

An Exploration on the Effect of a National Minimum Wage in the SME Sector Post the Covid-19 Pandemic in Mauritius

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – A National Minimum Wage Law has been implemented by the Government in Mauritius to ensure that low-skilled workers are decently remunerated for them to lead a better life. However, with the recent Covid-19 pandemic in Mauritius, the survival of many Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are at risk. Noteworthy, that most of the low wage workers are employed by the SME Sector. While SMEs are complying with the regulations to provide a minimum wage, this study is being carried out to understand the impact that NMW has on the SMEs after the pandemic.

Design/Methodology/Approach – The study adopts a mixed method approach using focus group and semi-structured interview as qualitative research method and a questionnaire for the quantitative approach. The research will be carried out with a group sample of companies from the SME Sector comprising of the business owners or representatives from the various economic sectors in Mauritius.

Findings – A forecasting of the results based on the previous researches that have been carried out may revealed that although some companies encountered higher labour cost with the implementation of a NMW, with appropriate changes in the strategy and future planning, the SMEs can still mark their existence the industry with a new approach of doing business suitable to the requirement in the business market. However, as the world has been stricken by the Covid-19 pandemic, many SMEs are finding themselves in a difficult situation to survive in the industry and should look for new strategies and solution to adapt themselves to the “new normal”. Observing the current situation, it can be assumed that findings of this study might reveal that the effect of Covid-19 pandemic is way higher than that of implementing NMW in the SME Sector.

Originality/Value – The outcomes of this research will represent empirical evidence in the field.

KEYWORDS – National Minimum Wage (NMW), Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Covid-19 Pandemic effect.

Date of Submission: 12-03-2022

Date of Acceptance: 28-03-2022

I. INTRODUCTION

Minimum wage represents the lowest levels of pay, established through a Minimum Wage Fixing System, to be paid to workers by virtue of a contract of employment (IOE, 2014). The governments implement minimum wages as an instrument of political macroeconomics or as social tools. However, the opponents of minimum wages may argue that this instrument can have detrimental effects on employment, growth and incentives to work and can negatively impact opportunities for lower-skilled workers. While supporters of the minimum wage conversely argue that, it is in fact an effective instrument to protect the lower paid staff and combat poverty. Minimum wages have three aspects, which are as follows;

- (a) The remuneration for work performed by the worker
- (b) The workers' basic income and source of purchasing power
- (c) A production cost

Minimum wages can be set by statute, collective bargaining agreements, and decisions of national boards or arbitration awards. They can be differentiated by region, sector or according to the specific criteria for the country (IOE, 2014).

According to Zhang (2016), minimum wage refers to the lowest remuneration that employers pay to employees which was long implemented across the world as a poverty mitigating tool. As the popularity of minimum wage system is growing, different countries are adopting a minimum wage strategy that is appropriate in their context of wage system.

It can be estimated today that more than 90% of all countries have some kind of MW legislation such as UK has a National Minimum Wage (NMW), US has a Federal Minimum Wage (FMW), France has a Salaire Minimum de Croissance (SMDC) and others (Wageindicator.org.2015). Historically, these laws applied only to

children and women: it was only after the Great Depression that many mechanized economies extended them to the universal workforce (Francis Journot, 2013). Some countries have implemented a MW law in their economy after having ratified the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which some others have established MW fixing procedure (ILO, 2015). Even though Mauritius has attempted several strategies and regulations to bring a decent minimum wage system, it is in 2018 that a NMW was reinforced to avoid exploitation of low skilled labour.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The primary purpose of the National Minimum Wage is to ensure that the basic needs of low wage workers are adequately met to enable them lead a better quality of life. However, it may question the survival of the organizations from the various sectors especially the small and medium enterprises in Mauritius as they may not afford to plan a budget with a higher labour cost. On one hand the Government is encouraging investment in small and medium enterprises to create a second Economic Miracle while on the other hand, a National Minimum Wage has been implemented which may not be affordable to many small trade business. Of course, we cannot ignore the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on the overall economy and more precisely on the SMEs for the purpose of this study. Some employers might find it easier to reduce the non-wage benefits offered to the workers to cater to the additional financial burden in order to sustain their profit margin. Introduction of a NMW in Mauritius can cause a decline in the employment rate especially in the SME Sector as well as an increase depending on the profit margin and strategies adopted by the firms in question. However, after the pandemic, the SMEs are struggling for their survival in the market and whether or not they will be able to pay the existing NMW. There is a high risk of labour being replaced by capital machinery and equipment. Along with unemployment, price hiking is another crucial issue to encounter after a raise in NMW. Therefore, this study will be conducted to determine how various sectors in Mauritius will cope with the NMW.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of the National Minimum Wage (NMW) in the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Mauritius post the Covid-19 pandemic. The result will show whether NMW had a substantial influence on the survival of SMEs and if so, in what ways. Additionally to NMW, the study findings will also reveal how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the SMEs and determining the factors which were mostly impacted and what are the new strategies and measures that SMEs would adopt to remain competitive in the market.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is based on empirical investigation of the effect that the implementation of a NMW has on the SMEs in Mauritius after the Covid-19 pandemic. The SMEs across the island are the targeted audience for the purpose of this study. The various sectors of operation will be selected according to their percentage of existence in the SME. The result of this research will show whether or not the implementation of NMW affected the SMEs mostly after the Covid-19 pandemic.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are the research questions that this study is trying to address;

