

How much does it cost to live a dignified life in Mexico?

—Follow-up to the 2019–2024 Well-being Basket Survey. Regional Comparison

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Abstract

Measuring the purchasing power of wages involves a complex process: constructing a median consumption basket that approximates a dignified standard of living and tracking it over time to analyse inflationary impacts on impoverishment (loss of purchasing power). This article examines price changes for components of the Wellbeing Basket—developed since 2019 by the International Observatory for Living Wages—now including a regional comparison between Mexico City and Cancún, Quintana Roo (the country's most important tourist destination). The basket comprises three components to cover food, non-food, and food preparation needs under a dignity-centred framework. Using a basket methodology adjusted to real consumption patterns, data from the first post-neoliberal administration (2019-2024) are compared. Results reveal a sustained rise in the basket's cost, with significant regional disparities, underscoring the need for public policies that transcend subsistence frameworks and advocate for regionally differentiated minimum wages.



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Introduction

Many economic policy efforts aimed at reducing inequality focus on redistributing household income so that the poorest deciles can afford at least a basic consumption basket that ensures subsistence (Guslyakov et al., 2023). Therefore, consistently measuring the cost of such a basket becomes essential. However, this also raises preliminary challenges regarding the construction and definition of the basket's component elements. In this regard, the

Observatorio Internacional de Salarios Dignos (OISAD, International Observatory of Living Wages) has, since 2019, proposed the construction of a basket that goes beyond the subsistence minimum and enables a household head to provide for their family with dignity and decency (Arellano et al., 2020).

For this reason, this study uses the methodology proposed by OISAD to track the costs of the so-called 'well-being basket' for the year 2024 and includes a comparison of costs between the centre of the country (Mexico City) and the southeast; for this purpose, the city of Cancún, in Quintana Roo, was selected, in order to provide evidence to help determine the need to design regionally differentiated wage policies.

The Well-being Basket is the basket of goods and services required by an average household in our country (comprising four members: one under the age of 15 and three over the age of 15) to meet average needs in food, education, health, housing, clothing, and recreation. It comprises both a food basket and a non-food basket; the former includes the daily energy requirements in kilocalories according to the household's age composition, plus the inputs for the preparation, consumption and preservation of food. The non-food basket, meanwhile, includes items other than food (Arellano et al., 2020).

The following section provides an update on the most recent literature review published on the construction of consumption baskets and their measurement, with a view to influencing public policies aimed at combating poverty and inequality, to better understand the importance of systematically measuring the consumption and consumption patterns of a typical household. Subsequently, the methodology is explained, with the caveat that the construction of the consumption index follows the OISAD proposal. Therefore, reference is made to previous publications (Jiménez-Bandala and Jiménez-Bandala, 2024; Arellano et al., 2020a and Arellano et al., 2020b). The third section presents the results, comparing annual variations, variations between cities and variations in the purchasing power of minimum wages relative to the prices of the Well-being Basket. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are presented, and the average prices of each item in the Well-being Basket, by component and city, are included as appendices.

Literature Review

Neoliberal policies in Mexico (1988–2018) caused wages' purchasing power to fall to as little as a third of what it had been in 1976. The wage policy pursued in our country since 2019 has been based on increases above inflation to restore purchasing power. However, it has faced various critics who, drawing on neoclassical theories, cite the Phillips Curve (cf. Morales et al., 2024) and the hypothetical inflationary spiral, which posits that an increase in workers' income levels would push up overall demand for goods and services and thus also drive up the general price level; this, in turn, would increase firms' cost structures, forcing them to reduce their demand for labour and consequently leading to higher unemployment (Ngundu et al., 2023).

Although inflation in recent years has been above the Bank of Mexico's (Banxico) target of $3\% \pm 1\%$, wage increases have not been the cause, as various studies have shown, notably that of Muller Durán and Ochoa León (2024), which, using a vector autoregressive cointegration (CVAR) model, confirms that labour costs were not the cause of the rise in inflation, but rather that it was due to an increase in the cost of raw materials experienced globally as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. Furthermore, the authors note that there was room to continue the wage recovery policy, as other studies have noted (Jiménez et al., 2023). Similarly, empirical evidence has shown that wage increases did not have adverse effects on employment either (Jiménez et al., 2022); in fact, the overall unemployment rate (including both formal and informal employment) has been at frictional levels for at least four years.

