

The Effects of Wage Degradation on Economic Growth and Poverty in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of wage degradation on economic growth and poverty in Zimbabwe. Making use of extant qualitative research methods, the study analysed the trends and patterns of wage degradation in Zimbabwe and its effects on economic growth and poverty. The results showed that wage degradation had a significant negative impact on economic growth and poverty in Zimbabwe. The study found out that the decline in real wages led to a decrease in consumer spending, which in turn had contributed to economic stagnation. Furthermore, wage degradation exacerbated poverty and income inequality in Zimbabwe, with the poorest segments of the population being the most affected. Key drivers of wage degradation included hyperinflation, economic instability and poor labour market policies. The findings of this study had important policy implications for Zimbabwe. To stimulate economic growth and reduce poverty, the government needed to implement policies that promoted wage growth, improved labour market conditions and protected workers' rights. Specifically, the study recommended the implementation of a living wage policy, strengthening of labour unions and the promotion of collective bargaining. Additionally, the government needed to implement policies that promoted economic stability, reduce inflation and increase productivity. By addressing the issue of wage degradation, Zimbabwe could unlock the potential of its workforce and promote sustainable economic growth and development.

Keywords: Wage Degradation, Economic Growth, Poverty, Zimbabwe, Labour Market Policies, Living Wage

Introduction

Zimbabwe's economic history is marked by periods of rapid growth and decline. The country experienced significant economic growth in the early 1980s, driven by a strong agricultural sector and a diversified economy. However, the economy began to decline in the late 1990s, due to a combination of internal and external factors, including economic mismanagement, sanctions and a decline in global commodity prices, (Chidoko, 2023). The economy further deteriorated in the 2000s, with hyperinflation reaching unprecedented levels, peaking at an astonishing 89.7 sextillion per cent in 2008. The economic crisis had a devastating impact on the welfare of Zimbabweans, with poverty and unemployment soaring to alarming levels. One of the key features of Zimbabwe's economic crisis was the degradation of wages. The value of wages was eroded by inflation and the wage structure became increasingly compressed, with low wages and salaries failing to keep pace with the cost of living. (Nyoni, 2019). The decline in real wages had a disproportionate impact on low-income earners, who are living in poverty. The wage degradation also had a negative impact on the economy, as low wages reduced consumer spending, which was a key driver of economic growth. (Nyanga, 2022).

The economic crisis in Zimbabwe has had a profound impact on the labour market. The decline in economic activity led to a significant decline in formal employment opportunities and many workers were forced to seek employment in the informal sector. The informal sector is characterised by low wages, poor working conditions and a lack of social protection (Sibanda, Sibanda, Ntombana, & Jere, 2024). However, the same can be said for civil servants, in which the condition of service has deteriorated over the years and is characterised by low wages. The decline in real wages also led to a decline in the purchasing power of workers, making it difficult for them to meet their basic needs. (Nyanga, 2024). The government implemented various policies to address the economic crisis, including the introduction of a multi-currency system and the implementation of fiscal consolidation policies. However, these policies had limited success in stimulating economic growth and reducing poverty. The economy remained fragile and the prospects for economic growth and job creation remained uncertain. (Oxfam International, 2025).

It is against this bedrock that the study sought to examine the impact of wage degradation on economic growth and poverty in Zimbabwe. The study analysed the trends and patterns of wage degradation in Zimbabwe and its effects on economic growth and poverty. The study also explored the key drivers of wage degradation and identified potential policy interventions that could be implemented to promote wage growth and reduced poverty. The study was structured into four sections and these included an overview of the economy in the last five decades, research methodology, research findings, analysis and conclusions and recommendations.

Five Decades of Economic Turmoil and Duress

1980-1990

Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980 and the new government, led by Prime Minister Robert Mugabe, implemented socialist policies aimed at reducing economic inequalities and promoting economic growth. The government introduced a range of policies, including strict controls on wages and prices, to stabilise the economy and promote development. The economy experienced significant growth in the early 1980s, driven by a strong agricultural sector and a relatively well-developed manufacturing sector. (Matora & Abednico, 2024). However, the economy faced significant challenges, including a large budget deficit and high inflation. The government's socialist policies, while well-intentioned, led to a decline in investor confidence and a shortage of foreign exchange. (Chinembiri, 2016). The government's attempts to control wages and prices led to a brain drain, as many skilled professionals left the country in search of better opportunities. Despite these challenges, the government introduced market reforms in the late 1980s, aimed at liberalising the economy and promoting growth. The reforms included the introduction of a new investment code, aimed at attracting foreign investment and the liberalisation of trade policies. (Nyoni, 2019). However, the reforms had limited success and the economy continued to face significant challenges.