1. How has the NMW affected the profitability of the small and medium firms?
2. What are the measures taken to bear the additional costs after the implementation of NMW in the small and medium firms?
3. Is a National Minimum Wage being sustainable in the long run post Covid-19?
4. What are the aspects of job creation or job loss after Covid-19 pandemic?
5. Has productivity of workers improved with the introduction of a NMW?
6. What could be the ways forward in the case of Mauritius?
7. What are the strategies adopted for survival of SMEs after the pandemic?

HYPOTHESES

Below are few hypotheses that will be analysed during this study;

Hypothesis 1

Ho NMW has not led to decline in employment among SMEs

H1 NMW has led to decline in employment among SMEs

Hypothesis 2

Ho NMW has not led to substitution by machines in SMEs

H1 NMW has led to substitution of labour by machines in SMEs

Hypothesis 3

Ho NMW has led to increase in prices of products/services of SMEs

H1 NMW has led to increase in prices of salaries of products services of SMEs

Hypothesis 4

Ho NMW has not led SMEs to increase training to increase productivity

H1 NMW has led SMEs to increase training to increase labour productivity

Hypothesis 5

Ho NMW has not led to erosion of benefits of employees

H1 NMW has led to erosion of benefits of employees

Hypothesis 6

Ho NMW has not led to less recruitment by SMEs

H1 NMW has led to less recruitment by SMEs

Hypothesis 7

Ho SMEs are able to pay the NMW to staff after the Covid-19 pandemic

H1 SMEs are not able to pay the NMW to staff after the Covid-19 pandemic

Hypothesis 8

Ho Business Profits has been affected after Covid-19 pandemic

H1 Business Profits has not been affected after Covid-19 pandemic

Hypothesis 9

Ho Price of products or services has increased after Covid-19 pandemic

H1 Price of products or services has not increased after Covid-19 pandemic

II. BACKGROUND

Introduction

On 1st January 2018, a NMW was introduced as a medium to avoid exploitation of low-skilled labour in Mauritius. Over the years, the NMW has been reviewed and raised considering the actual cost of living. However, in the last 2 years, the world has been hit by the Covid-19 pandemic that has not only changed our living habits but also the health and the economy of across the world has been very affected. Therefore, in this part of the article, a review of the existing literature relevant to this study will be explored.

Empirical Investigation

There are various researches that have been conducted over the years about the effect of an increase of minimum wage on several factors such employment of workers, price of products and service, productivity of workers and the business profits of the SMEs. Historically, there were two distinct perspectives in the body of research about the effect of an increased minimum wage. Firstly, those who support minimum wage increase as a means to increase income and help alleviate poverty and secondly those who are against minimum wage increase due to the unintended consequences of decreased employment for unskilled workers, inflationary pressure, increased automation and capital investment. However, very little research existed about how small and medium firms were affected by and adjusted to minimum wage increases. The SME Sector is very important for the economy of a country and it has been revealed that successful small businesses help the economic growth by job creations which also increase the household income and the spending. Also, increasing minimum wage proved to increase the purchasing power of many low-skilled workers. This results in a ripple effect of increased economic activity throughout the entire economy that triggers economic growth (McEachern, 2017). Everett (2014) examined how small and large firms respond by increasing prices, reducing hours, laying off employees, reducing other costs, and/or reducing profit. Arrowsmith (2003) examined the effect of a NMW on small firms and discussed the process of adjustment and how small firms often absorbed the additional cost, changed the work organization, or changed the market positioning. Aaronson and Phelan (2016) studied wage shocks and the technological substitution of low-wage jobs. As the price of labour increases, firms often substitute capital investment and automation for human labour. They explained that in industries and in job markets with routine and repetitive processes, a minimum wage increase likely increases the technological substitution for that labor and thus decreases low-skill, low-wage jobs. Hirsch, Kaufman, and Zelenska's (2015) study found that the increased costs associated with the minimum wage were passed along by increasing the final product price, as well as increasing employee performance standards and work effort, increasing marketing