These studies take on particular significance in the post-pandemic period, as the surge in inflation that occurred forced many countries to adopt restrictive monetary policies: reducing money supply M and/or raising interest rates (Aceves and Absalón, 2023), with covert intervention in labour markets to curb wage increases (Dervishi, 2023; Galbraith, 2024).

Despite these neoclassical positions, wage increases to restore purchasing power continued in Mexico; however, wages have not reached the purchasing power they had in 1976, and for this to be achieved, wages must continue to rise, at least until minimum wages are sufficient to enable a family to attain a level of consumption that ensures a dignified quality of life.

In contemporary debates on economic justice and well-being, the link between wages, inflation, and conditions of social reproduction becomes critical. Restrictive monetary policies, commonly used to control inflation, often impose a high cost on employment without guaranteeing a proportional reduction in inflationary levels, which depends largely on the structure and sensitivity of the labour market. Consequently, various studies have identified that public spending intervention can have more significant effects on economic and social stabilisation (Lapian et al., 2023).

However, an increase in public spending or nominal wages is not enough unless the structural relationship between productivity and remuneration is taken into account. In this regard, a growing decoupling between the two indicators has been documented: whilst overall productivity rose by between 12% and 18% in the early decades of the 21st century, real wages fell by an estimated 9% to 11% (Vargas-Téllez and Contreras-Hernández, 2025). This disconnect between productivity and real wages reflects a progressive deterioration in the purchasing power of the working class, despite economic growth.

Against this backdrop, it has been noted that efficient tax collection and responsible private investment can positively affect wages. In turn, wage increases help reduce structural inequalities in income distribution (Vigoya-Casas et al., 2023). However, wage policies have been more closely linked to political objectives than to comprehensive, long-term economic planning, which limits their redistributive effectiveness (Andrade et al., 2024).

In contexts where wage increases have been accompanied by complementary measures to contain prices—such as targeted subsidies or regulations on basic goods—the effect on purchasing power has been significantly greater than if wage increases had been implemented in isolation (Alvarado et al., 2023). Indeed, evidence shows that inflationary effects directly contribute to rising poverty levels, undermining wage gains (Arévalo and Arévalo, 2023).

In this regard, the concept of the 'Well-being Basket' is key to understanding the limits and scope of labour income. Acquiring an adequate consumption basket implies, from a labour-value perspective, that the workforce can reproduce itself socially (Kennedy et al., 2023) and, from a pragmatic perspective, that households have sufficient income to exceed the minimum poverty thresholds. Thus, the analysis of the relationship between wages and inflation cannot be separated from the mechanisms that ensure or impede access to goods essential for a dignified life.

Materials and Methods

The Well-being Basket (CB) presented here follows the methodology proposed by the International Observatory on Living Wages (OISAD), as described in Arenan et al. (2020a). To avoid repetition, this document highlights a few key points:

The WB takes into account the consumption of an average household in our country comprising four members, at least one of whom is under 15 years of age. Consumption is projected based on a field study that identified ‘trend consumption’ (the consumption regularly undertaken by a household based on its age composition), but also includes ‘desired consumption’ (the level of consumption a household should achieve, primarily in the food sector). The WB comprises three baskets: food, non-food and food preparation.

To estimate its cost (CB)CB, equation (1) is used:

$$C_B = \sum_{i=1}^n (p_{it} * q_i * \beta_i)$$

Where:

P_{it} denotes the average price of the good in period *t*.

q_i represents the required consumption quantity.

β_i denotes the equivalent in portions/useful life per month.

n represents the number of items in the sample.

Table 1 presents the components and groups of the Well-being Basket

Tabla 1. Components and categories of the Well-being Basket

Components	Groups
Food	Fruit and vegetables Cereals and root vegetables Legumes Oils and fats Animal proteins Sugars and others
Food preparation	Pottery, glassware and cutlery Cookware Kitchen utensils Furniture Appliances Bags Energy

Non-food	Transportation Personal care Education, culture and leisure Glassware, household linen and small household goods Major household goods and maintenance Communications Clothing, footwear and accessories Housing and utilities Holidays and non-recurring expenses House cleaning and maintenance Leisure items
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Note: Source: (Arellano et al., 2020a)

Prices are obtained through a combination of on-site and online surveys, averaging at least two establishments during the first half of November each year. The selected establishments are those which, according to the Federal Consumer Protection Agency (PROFECO) survey for the previous month (October), had the lowest prices. The basket has limitations: it does not account for meals eaten out, major medical expenses, extraordinary events, or household maintenance such as plumbing or electrical work; it also excludes financial and insurance costs.