1991-2000

The 1990s were a challenging decade for Zimbabwe's economy. The government implemented the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in 1991, which aimed to liberalise the economy and promote growth. The program included a range of policies, including trade liberalisation, privatisation and fiscal consolidation. (Chinembiri, 2016). However, the program was hit by severe droughts, which had a devastating impact on the agricultural sector. The economy experienced a significant decline during the 1990s, with GDP growth averaging

just 2.5% per year. The government's budget deficit increased significantly and inflation soared to over 60% in 1995. The decade also saw a significant increase in poverty, with the percentage of the population living below the poverty line increasing from 30% in 1990 to over 50% by the end of the decade. (Matora & Abednico, 2024). The government's land reform program, which aimed to redistribute land from white farmers to black Zimbabweans, also faced significant challenges. The program was criticised for being slow and ineffective and many white farmers were forcibly evicted from their land. The program also led to a decline in agricultural production, as many black farmers lacked the skills and resources to maintain production levels. (Nyanga, 2024).

2001-2010

The 2000s were a disastrous decade for Zimbabwe's economy. The government implemented policies that led to a decline in agricultural production, manufacturing and economic output. The economy shrank significantly and poverty levels increased. The government's land reform program, which had been slow and ineffective in the 1990s, became increasingly violent, with many white farmers being forcibly evicted from their land (Chinembiri, 2016). The economy experienced hyperinflation, with inflation rates reaching unprecedented levels. The inflation rate peaked at an astonishing 89.7 sextillion per cent in 2008, making it one of the worst cases of hyperinflation in history. The economy also experienced a severe shortage of foreign exchange, which made it difficult for businesses to import goods and services. (Nyanga, 2024). The government's economic policies were widely criticised, both domestically and internationally. The government's attempts to control prices and wages led to shortages and black-market activities. The economy also suffered from a lack of investment, as both domestic and foreign investors were deterred by the government's policies. In 2009, the government introduced a new currency, the Zimbabwe dollar and implemented a power-sharing agreement with the opposition. (Chidoko, 2023). The agreement led to a stabilisation of the economy and inflation rates began to decline. However, the economy continued to face significant challenges, including a lack of investment and a severe shortage of foreign exchange.

2011-2020

The economy showed signs of recovery between 2010 and 2013, with growth rates averaging over 10% per year. The government implemented policies aimed at stabilising the economy and promoting growth. The government also introduced a new Constitution, which aimed to promote democracy and good governance. (Matora & Abednico, 2024). However, the economy faced significant challenges, including poor harvests, low diamond revenues and decreased investment. The country's infrastructure, including roads and electricity, also remained in poor condition. The economy also faced significant regulatory challenges, including a complex and unpredictable business environment. (Nzimakwe & Utete, 2024). Despite these challenges, the economy continued to grow, albeit at a slower rate. The government implemented policies aimed at promoting investment, including the introduction of special economic zones and investment incentives. The government also implemented policies aimed at improving the business environment, including the introduction of a new company law. (Oxfam International, 2025). However, the economy continued to face significant challenges, including a lack of foreign exchange and high levels of debt. The government's fiscal policies were also criticised, with many arguing that the government was spending too much and not doing enough to promote economic growth.

2021-2025

In recent years, Zimbabwe's economy showed resilience, with growth projected in key sectors such as mining and manufacturing. The government implemented economic reforms, including efforts to improve the business environment and reduce inflation. The economy was expected to continue growing, driven by increased production in the mining sector and improved economic stability. (United Nations Zimbabwe, 2024). The government implemented policies aimed at promoting investment, including the introduction of investment incentives and special economic zones. The government also implemented policies aimed at improving the business environment, including the introduction of a new company law and the streamlining of regulatory procedures. (IMF, 2025). The economy is also expected to benefit from the country's significant natural resources, including platinum, gold and diamonds. The government also implemented policies aimed at promoting the extractive sector, including the introduction of new mining laws and regulations. (Oxfam International, 2025). However, the economy continued to face significant challenges, including a lack of foreign exchange and high levels of debt. The government's fiscal policies were also under pressure, with many arguing that the government needed to do more to promote economic growth and reduce poverty.

