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Challenges in Implementing Decent Work Strategies in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study looks into the problems that make it hard to put decent work strategies into action in Nigeria. Following the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Decent Work Agenda, the research explores the institutional, economic, and socio-political issues that are holding back Nigeria from reaching better employment conditions. The researchers used a mixed-method approach, gathering quantitative data from 400 participants, including workers, employers, and labor officials from the Federal Capital Territory, Lagos, and Kano, along with qualitative insights from interviews with key informants. The results showed that weak enforcement of labor laws, a high number of informal jobs, low pay, insufficient social protection, and limited institutional capacity are significant barriers to achieving decent work. The study concludes that although there are policy frameworks in place, their implementation is weak due to corruption, lack of funding, and poor monitoring. To improve this situation, recommendations include enhancing labor inspections, empowering trade unions, encouraging formal employment practices, and ensuring that national labor policies align with global decent work standards.

Keywords: Decent work, labor policy, informal economy, employment standards, Nigeria

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Background to the Study

Decent work is a broad concept that focuses on encouraging productive jobs, protecting workers' rights, ensuring social safety nets, and fostering communication between employers and employees (International Labour Organization [ILO], 1999). It is a key objective of sustainable development and an important part of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, which aims to create ongoing, inclusive, and decent job opportunities for everyone.

In Nigeria, the job market faces issues like high unemployment rates, underemployment, and a large informal economy. Even with government efforts such as the National Employment Policy (2017) and the Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP), millions of Nigerians still do not have stable jobs, fair wages, or proper social protection. The push for decent work has been weakened by problems like structural issues, corruption, and poor coordination among institutions (Adebayo &Olagunju, 2021).

Since decent work plays a vital role in reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion, it's important to understand the challenges that hinder its implementation in Nigeria for better policy development. This study looks into the barriers that prevent effective enforcement of decent work policies and provides evidence-based suggestions for securing decent employment for all Nigerians.

Conceptual Review

Concept of Decent Work

The ILO (1999) describes decent work as "the chances for both women and men to find productive jobs in an environment that promotes freedom, fairness, safety, and human dignity." It consists of four main parts: creating jobs, ensuring rights at work, providing social protection, and fostering social dialogue.

Employment and Working Conditions

The quality of employment goes beyond just having a job; it also includes fair pay, workplace safety, job stability, and chances to learn new skills (Fields, 2019). In Nigeria, the rise of casual and contract jobs has decreased job security, which goes against the idea of decent work (Olawale&Adegoke, 2022).

Social Protection and Labor Rights

Social protection refers to actions taken to help workers deal with economic hardships. However, many workers in Nigeria, especially those in informal jobs, do not have access to pensions, health insurance, or maternity leave (Adewale, 2020). The weak enforcement of labor laws makes working conditions even worse.

Institutional and Governance Factors

Putting decent work strategies into action relies on strong institutions, effective labor inspections, and enough funding. Bureaucratic delays and political interference have weakened the ability of the Ministry of Labour and Employment to function properly (Nwachukwu, 2021).

Empirical Review

ILO (2023) in their work titled: **"**Policy Coordination and Institutional Capacity: Barriers to Effective Decent Work Implementation" examines how fragmented institutional arrangements and weak inter-agency coordination have hampered implementation of decent work strategies in Nigeria. Using qualitative interviews with policymakers, labour inspectors, and social partners in three geopolitical zones, the study traces delays in plan execution to overlapping mandates between federal and state labour agencies, limited budgetary allocations, and frequent staff turnover. The analysis shows that national frameworks (including the Decent Work Country Programme III) provide sound strategic priorities, but implementation gaps arise from poor horizontal coordination, inadequate monitoring systems, and weak enforcement at subnational levels. The paper argues that strengthening decentralized labour governance, clarifying institutional roles, and ring-fencing financing for decent work activities are necessary for translating policy into measurable improvements in working conditions and social protection. However, the study relies on purposive interviews and documentary review, which limit the empirical generalizability of findings beyond the sampled states. It underestimates how political economy drivers (e.g., patronage networks) shape institutional performance and could have benefited from mixed-methods triangulation with budgetary and enforcement data.