In order to obtain data enabling us to assess the varying impacts of wage purchasing power on a regional basis, for the 2024 edition a city in the southeast of the country, Cancún, Quintana Roo, was included in the price survey based on two key criteria: the first is that this city has the highest inflation rate of the southeastern cities included in INEGI's National Consumer Price Index; the second is that it is an emblematic city due to the economic dynamism it represents for the national GDP. The same criteria were followed in the price survey for Cancún as for Mexico City. For the comparison of prices between years, the Laspeyres index ($L(p)$, $L(p)$) shown in equation (2) is used.

$$L(p) = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^n p_{j,t} q_{j,0}}{\sum_{j=1}^n p_{j,0} q_{j,0}} * 100 \quad (2)$$

Where:

$p_{j,t}$ denotes the average price of the good in period t .

$q_{j,0}$ represents the required quantity of consumption in period 0.

$p_{j,0}$ denotes the average price of the good in period 0.

n represents the number of items in the sample.

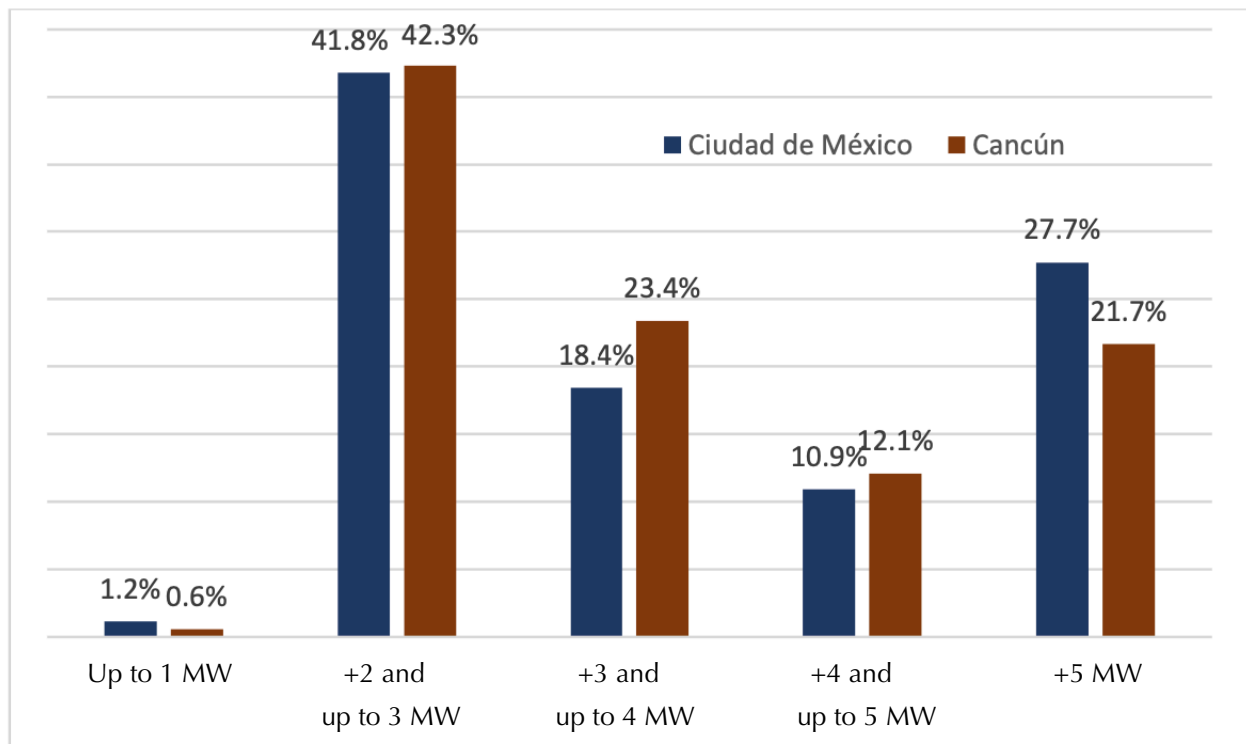
Results and Discussion

Cancún is the second most populous city in the southeast of the country, after Mérida; however, due to its tourism industry, it is the most dynamic city in the region; indeed, Cancún International Airport is the busiest airport in the Caribbean-South America region and the second busiest airport after Benito Juárez in Mexico City. However, this is not reflected in workers' income levels; although Cancún is a destination for labour migration in the southeast, the wage gap with the country's capital is significant. According to data from the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS), as of May