Research Methodology

Extant secondary qualitative literature was the research method used to gather information. This approach aimed to comprehend the impact of wage degradation on economic growth and poverty in Zimbabwe. As a means of gathering specific and needed information, the analysis relied on secondary data from international institutions' publications to generate accurate data. More so, findings, conclusions and recommendations were also drawn from a documentary search of books, journal articles and working papers.

Results and Discussion

Causes of Low Wages

Economic Mismanagement

Zimbabwe's economic challenges, including hyperinflation, currency instability and high unemployment, significantly contributed to wage degradation. The government's economic policies were criticised for being ineffective, leading to a decline in economic growth and a decrease in the purchasing power of citizens. The Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe's decision to print more money after 2018 to finance budget deficits led to hyperinflation, further eroding the value of wages. (United Nations Zimbabwe, 2024). The government's economic mismanagement also led to a decline in investor confidence, making it difficult for businesses to access foreign currency and imports. This resulted in shortages of essential goods and services such as cement in 2025, further exacerbating the economic crisis. The lack of economic stability made it challenging for employers to maintain real wages, leading to a decline in the standard of living for workers. (Sibanda, Sibanda, Ntombana, & Jere, 2024). The government's failure to implement structural reforms and diversify the economy also contributed to the economic crisis. The economy's heavy reliance on a few sectors, such as agriculture and mining, made it vulnerable to external shocks such as draughts experienced in 2022-2023 season. (IMF, 2025). The lack of economic diversification limited job creation and economic growth, further exacerbating wage degradation.

Hyperinflation

Zimbabwe's hyperinflation crisis, which peaked in 2008, had a lasting impact on the economy and wages. The rapid increase in prices made it difficult for workers to afford necessities, leading to a decline in their standard of living. The government's inability to control inflation resulted in wages becoming increasingly worthless. (Hupile, 2021). Hyperinflation also led to a decline in savings and investment, as people were more likely to spend their money quickly before prices rose further. This resulted in a lack of investment in productive sectors of the economy, further exacerbating the economic crisis. The hyperinflation crisis also had a significant impact on the government's fiscal policy. (Nyanga, 2024). The government's inability to collect sufficient revenue resulted in a decline in public services, further exacerbating the economic crisis. The government's decision to print more money to finance budget deficits in 2018 further fuelled inflation, creating a vicious cycle of inflation and economic decline (United Nations Zimbabwe, 2024).

Corruption and Governance Failures

Corruption and governance failures also contributed to wage degradation in Zimbabwe. The country's leaders were accused of siphoning public funds for personal gain, leaving little for essential services and infrastructure development. This resulted in poor service delivery and a lack of investment in human capital, further exacerbating wage degradation. (Matora & Abednico, 2024). The lack of transparency and accountability in government also contributed to corruption, as those in power were not held accountable for their actions. This resulted in a culture of impunity, where corruption was tolerated and even encouraged. (Sibanda, Sibanda, Ntombana, & Jere, 2024). The impact of corruption on the economy has significant, with many businesses citing corruption as a major obstacle to doing business in Zimbabwe. The lack of transparency and accountability also led to a decline in investor confidence, making it difficult for the country to attract foreign investment. (Nzimakwe & Utete, 2024).

Decline of the Formal Sector

The decline of the formal sector in Zimbabwe also contributed to wage degradation. Many companies closed or downsized due to economic challenges, leading to a significant increase in unemployment and underemployment. This resulted in a shift towards informal employment, which often lacked job security and benefits. (Nyanga, 2022). The decline of the formal sector also led to a decline in productivity, as many workers were forced to engage in low-productivity activities in the informal sector. This resulted in a decline in economic growth and a decrease in the standard of living for workers. (Sibanda, Sibanda, Ntombana, & Jere, 2024). The government's failure to support the formal sector contributed to its decline. The lack of access to finance and foreign currency made it difficult for businesses to operate, leading to a decline in economic activity. (Matora & Abednico, 2024).

