organismos internacionales. Los resultados muestran que el SBU sigue ofreciendo una cobertura insuficiente frente a la CBF, mientras que la aparente suficiencia del IFM depende de supuestos sobre el número de perceptores de ingresos en el hogar. El estudio también revela un déficit en la liquidez real, el cual es compensado mediante estrategias de resiliencia económica y una constante adaptación por parte de las familias.

Palabras clave: poder adquisitivo; liquidez de los hogares; vulnerabilidad económica; resiliencia social; trabajo decente.

Riassunto

La relazione tra salario base, inflazione e costo della vita è fondamentale per analizzare la sostenibilità sociale e il benessere economico delle famiglie in Ecuador. L'obiettivo di questo studio è stato quello di analizzare, da una prospettiva socioeconomica, i divari tra il Salario Base Unificato (SBU), il Paniere Familiare di Base (CBF) e il Reddito Familiare Mensile (IFM) nel periodo 2007–2025. È stata adottata una metodologia quantitativa, non sperimentale, longitudinale e basata sull'analisi documentale, utilizzando dati provenienti dall'INEC e da organizzazioni internazionali. I risultati mostrano che lo SBU continua a offrire una copertura

insufficiente rispetto al CBF, mentre l'apparente adeguatezza dell'IFM dipende da alcune ipotesi relative ai percettori di reddito. Lo studio rivela inoltre un deficit di liquidità reale, compensato da strategie di resilienza economica e da un costante adattamento da parte delle famiglie.

Parole chiave: potere d'acquisto; liquidità familiare; vulnerabilità economica; resilienza sociale; lavoro dignitoso.

Introduction

The Sustainable development requires not only economic growth but also the ability to guarantee decent living conditions, social equity, and economic resilience in households. In this context, family well-being constitutes a fundamental dimension of social sustainability, which is why international organizations recommend assessing real income, income distribution, and economic security as essential elements of human development (OECD, 2024; Stiglitz et al., 2009). From this perspective, income adequacy and households' ability to meet their basic needs are determining factors in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals related to poverty reduction, food security, and decent work.

The International Labor Organization maintains that the effectiveness of wage policies depends on the behavior of real wages, since inflation can significantly limit workers' purchasing power (ILO, 2024). Likewise, ECLAC warns that the persistent gaps in inequality, informality, and economic vulnerability in Latin America constitute obstacles to progress toward inclusive and sustainable social development, which requires strengthening social protection systems and public policies aimed at well-being (ECLAC, 2024). Complementarily, the World Bank (2021) notes that large segments of the population remain exposed to conditions of vulnerability that compromise their ability to weather economic crises and maintain adequate levels of consumption.

In Ecuador, the Unified Basic Wage (SBU) rose from USD 170 in 2007 to USD 470 in 2025 (Ministry of Labor, 2024). However, this growth must be analyzed in relation to the Basic Family Basket (CBF), whose value reached USD 813.82 in 2025, while the Monthly Family Income (IFM) recorded an official coverage rate of 107.80% (INEC, 2025a; INEC, 2025b). Despite this, the results of this study show that the gap between the SBU and the CBF remained negative throughout the entire period analyzed, indicating that a worker earning only the basic wage is unable to cover the household's basic needs on their own. This pattern is consistent with recent research showing that wage growth does not always translate into equivalent improvements in purchasing power and quality of life (Piedra et al., 2023; Delgado, 2024).

The issue takes on greater significance when one considers that the IFM's official methodology is based on the assumption of 1.6 income earners per household—a situation that may differ from the reality of many households affected by unemployment, underemployment, or informal employment (INEC, 2026). These conditions increase economic vulnerability and limit the ability to ensure adequate nutrition and sustainable human development, a situation reflected in persistent problems such as chronic child malnutrition (UNICEF, 2024).

Although recent literature has independently studied variables such as wages, inflation, and poverty, few studies have examined the relationship between the Unified Basic Wage, the Basic Family Basket, real liquidity, and the economic resilience of households from a social sustainability perspective. Consequently, this study aims to analyze the gaps between the Unified

Basic Wage, the Basic Family Basket, and the Monthly Family Income in Ecuador during the 2007–2025 period, assessing their implications for economic well-being and sustainable development. The hypothesis is that the sustained growth of the SBU has not been sufficient to ensure effective coverage of basic needs or to stably strengthen the social sustainability of Ecuadorian households, due to the combined influence of inflation, labor market conditions, and methodological limitations in the estimation of family income.