2025, the average wage for formal employment in Mexico City was 778.41 pesos [per day]; whilst in Cancún (Benito Juárez municipality, Quintana Roo) it was 556.35 pesos [per day], a difference of 1.39 times.

The distribution by income level is also significantly different, as shown in Figure 1. Whilst in Mexico City almost a third of the working population earns more than five times the minimum wage, in Cancún it is barely a fifth, therefore, increases in the minimum wage may have a greater impact in Cancún than in Mexico City, which is consistent with other analyses concluding that wage policies have a greater impact on lower income deciles (Alvarado et al., 2023). Whilst the regional wage gap can be explained by productivity differences across sectors, (Cancún lacks a secondary sector), it also reflects the precarious conditions typical of the periphery, despite the fact that the inflation rate is higher in Cancún than in Mexico City. In real terms, this translates into greater impoverishment in the south than in the centre of the country and, consequently, makes it almost impossible to bridge regional disparities through labour income.

Figure 1. Distribution of jobs by wage level in the formal sector (Mexico City and Cancún)



Note: Prepared using IMSS data (May, 2025)

The cost breakdown by component is shown in Table 2. Results show that the greatest difference between Mexico City and Cancún lies in food preparation, particularly in electricity costs (see Appendix 1); this is followed by the non-food basket, whilst the food basket showed a difference of just over half a percentage point.

Table 2. Costs of the 2024 Well-being Basket by component (Mexico City and Cancún)

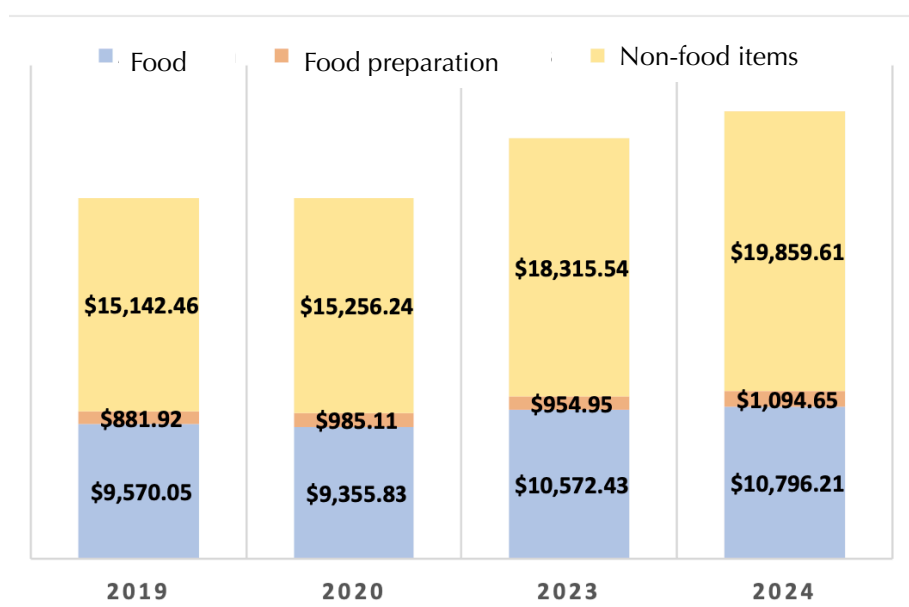
Components	Mexico City	Cancun	Difference (%)
Food	\$10,796.21	\$10,857.56	0.57%
Food preparation	\$1,094.65	\$1,272.17	16.22%
Non-food items	\$19,859.61	\$20,794.77	4.71%
Total	\$31,750.47	\$32,924.50	3.70%

Note: Prepared by the authors

The costs obtained are comparable with previous measurements by OISAD (Arellano et al., 2020a; Arellano et al., 2020b; Jiménez-Bandala and Jiménez, 2024). Consequently, as shown in Figure 2, the total increase compared to 2023 was 6.39%, which is higher than the official inflation rate, which stood at 4.02% at the end of last year. Therefore, any wage increases negotiated solely based on the official inflation rate will result in a loss of purchasing power. This would represent the highest increase in the basket since measurements began.