to stimulate revenue growth, and wage compression. MaCurdy (2015) argued that to compensate for an increase in the minimum wage, employers can reduce employment, raise final product prices, or reduce employer profits. Neumark (2015) discussed that over the years, some research indicated that a higher minimum wage reduced the employment opportunities for teenage and low-skilled workers, while other studies showed little to no adverse effects of a small to moderate minimum wage increase. The study also includes the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic effect on the SMEs and the strategies to be adopted to be able to survive with the “new normal”.

Covid-19 Pandemic Effect on SMEs

Both demand and supply are affected during a pandemic (Swift 2009). Due to the fear of illness and infection, the number of hours has fallen drastically thus reducing the aggregate supply. The lockdowns have sharply reduced the retail sales and leisure activities such as visiting to sports events, restaurants and theatres etc. With the government intervention towards reducing the propagation of Covid-19, the supply chains are deeply affected which impact the international trade subsequently. Many firms are bearing the burden of fall in production and sales and profits because of fixed short-term costs and fall in revenue. However, the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have not touched all the sectors: the hospitality and personal services have been adversely affected while pharmaceutical and medical-equipment/personal protective equipment fields are likely to benefit most.

There are limited studies from the previous pandemics and the consequences on the SMEs. Typically, the economic analysis of pandemics focuses on macroeconomic indicators, for example GDP, rather than micro or firm-level effects. Since data is limited to refer to the recent pandemic, predictions of the social and economic effects are based on the influenza pandemic of 1918 (commonly known as the ‘Spanish Flu’) (Garret 2009). The 1918 pandemic caused approximately 40 million deaths worldwide from the early spring 1918 to the late spring 1919. In 2005, the World Bank predicted that such a pandemic could cost the world economy \$800 billion and kill millions of people with greater long-run costs (Brahmbhatt, 2005). The impact of the 1918 pandemic in US was not uniform. There were certain regions that took precautionary measures such as closing down of schools and churches to minimise the propagation of the infection. The Spanish Flu targeted mostly the age group between 18 and 40 which is different to the pattern of Covid-19 (Garret 2008). Due to limited information available, previous studies on the pandemics in the past are mostly based on printed media. The newspapers that were reviewed suggested that in one state of the US, the firms experienced severe decline by approximately 40% to 70% in their business activities (Garrett 2008). Pandemics have a negative impact on businesses in the service and entertainment industries while businesses in the health-care sector encountered an increase in revenues. Due to the risk of morbidity, the supply of labour is reduced causing the marginal product of labour and capital per worker to increase and in turn increasing real wages. After the pandemic, US have experienced an increase in capital per worker resulting in higher output per worker and higher incomes (Brainerd and Siegler 2003).

We can derive reasonable implications about the economic and social consequences of a modern-day pandemic (Covid-19) based on those of 1918 pandemic effects. High mortality rates are more likely to encounter in densely populated areas. Indeed, lockdowns and quarantines would affect businesses in the short run and some firms can lose a large proportion or all their revenue (for example restaurants) while others adopted new strategies to continue their business activities (for example online-delivery firms). However, it seems unlikely given the nature of the mortality profile that the Covid-19 pandemic will result in labour shortages of the type that existed during the 1918 pandemic (Garrett, 2008).