State of the Art

The analysis of the relationships between wages, inflation, and the cost of living has gained prominence in studies on economic well-being and social sustainability. Recent literature has shifted the focus from nominal wage growth to the study of real wages, household liquidity, and effective consumption capacity, since labor income considered in isolation may provide an incomplete picture of household living conditions (ILO, 2024; OECD, 2024). In this regard, economic well-being does not depend exclusively on income levels, but also on the ability to meet basic needs in contexts characterized by inflation, inequality, and social vulnerability.

The International Labor Organization maintains that real wages are a key indicator for assessing workers' purchasing power. The World Wage Report 2024–2025 notes that nominal wage increases do not always offset rising prices, which limits actual improvements in well-being. Complementarily, the OECD, through its report *How's Life? 2024*, proposes a multidimensional view of well-being, incorporating variables associated with income, economic security, inequality, and resources available to future generations (OECD, 2024). These approaches help us understand that economic sufficiency cannot be measured solely based on wage trends.

In Latin America, ECLAC has demonstrated that poverty and vulnerability cannot be explained solely by income levels. The Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean 2024 highlights the need to strengthen universal and resilient social protection systems to address structural gaps in inequality and labor informality (ECLAC, 2024). Likewise, the World Bank (2021) warns that the pandemic increased the economic vulnerability of millions of households, highlighting the fragility of large segments of the population in maintaining adequate levels of consumption in the face of economic crises.

Evidence from Ecuador confirms these concerns. The INEC defines the Basic Family Basket (CBF) based on a typical household consisting of four members and 1.6 income earners. Although this methodology serves as an important benchmark for monitoring economic conditions, it also has a limitation related to the heterogeneity of the labor market and the actual composition of households. In this regard, the results of this study show that, despite the sustained increase in the Unified Basic Wage (SBU), it remained below the CBF throughout the 2007–2025 period, while the apparent adequacy of the Monthly Family Income (IFM) depends,

to a large extent, on the assumption of multiple income earners and the inclusion of supplementary income.

In Ecuador, Piedra et al. (2023) demonstrated that the stability of the SBU during the pandemic affected its ability to cover the basic basket of goods, while Delgado (2024) concluded that minimum wage growth cannot be interpreted in isolation from variables such as productivity, employment, and the cost of living. However, both studies have limitations related to their time frame and the absence of variables such as real liquidity, actual income earners, or economic resilience.

From a theoretical perspective, the problem can be addressed using different models. The ILO's real wage approach allows for an analysis of the relationship between SBU, inflation, and purchasing power; the OECD's welfare approach incorporates economic security and inequality; ECLAC's social vulnerability perspective explains the effects of informality and poverty; while models of household income elasticity and economic resilience help us understand how households compensate for persistent shortfalls through borrowing, reduced consumption, or family support networks.

Recent literature from UNICEF (2024) shows that food insecurity and child malnutrition continue to be problems associated with poverty and economic vulnerability. This suggests that gaps between income and the cost of living have implications that transcend the economic sphere and affect areas related to health, education, and human development.

In methodological terms, significant gaps have been identified in the national literature. Most studies address the minimum wage, inflation, or poverty in isolation, with few studies integrating—within a broad historical series - variables such as the Basic Living Basket, net income, effective employment density, and family resilience mechanisms. Consequently, this study broadens the existing discussion by comparing the statistical adequacy of the Monthly Family Income with households' actual liquidity, providing a more comprehensive interpretation of economic well-being and conditions of social sustainability in Ecuador.

Method

This study was conducted using a quantitative approach with descriptive, correlational, and explanatory scope, aimed at analyzing the behavior of the Unified Basic Wage (SBU), the Basic Family Basket (CBF), the Vital Basic Basket (CBV), and the Monthly Family Income (IFM) in Ecuador during the 2007–2025 period, as well as their relationships and implications for household well-being. The design was non-experimental, longitudinal, and retrospective, based on the analysis of time series data without manipulation of variables. A documentary methodology was used with data from INEC, BCE, ILO, ECLAC, and the Ministry of Labor. The analysis included descriptive techniques, Pearson's correlation, linear regression, and residual analysis, as well as an econometric model of household income elasticity with

employment, Gini coefficient, and liquidity variables, supplemented by an economic resilience analysis to interpret households' ability to adjust in the face of persistent socioeconomic gaps.

Analysis of Results

Performance of the SBU, IFM, and CBF

The results show sustained growth in the SBU (193.75%) and the IFM, compared with a smaller increase in the CBF (84.91%). However, the SBU–CBF gap remains negative throughout the entire period.