By component, the costs of each basket are shown in Figure 2; broadly speaking, the monetary weightings of each basket have been maintained; the non-food basket accounts for the largest proportion, whilst the smallest portion is for goods and services used in food preparation. For 2024, the basket cost 31,750 pesos in Mexico City. The average costs of each product are in the appendices section of this document, along with the weightings based on useful life or, in the case of food preparation, on performance.

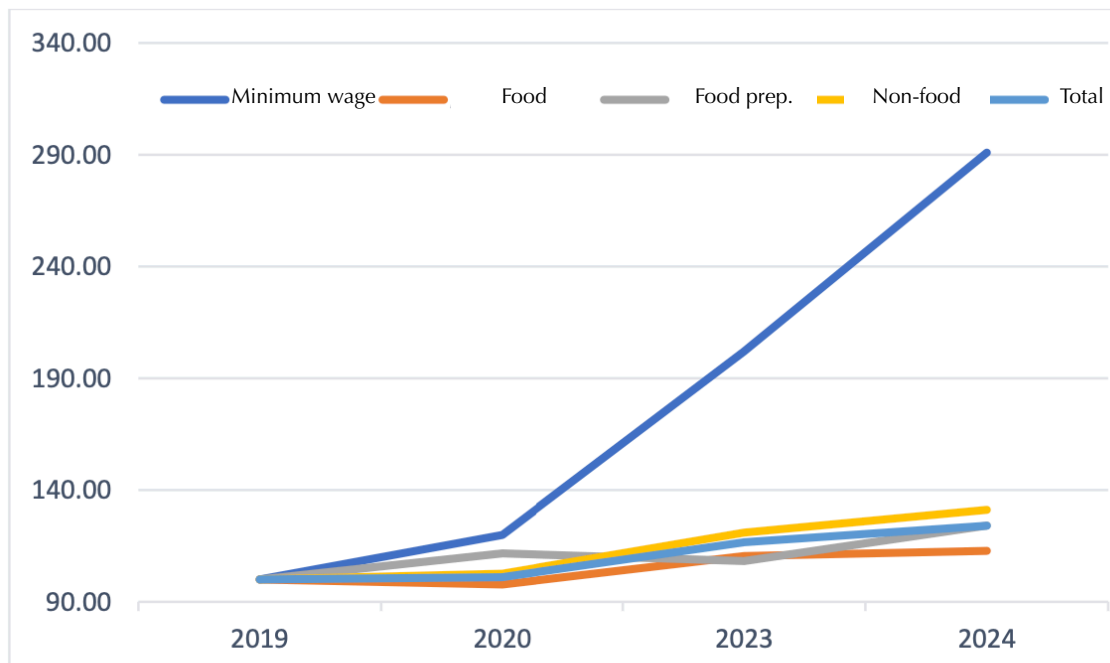
Figure 2. Comparison of the costs of the Well-being Basket in Mexico City, 2019–2024, by component (market prices).



Note: prepared by the authors

Compared with the minimum wage, the CB remains well below the rate of wage increases, taking 2019—when the measurement began—as the base year, standing at 124 points, whilst wages reached 290.93, this means that the prices of the basket have risen by a quarter of their value since 2019, whilst minimum wages have tripled, representing the greatest achievement for the working class in over 50 years, as shown in Figure 3. Although the gap between wages and the cost of the consumer basket continues to widen, it is important to closely monitor the behaviour of certain non-food goods that may be affected by the tariff tensions unfolding in the United States or by the conflict in the Middle East, which is already putting pressure on energy prices. It is important to note that the food basket has experienced the least price increase. However, in our measurement, it accounts for a third of total consumption as it is a ‘living basket’; the beneficial impact is greater in the poorest deciles, as according to the results of the National Survey of Household Income and Expenditure, expenditure on food accounts for up to 90% of household consumption in decile 1 (INEGI, 2022).