III. METHODOLOGY

According to Polit and Beck (2004) methodology refers to ways of obtaining, systematizing and analysing data while Creswell (2003) portrays methodology as a coherent group of methods that harmonize one another and that have the capability to fit to deliver data and findings that will reflect the research question and suits the researcher’s purpose. Bowling (2002) explains that methodology is the complete structure of the research study; the size and sample methods, the practices and techniques utilized to collect data and the process to analyse data. Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler (2008) express that research methodology is truly essential for researches due to its vast contribution regarding to knowledge and skills provided in order to solve the problems, and achieve the goals or objectives planned for the investigation. For researchers, it is quite important to have a clear methodological framework in order to ask questions and also to answer them. Hence, this section highlights the methodology chosen the investigation, as well as its validity, reliability and the ethic conditions.

The main purpose of this study is to gain insights on the impact that the NMW has on SMEs particularly after the pandemic due to Covid-19. Therefore, in this section there are a variety of aspects being covered to get all this information. These aspects are going to be the methodology of the design and the selection of the sample, the method of collecting the data and the way it will be analyzed, the validity and

reliability of these chosen methods and at last the ethical issues considered to successfully fulfill this research's purpose.

In order to address this problem, a mixed method research is being conducted to deeply explore how the SME adjusted their business strategies with the implementation of NMW in Mauritius post the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Design

According to Adrew Kirumbi (2018), a research design is a set of methods and procedures used in collecting and analysing measures of the variables specified in the problem statement. Another definition of research design by Myres (2008) is a procedure used to gather and analyse data, interpret results and disseminate the findings. The research methods that can be used for investigation being carried out can come in three different ways: mono method, multi-methods and mixed methods. A mixed methods selection is the one considered appropriate for the current research as data will be collected via a focus group and interview research method and a survey using questionnaire.

Domegan and Fleming (1999) point out that the research method or design of any investigation is as important as the investigation's problem definition, and it can only be chosen after the objectives have been selected. These two authors define research design as the general action plan in a marketing research study, and it can be classified into three types of research: Exploratory, Descriptive and Causal. According to Burns and Bush (2014), the selection of any of these three types of research will depend on the objectives set by the researcher. Causal research is the one selected for this investigation, and they are described as the deeply understanding of certain phenomenon regarding to a conditional statement, engaged to a high use of mathematical and statistical tools. The causal research aims to establish a cause and effect relationship among the various criteria and variables being investigated during the study.

Basically, there are two types of data which are primary data and secondary data. Primary data are obtained from first hand sources such as direct observation, interviews, survey and questionnaire while secondary data are retrieved from sources such as printed and published materials. For this investigation, the written materials like academic journals, publications, newspapers and organizations websites were used as secondary data to be able to obtain additional information for the study and the focus group discussion and a questionnaire is designed to collect the primary data required for the analysis.

The Research Plan

The overall aim for this study is to conduct a systematic investigation on the impact of NMW in SMEs in Mauritius after Covid-19 pandemic. In this study, the interpretivism was assumed to gain information on the experiences of SMEs from various economic sectors after the implementation of NMW in Mauritius. Consequently, a qualitative methodology is employed and a focus group interview together with an in-depth interview exercise was conducted to gain in-depth information on the factors to be analysed in this study. A focus group of 7 participants from different sectors was conducted at a selected venue. Evidence shows that a group of 6 to 8 participants is ideal for a focus group interview as smaller groups show greater potential (Krueger & Casey, 2000). As for the interview process, a group of 20 interviewers were selected. For this study, the participants are recruited from the different SME sectors in Mauritius. Precisely, the purposive sampling was used which means that the participants selected were made aware of the aim of the study and they agreed to participate in this study (Creswell, 2013). The major concern in any research is to have the consent of the participants. Green and Hart (1999) suggested that focus group participants have a particular vulnerability as they are not only convinced by skilled facilitators to reveal intimate views but they are also mostly asked to do it in front of peers. Therefore, it is very important to have the consent of the participants before the interview starts and confidentiality has to be maintained as the name of the participants should not be revealed. It is also applicable in researches where various organizations are participating but are not willing to reveal their identity.

Participants

Inclusion criteria are:

- Owners or representatives of small and medium enterprises who have at least one staff employed.
- Willingness to take part in the survey.

Previous research into sample sizes in both qualitative and quantitative researches has suggested gaining participants and conduct the survey until data analysis and transcription reaches saturation. Saturation has been found to come at different sample sizes depending on the research aims and objectives.