Lack of Economic Diversification

Zimbabwe's economy was heavily dependent on a few sectors, including agriculture and mining. This lack of diversification made the economy vulnerable to external shocks and limited job creation and economic growth. (Hu, Hassan, & Amri, 2024). The government's failure to diversify the economy contributed to wage degradation. The lack of economic diversification also led to a decline in economic resilience, making it difficult for the economy to absorb external shocks such as droughts. This resulted in a decline in economic growth and

a decrease in the standard of living for workers. (World Bank, 2022). The government's failure to promote economic diversification also contributed to a lack of investment in other sectors of the economy. The lack of investment in sectors such as manufacturing and tourism limited job creation and economic growth, further exacerbating wage degradation. (Oxfam International, 2025).

Poor Labor Market Policies

Zimbabwe's labour market policies were criticised for being inadequate, leading to the exploitation of workers. The lack of effective collective bargaining mechanisms and minimum wage laws resulted in wages not keeping pace with inflation, further exacerbating wage degradation. (Esmaeili, Zahedi, KooshkiJahormi, & Hozori, 2024). The lack of protection for workers also led to a decline in job security, as workers were retrenched at will. This resulted in a decline in worker morale and productivity, further exacerbating the economic crisis. (Global Living Wage Coalition & Anker Research Institute, 2023). The government's failure to protect workers' rights also contributed to a decline in social cohesion, as workers feel that their rights were not protected. This resulted in a decline in trust in institutions and a sense of disillusionment among workers. (Muringani, Nyanga, Utete & Nyanga, 2025).

International Sanctions

International sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe have also contributed to wage degradation. The sanctions limited the country's access to international credit markets, further isolating it from the global economy and reducing economic growth. (Nyoni, 2019). The sanctions also had a significant impact on the country's ability to access essential goods and services, including medicines and food. This resulted in a decline in the standard of living for many Zimbabweans, further exacerbating poverty and wage degradation. (Matora & Abednico, 2024). The impact of sanctions on the economy was significant, with many businesses citing sanctions as a major obstacle to doing business in Zimbabwe. The lack of access to international credit markets made it difficult for businesses to access the foreign currency they needed to import essential goods and services. (Nzimakwe & Utete, 2024).

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on Zimbabwe's economy, leading to increased poverty and unemployment. The pandemic further exacerbated wage degradation, as many workers had their hours or wages reduced. (World Bank, 2021). The pandemic was particularly challenging for workers in the informal sector, who often lacked access to social protection and benefits. The pandemic also led to a decline in economic activity, further exacerbating the economic crisis. (Oxfam International, 2025). The government's response to the pandemic was criticised for being inadequate, with many arguing that more could have been done to support workers and businesses. The lack of support for workers and businesses further exacerbated the economic crisis, leading to a decline in economic growth and an increase in poverty and wage degradation. (Sibanda, Sibanda, Ntombana, & Jere, 2024).

Effects on the Economy and Poverty

Reduced Purchasing Power

Low wages in Zimbabwe significantly reduced the purchasing power of individuals and families. With wages failing to keep pace with inflation, many people struggled to afford necessities like food, clean water and medical care. This reduced purchasing power negatively impacted the overall economy, leading to decreased economic activity. As people had less disposable income, they were less likely to spend on non-essential goods and services, which led to a decline in economic growth. (World Bank, 2022). The reduced purchasing power also led to a decline in the standard of living for many Zimbabweans. People were forced to make difficult choices between paying for food, healthcare and other essential expenses. This resulted in a decline in nutrition, health outcomes and overall well-being. The situation is particularly dire for vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, children and those with disabilities, who were often the most affected by economic shocks. (Oxfam International, 2025). The government's inability to implement effective economic policies contributed to the reduced purchasing power. The lack of fiscal discipline and monetary policy effectiveness led to high inflation rates, which eroded the value of wages. The government's failure to address these issues resulted in a decline in the standard of living for many Zimbabweans. (Sibanda, Sibanda, Ntombana, & Jere, 2024).

Increased Poverty

Low wages in Zimbabwe perpetuated poverty, with approximately 76.3% of Zimbabwean children living in poverty. The poverty rate stood at around 38.3%, with 42% of the population living in extreme poverty. The lack of economic opportunities and low wages resulted in a decline in living standards, with many people struggling to access necessities like food, clean water and healthcare. (United Nations Zimbabwe, 2024). The poverty situation in Zimbabwe was particularly dire in rural areas, where access to basic services like healthcare and education was limited. The lack of economic opportunities in rural areas resulted in a significant rural-urban migration, with many people moving to urban areas in search of better economic opportunities. (IMF, 2025). The government's failure to address poverty resulted in a decline in human development outcomes, including health and education. The poverty rate also contributed to social and economic instability, as people became increasingly frustrated with the lack of economic opportunities. (Nzimakwe & Utete, 2024).