Table 1. SBU, IFM, and CBF (2007–2025)

Year	Unified Basic Wage (SBU)	% Increase (SBU)	Basic Family Basket (CBF)	% Increase (CBF)	Monthly Family Income (IFM)	Gap (SBU - CBF)	Gap (IFM - CBF)
2006	\$160.00		\$440.81			-\$280.81	
2007	\$170.00	6.25%	\$482.11	9.37%	\$331.43	-\$312.11	-\$150.68
2008	\$200.00	17.65%	\$511.53	6.10%	\$389.92	-\$311.53	-\$121.61
2009	\$218.00	9.00%	\$521.87	2.02%	\$424.16	-\$303.87	-\$97.71
2010	\$240.00	10.09%	\$538.51	3.19%	\$448.00	-\$298.51	-\$90.51
2011	\$264.00	10.00%	\$578.04	7.34%	\$492.80	-\$314.04	-\$85.24
2012	\$292.00	10.61%	\$595.38	3.00%	\$545.07	-\$303.38	-\$50.31
2013	\$318.00	8.90%	\$620.84	4.28%	\$593.60	-\$302.84	-\$27.24
2014	\$340.00	6.92%	\$634.69	2.23%	\$634.67	-\$294.69	-\$0.02
2015	\$354.00	4.12%	\$673.21	6.07%	\$660.80	-\$319.21	-\$12.41
2016	\$366.00	3.39%	\$694.01	3.09%	\$683.20	-\$328.01	-\$10.81
2017	\$375.00	2.46%	\$708.98	2.16%	\$700.00	-\$333.98	-\$8.98
2018	\$386.00	2.93%	\$712.56	0.50%	\$720.53	-\$326.56	\$7.97
2019	\$394.00	2.07%	\$719.88	1.03%	\$735.47	-\$325.88	\$15.59
2020	\$400.00	1.52%	\$711.20	-1.21%	\$746.67	-\$311.20	\$35.47
2021	\$400.00	0.00%	\$719.65	1.19%	\$746.67	-\$319.65	\$27.02
2022	\$425.00	6.25%	\$763.44	6.08%	\$793.33	-\$338.44	\$29.89
2023	\$450.00	5.88%	\$786.00	2.96%	\$840.00	-\$336.00	\$54.00
2024	\$460.00	2.22%	\$797.97	1.52%	\$858.67	-\$337.97	\$60.70
2025*	\$470.00	2.17%	\$815.12	2.15%	\$877.33	-\$345.12	\$62.21

Note. INEC, author's own calculations.

A statistical equilibrium point for the IFM is identified in 2014, followed by subsequent structural divergences.

SBU–CBV Ratio

The CBV shows more moderate growth, with SBU coverage rising from 51.54% to 81.30%.

Table 2. SBU vs. CBV (2007–2025)

Year	Unified Basic Wage (SBU)	VITAL Basic Basket (CBV)	Gap (SBU vs. CBV)	% COVERAGE (SBU vs. CBV)
2007	170.00	329.84	159.84	51.54%
2008	200.00	365.12	165.12	54.78%
2009	218.00	378.40	160.40	57.61%
2010	240.00	388.20	148.20	61.82%
2011	264.00	405.15	141.15	65.16%
2012	292.00	418.30	126.30	69.81%
2013	318.00	435.60	117.60	73.00%
2014	340.00	452.18	112.18	75.19%
2015	354.00	472.30	118.30	74.95%
2016	366.00	488.40	122.40	74.94%
2017	375.00	499.10	124.10	75.14%
2018	386.00	502.40	116.40	76.83%
2019	394.00	505.80	111.80	77.90%
2020	400.00	508.15	108.15	78.72%
2021	400.00	511.20	111.20	78.25%
2022	425.00	534.60	109.60	79.50%
2023	450.00	555.20	105.20	81.05%
2024	460.00	562.40	102.40	81.79%
2025	470.00	578.10	108.10	81.30%

Note. INEC, own calculations.

SBU–CBV Statistical Relationship

The initial model shows:

- $R^2 = 99.1\%$
- Durbin-Watson = 0.68

However, the residual analysis reveals autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity.

After adjustment:

- $R^2 = 55.48\%$
- Correlation ≈ 0.75

This indicates that the SBU partially explains the CBV, but not completely.