Figure 3. General minimum wage index and cost of the Well-being Basket by component. Base: 2019=100



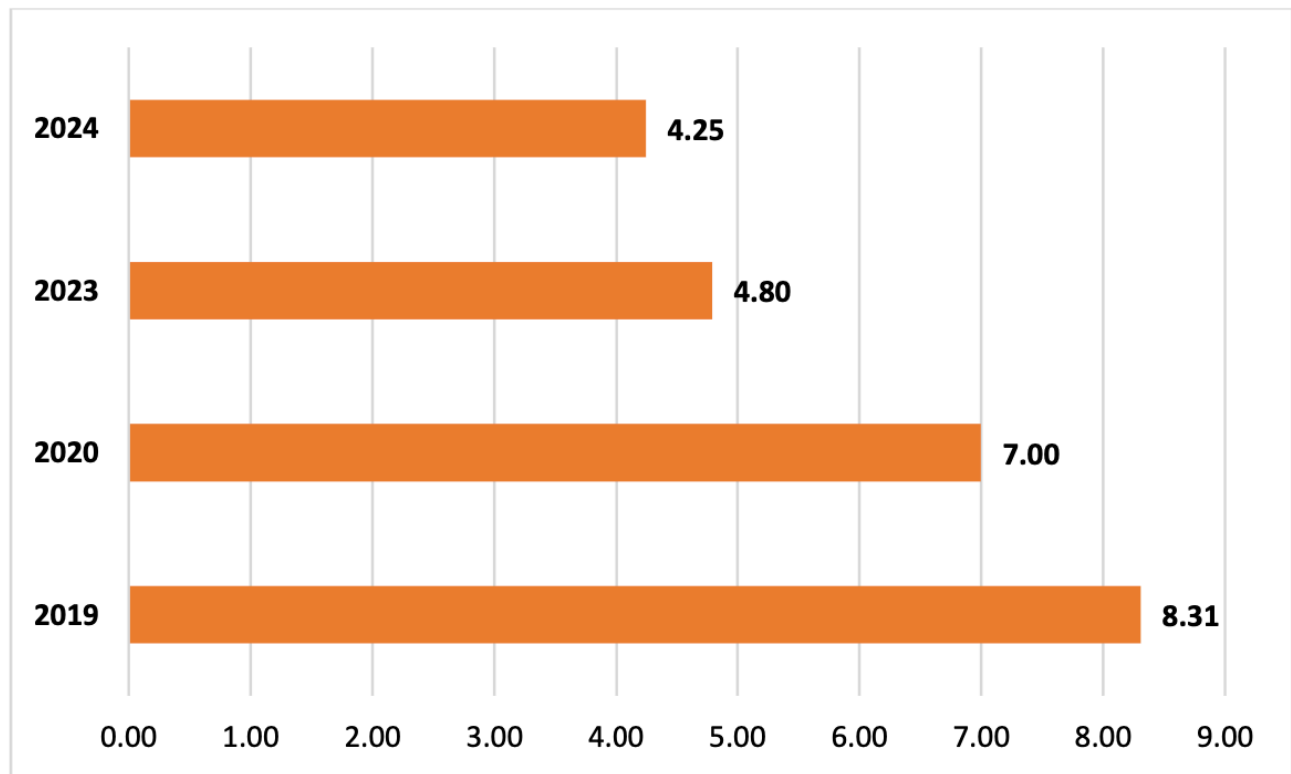
Note: prepared by the authors

Regarding the wage gap required to purchase a CB, although to a lesser extent than in previous years, it continues to narrow, as shown in Figure 3. In 2024, 4.25 times the minimum wage was required to afford a basket of goods; this means that in Mexico City, 4 out of 10 workers in the formal sector could afford the basket, whilst in Cancún, only 3 out of 10 could, highlighting the disparity between regions, which must be addressed through implementing tailored public policies.

From 2019 to 2023, the wage gap required to purchase a CB narrowed by 16%; whereas from 2023 to 2024, it narrowed by only 11.5%, reflecting, on the one hand, greater restraint by the State in driving wage increases, and, on the

other hand, runaway inflation. Nevertheless, it is an achievement that between 2019 and 2024 the gap has narrowed by 49%; however, this remains insufficient, and therefore the National Minimum Wage Commission (CONASAMI) must continue to promote extraordinary wage increases above inflation with greater vigour; the goal must be for the minimum wage to cover the cost of a CB.

Figure 4. Number of general minimum wages required to purchase a Well-being Basket for 2019–2023.