Food Insecurity

Zimbabwe faced significant food insecurity, with an estimated six million people expected to be food insecure. Rising food prices and fluctuating exchange rates eroded families' purchasing power, making it difficult for them to afford food. The situation was particularly dire in rural areas, where many people relied on agriculture for their livelihoods. (Oxfam International, 2025). The food insecurity situation in Zimbabwe was exacerbated by the country's reliance on rain-fed agriculture, which made it vulnerable to climate-related shocks. The lack of investment in agriculture and irrigation infrastructure also contributed to food insecurity, as farmers were unable to produce enough food to meet domestic demand. (United Nations Zimbabwe, 2024). The government's failure to address food insecurity resulted in a decline in nutrition and health outcomes, particularly for vulnerable populations like children and the elderly. The food insecurity situation also contributed to social and economic instability, as people became

increasingly frustrated with the lack of access to necessities like food. (Global Living Wage Coalition & Anker Research Institute, 2023).

Limited Economic Growth

Low wages in Zimbabwe limited economic growth by reducing consumer spending, which was a key driver of economic activity. As people had less disposable income, they were less likely to spend on non-essential goods and services, which could lead to a decline in economic growth. (World Bank, 2022). The lack of economic growth resulted in a decline in investment, as businesses were less likely to invest in an economy with low consumer spending. This resulted in a decline in economic development, including infrastructure and human capital. (Sibanda, Sibanda, Ntombana & Jere, 2024). The government's failure to address the economic crisis resulted in a decline in economic growth, which further exacerbated poverty and inequality. The lack of economic growth also contributed to social and economic instability, as people became increasingly frustrated with the lack of economic opportunities. (Matora & Abednico, 2024).

Increased Inequality

Low wages in Zimbabwe exacerbated income inequality, as those with fixed incomes, such as pensioners and low-income households, suffered the most. This economic disenfranchisement fuelled social unrest and protests. (Dohlman, Dimegilio, Hajj & Laudanski, 2021). The lack of economic opportunities and low wages resulted in a decline in social mobility, as people were less likely to move up the economic ladder. (World Bank, 2022). This has resulted in a decline in social cohesion, as people became increasingly frustrated with the lack of economic opportunities. (Matora & Abednico, 2024). The government's failure to address income inequality resulted in a decline in trust in institutions, including the government and the private sector. The lack of trust has contributed to social and economic instability, as people became increasingly frustrated with the lack of economic opportunities. (Nzimakwe & Utete, 2024).

Negative Impact on Health and Education

The economic crisis and low wages in Zimbabwe led to a decline in access to healthcare and education. Many children were forced to drop out of school and healthcare services were underfunded and understaffed. (United Nations Zimbabwe, 2024). The lack of access to healthcare resulted in a decline in health outcomes, particularly for vulnerable populations like children and the elderly. (United Nations Zimbabwe, 2024). The decline in access to education resulted in a decline in human capital, which was critical for economic development. (Esmaeili, Zahedi, KooshkiJahormi & Hozori, 2024). The government's failure to address the economic crisis resulted in a decline in human development outcomes, including health and education. The lack of investment in human capital contributed to a decline in economic growth and development. (Global Living Wage Coalition & Anker Research Institute, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The challenge of low wages in Zimbabwe was a complex issue that require a multifaceted approach. The country's economic crisis, characterised by hyperinflation, currency instability and low economic growth, had a devastating impact on the purchasing power of workers. The effects of low wages were far-reaching, with significant impacts on poverty, food insecurity and access to basic services like healthcare and education. Low wages resulted in reduced purchasing power, increased poverty and food insecurity. The economic crisis had a disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations, including children, the elderly and those with disabilities. The government's failure to implement effective economic policies contributed to the economic crisis and exacerbated the challenges faced by workers.

It was therefore recommended that Zimbabwe required coordinated effort from the government, private sector and civil society to address the challenge of low wages. There was need to implement a living wage policy that considered the cost of living and was indexed to inflation. There was a need to implement economic reforms to promote economic growth, stability and investment. There was need to strengthen labour institutions and social protection measures to protect workers' rights and promote social justice. There was also needed to promote economic diversification and job creation in sectors that could absorb labour and promote economic growth.

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