In another research conducted by NBS (2023), the study explores the persistent informality of Nigerian labour markets and how it constrains decent work strategies that are predicated on formal employer–employee relations. Drawing on Labour Force Survey data and case studies in urban informal settlements, the paper documents the predominance of self-employment and micro-enterprises, high rates of time-related underemployment, and the limited reach of labour inspections and social insurance schemes in the informal economy. As a result, conventional policy instruments minimum wage laws, occupational safety regulations, and employer-based social security fail to capture a large share of workers. The paper recommends adaptive policy designs such as contributory social protection for informal workers, cooperative-based formalization pathways, and targeted incentives to expand productive, remunerative work. While the paper persuasively links informality to policy failure, it tends to treat the informal economy as homogenous. It pays insufficient attention to heterogeneous livelihood strategies and local institutions that could enable incremental formalization without imposing burdensome compliance costs.

ILO (n.d)investigates the role of social dialogue tripartite engagement among government, employers, and workers in implementing decent work in Nigeria. Combining content analysis of policy documents with interviews of trade union leaders and employer representatives, the paper finds that social dialogue mechanisms are present but weak: consultations are often episodic, bargaining power is uneven, and employer associations lack capacity to implement standards across supply chains. The study also highlights instances where political contestation undermined negotiation outcomes, producing compliance gaps. It concludes that durable decent work outcomes require institutionalized social dialogue backed by legal safeguards, capacity building for employers' organizations, and incentives for collective bargaining in informal sectors. The research emphasizes formal tripartite mechanisms but does not adequately analyze alternative, community-level bargaining arrangements or the role of NGOs and civil society as mediatorsimportant actors in Nigeria's plural labour landscape.

In another study conducted by ILO (2024) titled: "Gendered Dimensions of Decent Work: Access, Protection and Discrimination", the paper focuses on gendered obstacles to decent work in Nigeria, highlighting how occupational segregation, unpaid care burdens, and limited

access to formal employment impede women's attainment of decent work. Using national survey disaggregation and workplace case studies, the research shows that female labour force participation is constrained by informal caregiving responsibilities, lower access to vocational training, and higher vulnerability to precarious forms of employment. The paper further documents gaps in maternity protection, enforcement of anti-discrimination rules, and access to social protection for women in informal work. Policy recommendations include gender-responsive labour market programs, expansion of affordable childcare, and targeted formalization strategies that prioritize women's enterprises. However, the analysis foregrounds structural constraints but does not sufficiently engage with cultural and normative factors at community level (e.g., gender norms that govern work choices), nor does it present rigorous causal evidence linking particular policies to improved gendered outcomes.

Reuters (2024) reported the persistence of forced labour and child labour in certain Nigerian sectors and the implications for decent work agendas. Drawing on the ILO's national forced labour surveys and sectoral case studies (agriculture, artisanal mining, domestic work), the study demonstrates that exploitative labour arrangements persist due to poverty, weak inspection capacity, and complex supply-chain dynamics. Even where legal frameworks exist, enforcement is uneven and referral systems for victims are under-resourced. The paper advocates a multi-pronged approach combining targeted enforcement, victim support services, community awareness, and supply-chain due diligence with incentives for businesses to adopt responsible sourcing. Although the paper uses authoritative survey data, it risks conflating correlation with causation when linking poverty directly to forced labour without unpacking intermediary institutions (credit markets, access to education). Recommendations are broad and would benefit from prioritized, context-specific interventions and costed implementation plans.

World Bank (2023) in their paper, theyaddresses how skills mismatch and structural economic barriers undermine decent work objectives for Nigeria's rapidly growing youth cohort. Using labour market analytics, employer surveys, and programme evaluations of national youth employment schemes, the study finds that (a) formal employment creation lags behind labour force growth, (b) many youth possess qualifications misaligned with employer needs, and (c) short-term training programs often lack strong employer linkages. Additionally, macroeconomic constraints weak private investment, inflationary pressures, and policy unpredictability deter job-creating firms. The paper recommends longer-term, demand-driven skills development, stronger public–private partnerships, and macro-level reforms to stimulate labor-intensive growth. The paper centers on supply-side skill interventions but underplays structural demand constraints. It assumes that better-skilled youth will find jobs if trained, whereas without simultaneous private sector dynamism and investment incentives, skills investments may have limited returns.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Human Development Theory and Institutional Theory to analyze the situation.

Human Development Theory (Sen, 1999) focuses on the idea that development should increase people's abilities and freedoms, such as having good and safe jobs.

Institutional Theory (North, 1990) points out that the effectiveness of changes in the job market relies on both formal and informal rules, including laws, social norms, and how well they are enforced.