Sampling Technique and Identification

The eligible participants will be contacted for a focus group discussion and following their confirmation, an invitation for participation will be posted for the participants. A focus group of 7 to 10 participants will be

selected along with 20 semi-structured interviews will be conducted in order to gain maximum information to be able to derive a questionnaire for mass data collection.

Data Analysis

A mixed method approach will be adopted for the data analysis. First of all, a thematic data analysis will be used to analyse the data collected via the focus group discussion and the semi-structured interview. Thematic analysis is a form of qualitative research that aims to gather an understanding of a certain phenomenon from taking common themes from a larger body of data. The NVIVO 12 Software will be used for the data analysis. The data collected from focus group discussion and the interviews will be inserted in the NVIVO 12 Software, then identifying the interesting features of the data and established codes which will be further collated into potential themes.

In this research, a questionnaire is a prepared set of questions submitted to the owners or managers of SMEs as respondents with a view to obtaining information about the impact that NMW has on the survival of SMEs particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic in Mauritius. The questionnaire should be carefully designed to boost the reliability and validity of the data.

The choice of the subject being studied, the aim of the research, the size of the research sample, the method of data collection and the analysis of data were all taken into consideration when preparing the questionnaire for the research. It is thus necessary to emphasize upon the questionnaire content, question format, question order, type of questions, formulation of questions and validity and reliability of questions.

One of the important objectives considered while designing the questionnaire for the research was to present the questions as simple and straightforward as possible. The questionnaire is formulated in such a way that it eliminated ambiguity, bias, technical language and prejudice.

Reliability

Reliability related to the consistency with which research procedures deliver their results (Seale, 2004). Reliability concerns the extent to which a measurement of a phenomenon provides stable and consistent result (Carmines and Zeller, 1979). It is also concerned with repeatability. For example, a scale or test is said to be reliable if repeat measurement made by it under constant conditions will give the same result (Moser and Kalton, 1989). Testing for reliability is important as it refers to the consistency across the parts of a measuring instrument (Huck, 2007). A scale is said to have high internal consistency reliability if the items of a scale “hang together” and measure the same construct (Huck, 2007, Robinson, 2009). The most commonly used internal consistency measure is the Cronbach Alpha coefficient. It is viewed as the most appropriate measure of reliability when making use of Likert scales (Whitley, 2002, Robinson, 2009). Although reliability is important for study, it is not sufficient unless combined with validity. In other words, for a test to be reliable, it also needs to be valid (Wilson, 2010). Concerning this study, the same questions were asked to all respondents and the questionnaire can be used elsewhere and hence the study is repeatable.

Ethical Issues

According to Bailey (1994), to be ethical is to conform to accepted professional practices. It is generally agreed that it is unethical for researchers to harm anyone in the course of research, especially, if it is without the person's knowledge and permission. This includes deceiving a respondent about the true purpose of a study, asking the respondent questions that cause him or her extreme embarrassment, causing emotional turmoil by reminding him or her of an unpleasant experience, causing *guilt*, or invading his or her privacy. Respondents may also be injured by being studied without their knowledge, or by violation of a promise of confidentiality.

Researchers can also act unethically when analyzing data e.g. by revealing only part of the facts, presenting facts out of context, falsifying findings, or offering misleading presentation. Bless and Higson-Smith (1997), therefore, maintains that researchers should accept responsibility for protecting their participants.

This research will be conducted with these ethical issues in mind and respondents will be assured of anonymity and confidentiality of information elicited from them. They will also be assured that information about this research would be kept confidential.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study contributes to shed light on the factors that are mostly affected in order to understand the impact of NMW along with the pandemic effect. The study will be carried out with the objective to provide useful insights on how business profits have been affected, the capacity of SMES to offer a NMW to staff post the pandemic, the factors such as employment of staff and prices of products, profitability and survival of the business, productivity of workers, the replacement of staff with machinery where possible and the strategies adopted survive in the market. Furthermore, outcomes of this study will suggest whether the implementation of

NMW in Mauritius is still sustainable with the upcoming new strategies and demand generating profits. However, with the Covid-19 pandemic effect, many companies are facing the challenge to offer a minimum wage. This study will contribute towards creating more opportunities and new strategies for the SMEs for effective application of theory into practice.

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Trisheeta Sewdin, et. al. "Title: An Exploration on the Effect of A National Minimum Wage In The SME Sector Post The Covid-19 Pandemic In Mauritius." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 27(03), 2022, pp. 01-08.