Note: Prepared by the authors

Looking beyond the minimum wage, and taking into account the average wage for formal employment (IMSS, 2025), the average income in Mexico City is 23,352.30 pesos [per month], meaning that 1.32 times the average wage is required to purchase the basket; in 2024, 1.8 wages were required, meaning the gap has narrowed by 24% and reflects that wages in formal markets (beyond the minimum) have been more dynamic than in sectors with a minimum wage. In the case of Cancún, the average wage gap in formal employment required to purchase a CB is 1.97, which is even greater than the gap in Mexico City the previous year. This negative differential for the southeast of the country, which reflects greater in-work poverty, condemns the most vulnerable population by preventing social mobility and provides empirical evidence that a policy of regionally differentiated wages is required, taking into account historical gaps, but also the price dynamics of ‘expensive’ areas, such as those which, due to their tourism activity, are dollarised and therefore experience higher inflation.

Finally, in our comparison with the measurement carried out by the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Policy (CONEVAL, 2025) on the income-based extreme poverty line (LPEI) based on the value of a food basket per person per month and an income-based poverty line (LPI) based on the sum of the value of a food and non-food basket in rural and urban populations, we find the following:

As of November 2024 (the same measurement date as our Well-being Basket), CONEVAL's food basket in urban areas was valued at \$2,359.10 and in rural areas at \$1,799.17, representing increases of 5.9% and 5.6%; whilst the combined value of the food and non-food basket in urban areas was \$4,628.83 and in rural areas \$3,329.63, representing increases of 4.8% and 4.5% respectively, which align with our findings that the rises exceeded inflation and were close to the percentage obtained in our results. Our findings also align with CONEVAL's conclusions, noting that wage recovery is continuing, albeit at a slower pace.

Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight profound regional disparities in the living conditions of the working class. A prime example is Cancún, where the gap between average incomes in the formal sector and the cost of a Well-being Basket is almost double that observed in Mexico City. This situation underscores the need to rethink the design of minimum wages based on a differentiated territorial approach. It is essential to move towards a policy of regional minimum wages that incorporates both structural inequalities and the specific factors that drive up the cost of living in peripheral regions or those specialising in tourism services, such as rising land prices, property speculation, food dependency and precarious access to quality public services.

Although wages have shown a recovery trend in recent years, this trend is at risk of slowing. On the one hand, real increases have begun to moderate; on the other, inflation has experienced periods of runaway growth that erode the purchasing power gained. Behind this phenomenon lie external causes beyond the country's control, such as the war between Russia and Ukraine, conflicts in the Middle East and trade tensions with the United States, particularly during Donald Trump's presidency. In this context, extraordinary increases to the minimum wage must continue as a mechanism of redistributive justice. But beyond political will, this process requires the sustained commitment of the academic community, social organisations and, above all, the organised working class, to keep alive the struggle for decent working and living conditions.

That said, the proposal to establish regionally differentiated minimum wages is not without its challenges. Among its advantages, it would allow for closer alignment between labour income and the actual cost of living in each region, helping reduce in-work poverty and improve well-being in areas where the cost of living is structurally higher. Furthermore, it could encourage greater formalisation of employment in regions with high living costs by offering wages more in line with local conditions.

However, there are also potential drawbacks. A poorly designed regional differentiation could consolidate or even widen the gaps between regions, particularly if wage increases in high-cost areas are not accompanied by productive and infrastructure policies in lagging regions. Likewise, wage disparities could encourage internal migration of workers to areas with higher nominal wages, placing pressure on local labour markets and creating new urban imbalances. For this reason, regional differentiation must be conceived not as an isolated measure, but as part of a comprehensive territorial development package that includes public investment, productive diversification and equitable access to basic services.

Finally, the enormous regional differences in income, prices and opportunities necessitate a rethinking of the mechanisms for measuring and assessing well-being. Applying uniform national metrics to profoundly unequal contexts not only obscures the real needs of millions of people but also contributes to perpetuating an unjust territorial order. Recognising the economic and social particularities of each region does not imply renouncing national unity, but rather strengthening it based on equity and distributive justice. Only in this way will it be possible to build a development model that reconciles Mexico's territorial diversity with the universal right to a dignified life.

Appendices on the components of the Food Basket, Food Preparation Basket and Non-Food Basket, by city and average unit prices (2024): [available in the original publication](#)

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