These theories work together to show why Nigeria struggles to provide decent work for everyone due to problems like weak structures, poor governance, and lack of proper policy execution.

Methodology

This study adopts a convergent mixed-methods design (collecting quantitative and qualitative data concurrently and integrating results at the interpretation stage) to capture both the breadth of factors affecting implementation of decent work strategies and the depth of stakeholder experiences and institutional dynamics. The mixed-methods approach enables triangulation of statistical patterns (e.g., prevalence of informality, enforcement gaps) with contextual explanations from policymakers, employers, trade unions and workers. This design follows recommended practice for public policy and labour market research.

The target population comprises:

Employers (formal firms and business owners of MSMEs) operating in selected states;

Employees and informal workers (including self-employed, market traders, artisans, and domestic workers);

Key stakeholders: government labour and employment officials, labour inspectors, trade union representatives, employers' association representatives, and representatives of NGOs working on labour/child/forced labour or social protection.

Nationwide labour statistics and the distribution of employment across formal and informal sectors informed sampling frame design.

The quantitative component uses a fixed sample size of **n = 400** respondents.

Rationale and calculation:

Using Cochran's formula for estimating a proportion in large populations: n0=z2p(1−p)e2n_0 = \dfrac{z^2 p (1-p)}{e^2}n0=e2z2p(1−p). For a 95% confidence level (z = 1.96), margin of error e=0.05e = 0.05e=0.05, and conservative proportion p=0.5p = 0.5p=0.5, Cochran's formula gives n0≈384n_0 \approx 384n0≈384. Rounding up to allow for non-response and for easier stratification, a final sample of 400 is used. This sample size provides acceptable precision for estimating proportions and conducting subgroup comparisons (e.g., formal vs informal workers).

Notes on finite population correction:

If analysis later indicates a small finite population for a narrowly defined subgroup, the finite population correction may be applied; however, for national-level estimates and mixed strata this is not required.

A multi-stage stratified cluster sampling approach will be used to ensure geographic and sectoral representativeness and to capture formal and informal workers.

Stage 1 Stratification by geopolitical zone and urban/rural:Stratify the country into Nigeria's six geopolitical zones (North West, North East, North Central, South West, South East, South South) and by urban/rural classification to capture regional labour market variation.

Stage 2 Selection of states and localities:Within each zone, randomly select one state (or two for larger zones) and within selected states randomly select Local Government Areas (LGAs) or urban neighbourhoods and rural communities as clusters.

Stage 3 Selection of establishments and households:

In urban clusters: sample workplaces (formal establishments, markets, and MSMEs) using business lists from local chambers or market associations where available.

In rural clusters: sample households and informal enterprise sites (e.g., farms, artisan workshops).

Stage 4 Within-cluster respondent selection:Use systematic random sampling to select individual respondents within establishments or households. For workplaces, randomly select employees; for household samples, select adults aged 18+ engaged in economic activity.

Allocation: Allocate the 400 respondents across zones and urban/rural strata proportionally to population size (and/or labour force size) with a minimum cell size to permit simple subgroup analysis (for example, at least 40 respondents per major zone or according to study priorities).

Rationale: Multi-stage stratified cluster sampling balances cost and field feasibility while preserving the ability to make comparisons across regions, sectors, and between formal/informal workers.

Purposive and snowball sampling will be employed to select key informants (approx. 20–30)

This sample size is sufficient to reach thematic saturation across stakeholder categories while remaining field-practicable. Creswell and other mixed-methods authorities recommend these ranges for explanatory qualitative depth.

A structured questionnaire (paper or tablet-based) composed of sections on: socio-demographics; employment status and history; working conditions (hours, pay, contracts); social protection coverage; health and safety; awareness of decent work policies; experience with labour inspections/enforcement; and perceptions of barriers to implementation.

The questionnaire will incorporate validated items where possible (e.g., core labour force items following National Bureau of Statistics/ILO labour force survey modules) to enhance comparability.

Pre-test and pilot: instrument will be piloted with ~30 respondents in a non-study area to assess clarity, timing, and reliability; necessary revisions will be made.

Semi-structured interview guides for key informant interviews (KIIs) focused on institutional roles, coordination mechanisms, enforcement capacity, financing and political economy drivers, and experiences with DWCP or other initiatives.