Real Liquidity Index (IBLR)

The IBLR shows persistent deficits relative to the CBF:

Table 3. IBLR vs. CBF and CBV (2007–2025)

Year	Basic Basket (CBF)	Vital Basket (CBV)	IFM (INEC)	Monthly Net Income (IL)	IBLR vs. CBF	IBLR vs. CBV	IL vs. CBF Gap	NI vs. CBV Gap
2007	459.72	329.84	307.2	268.5	41.59%	18.60%	-\$191.22	-\$61.34
2008	510.45	365.12	345.6	302.1	40.82%	17.26%	-\$208.35	-\$63.02
2009	525.1	378.4	380.8	332.9	36.60%	12.02%	-\$192.20	-\$45.50
2010	538.51	388.2	424	370.6	31.18%	4.53%	-\$167.91	-\$17.60
2011	560.12	405.15	473.6	414	26.09%	-2.18%	-\$146.12	\$8.85
2012	585.81	418.3	520	454.6	22.40%	-8.68%	-\$131.21	\$36.30
2013	610.5	435.6	560	489.5	19.82%	-12.37%	-\$121.00	\$53.90
2014	634.33	452.18	634.67	489.1	22.90%	-8.16%	-\$145.23	\$36.92
2015	660.8	472.3	660.8	509.3	22.93%	-7.83%	-\$151.50	\$37.00
2016	685.1	488.4	685.1	528	22.93%	-8.11%	-\$157.10	\$39.60
2017	709.2	499.1	709.2	546.5	22.94%	-9.50%	-\$162.70	\$47.40
2018	712.1	502.4	725.33	558.9	21.51%	-11.25%	-\$153.20	\$56.50
2019	715.5	505.8	734.67	566.1	20.88%	-11.92%	-\$149.40	\$60.30
2020	716.14	508.15	746.67	575.4	19.65%	-13.23%	-\$140.74	\$67.25
2021	719.3	511.2	746.67	575.4	20.01%	-12.56%	-\$143.90	\$64.20
2022	750.4	534.6	800	616.5	17.84%	-15.32%	-\$133.90	\$81.90
2023	785.6	555.2	834.67	643.2	18.13%	-15.85%	-\$142.40	\$88.00
2024	795.3	562.4	858.67	661.7	16.80%	-17.66%	-\$133.60	\$99.30
2025	815.4	578.1	877.3	676.1	17.08%	-16.95%	-\$139.30	\$98.00

Households show negative gaps ranging from –140 to –191 USD relative to the CBF.

Actual Income Per Capita (IPA) Model

The econometric model shows high significance:

- $R^2 = 98.47\%$
- Adjusted $R^2 = 98.14\%$
- Durbin-Watson = 1.859

Most relevant variables:

- Suitable employment (86.15%)
- Gini
- NPn_IL_dif

It is confirmed that the assumption of 1.6 earners is only consistent over limited periods.

Structural break in the IFM

A structural change is observed:

- 2007–2014: $R^2 \approx 99.4\%$
- 2015–2025: $R^2 \approx 34\%$

This indicates a loss of explanatory power of the IFM with respect to the CBF.

Discussion

The results show that the increase in the Unified Basic Wage (SBU) in Ecuador between 2007 and 2025 does not translate into a proportional improvement in household purchasing power. Although the SBU shows an upward trend, the gap relative to the Basic Family Basket (CBF) remains negative throughout the entire period, confirming that a single income is not sufficient to cover the cost of living. This finding aligns with the ILO (2024), which notes that nominal wages lose explanatory power when inflation reduces real wages.

Similarly, the behavior of the Monthly Family Income (IFM) should be interpreted with caution, as its apparent sufficiency relative to the CBF stems from methodological assumptions such as the existence of 1.6 wage earners per household and the aggregation of supplementary income. The INEC (2025) establishes this criterion as a statistical basis, although it does not necessarily reflect the actual diversity of labor structures in Ecuador.

A structural turning point can be identified starting in 2014. While the IFM shows a statistical surplus relative to the CBF, the SBU maintains a constant negative gap. This suggests that coverage of the basket depends more on household structure than on individual wages, which aligns with ECLAC (2024), which warns of persistent inequalities and labor informality in Latin America.

Therefore, the relationship between the SBU and the Basic Vital Basket (CBV) shows that wages cover only 81.30% in 2025, demonstrating that wage increases are partially offset by rising costs of essential goods. This trend is consistent with the OECD (2024), which emphasizes that well-being depends not only on income but also on actual conditions of access to basic goods.

Conclusions

The results show that the increase in the Unified Basic Wage (SBU) in Ecuador between 2007 and 2025 does not translate into a proportional improvement in household purchasing power. Although the SBU shows an upward trend, the gap relative to the Basic Family Basket (CBF) remains negative throughout the period, confirming that an individual's income is not sufficient to cover the cost of living. This finding aligns with the ILO (2024), which notes that nominal wages lose their explanatory power when inflation reduces real wages.

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