Field team: enumerators with survey experience and language skills for selected states; qualitative researchers with interview moderation experience.

Training: a 4-day training covering study objectives, ethical procedures (consent, confidentiality), instrument administration, tablet/data entry protocols, and role-plays.

Quality control: supervisors will conduct random spot checks, back-checks (5–10% of interviews), and daily debriefs.

Quantitative: use of standardized, piloted items and training of enumerators improves reliability; response rates and item non-response will be reported.

Qualitative: credibility ensured through member checking (where feasible), triangulation of data sources, and peer debriefing among the research team.

External validity: stratified sampling and proportional allocation improve generalizability within the selected strata; limitations for national inference will be acknowledged.

Approval will be sought from a relevant institutional ethics review board.

Informed consent will be obtained from all participants; for focus groups, ground rules on confidentiality will be explained.

Sensitive topics (e.g., forced labour, exploitation) will be handled with care: respondents disclosing harm will be offered information on referral services and local assistance where available (following ILO/NBS referral protocols used in forced-labour/child-labour surveys).

Data will be anonymized, stored securely (password-protected files), and accessed only by authorized research staff.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Table 1: Awareness of Decent Work Strategies in Nigeria

Serial Number	Responds	Frequency	Percentage
001	Yes	300	75.0
002	No	100	25.0
	Total	400	100

Source: Survey, 2025

Table 1 shows most people surveyed (75%) knew about decent work strategies, showing that they have some awareness of the policies from the ILO and Ministry of Labour. However, 25% were not aware, which hints at a lack of outreach and communication efforts.

Table 2: Major Challenges in Implementing Decent Work Strategies

Serial Number	Challenges	Frequency	Percentage
001	Weak enforcement of labor laws	120	30.0
002	High informal sector dominance	100	25.0
003	Corruption and political interference	80	20.0
004	Inadequate funding and institutional gaps	60	15.0
005	Lack of Social Protection Systems	40	10.0
	Total	400	100

Source: Survey, 2025

Weak enforcement of labor laws and the dominance of the informal sector were identified as primary challenges. This aligns with Nwachukwu (2021), who reported that most Nigerian workers operate outside formal legal frameworks, limiting labor protection.

Table 3: Respondents' View on Government Commitment to Decent Work

Serial Number	Response	Frequency	Percentage
001	Strongly Committed	60	15.0
002	Moderately Committed	140	35.0
003	Poorly Committed	200	50.0
	Total	400	100

Source: Survey, 2025

Table 3 revealed half of the respondents (50%) perceived government commitment as poor. This corroborates Adebayo and Olagunju (2021), who found that political will and budgetary prioritization remain key barriers to labor policy execution in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The findings revealed that although Nigeria has adopted the Decent Work Agenda, its implementation is hampered by weak institutions, underfunding, and the informalization of labor. The study supports Olawale and Adegoke's (2022) argument that labor casualization erodes job stability and workers' dignity. It also validates institutional theory by showing how governance weaknesses directly impede the enforcement of decent work policies.

Theory and Findings

The results align with Human Development Theory, emphasizing that without decent employment and fair income, human capabilities cannot flourish. They also confirm Institutional Theory, illustrating that weak regulatory institutions undermine the realization of decent work principles.

Summary

This study examined the challenges in implementing decent work strategies in Nigeria. Using data from 400 respondents, it identified weak enforcement of labor laws, informal employment dominance, and corruption as key obstacles. Despite policy frameworks like the Decent Work Country Programme, Nigeria's institutional and governance structures remain fragile.

Conclusions

Decent work remains central to achieving inclusive growth and sustainable development. However, Nigeria's progress has been slow due to institutional weaknesses, limited funding, and lack of political commitment. Effective implementation requires not only robust policies but also accountable institutions and active labor participation.

Recommendations

Strengthen labor inspection and enforcement mechanisms.

Formalize informal employment through simplified registration and tax systems.

Increase funding for the Ministry of Labour and social protection programs.

Enhance collaboration between government, employers, and trade unions.

Incorporate decent work indicators into national development plans and budgetary processes.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes empirical evidence on the institutional and socio-economic constraints to decent work implementation in Nigeria. It expands existing literature by linking policy gaps with institutional theory and providing actionable insights for policymakers and international organizations.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future research should:

Conduct longitudinal studies assessing the impact of specific labor reforms.

Explore gender dimensions of decent work implementation.

Examine comparative experiences across West African countries.

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