

South Africa's National Minimum Wage: A Total Sell Out? Or Bright Light in a Dark Tunnel?

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Abstract

This paper takes a balanced approach, navigating the middle ground between either a solely moral argument, or purely economic one. We ask, what does the national minimum wage really offer? Is it a total sell out, or does it provide some light at the end of the tunnel? Negotiated at NEDLAC to be set at R20 per hour, or R3500 in monthly terms, the proposed national minimum wage does not meet either the living wage level, or the decent wage threshold. This leaves many, particularly family members who are dependent on one workers wage, living below the working poor line (estimated to be R4317 as of February 2016). While South African families often depend on one wage earner per family in which the R3500 per month would be insufficient, there are some benefits to be derived from

setting a baseline for the distribution of wages. While a wage level of R3500 is not “Just”, it does have positive spin-offs. Two of the employment sectors in which a Minimum Wage of R3500 will have an immediate positive impact on, is amongst agricultural and domestic workers - whom to date earn significantly below the working-poor line. When the National Minimum Wage comes into effect, approximately 4.3 million low wage workers will immediately have their wages raised. This paper agrees that the National Minimum Wage policy be reviewed annually for assessment and adjustment in order to meet the needs of workers, and further agrees that the current negotiated level is a good baseline from which to advance workers interests.

Key words: National Minimum Wage, Working Poor Line, Poverty Line,

Introduction

The National Minimum Wage debate in South Africa is a robust one. The debate ensues against the backdrop of high levels of inequality, continuing poverty and high levels of unemployment – partly impacted upon by continuous, but very gradual economic growth in South Africa which has slowed down considerably since the 2008 global recession. From 1994 to 2008, South Africa’s GDP grew by 3.6 per cent a year, which equalled the average for upper middle-income economies.¹ However, from 2009 to 2012, the South African economy grew by only 3.1 per cent a year², and growth in GDP moderated further from 1.5 per cent in 2014 to a disappointing 1.3 per cent in 2015. On average, annual growth amounted to 2.3 per cent between 2010 and 2015, compared with an annual average rate of 4.0 per cent in the ten years prior to 2009.³

Recently, after nearly two years of negotiations, parties, and stakeholders at the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac)⁴ reached an agreement that set the level for the National Minimum wage at R20 per hour, which is meant to take effect as of 1st May 2018.⁵ However, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) continues to demand that workers be paid a minimum wage of R4500 instead of the R3500 agreed upon by the different stakeholders at NEDLAC.

COSATU argues that R3500 per month or R20 per hour is insufficient as a decent living wage. Agreeing with Cosatu’s stance, John Spiropoulos, argues, that the economic arguments and the unwillingness of business to increase the recommended minimum wage of R3500 to the R4500 advanced by Cosatu, is a matter of moral indignation.⁶ Similarly, Martin Hopkins, an executive

¹ “Economic Transformation”,

² Ibid

³ “Domestic Economic Developments”,

<https://www.resbank.co.za/Lists/News%20and%20Publications/Attachments/7195/02Quarterly%20Economic%20Review%20E2%80%93%20March%202016.pdf>, page 4

⁴ The National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac) was established through an Act of Parliament in 1994; one of the first Acts of the democratic government. Nedlac, enables labour, business and other constituents of civil society to participate directly in the formulation of policy and law before it is presented to Parliament.

⁵ National Economic Development and Labour Council, “AGREEMENT ON THE INTRODUCTION OF A NATIONAL MINIMUM WAGE”<http://new.nedlac.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Agreement-on-the-introduction-of-the-national-minimum-wage.pdf>, February 2017

⁶ John Spiropoulos, “The minimum wage and the moral economy”, In the Mail and Guardian, <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-01-06-00-the-minimum-wage-and-the-moral-economy>, January 2017

committee member at the South African Reward Association (SARA) and partner at the multinational professional services firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, had argued that: “the real issue we should be confronting is not just the minimum wage, but instead, what a living wage is, and how to begin paying it”.⁷

On the other hand, the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA), (a breakaway from COSATU and the ANC alliance in the process of forming its own trade union federation and possibly inaugurating a political party) argued that it was disgusted at the proposed amount of R3 500 as a National minimum wage, and according to the general secretary of Numsa, Irvin Jim: “this proposal reinforces South Africa as a haven for cheap labour, just as it was under Apartheid”.⁸

More interestingly, Numsa argues that if the proposed national minimum wage were to be implemented it would be the final nail in the coffin for the workers struggle in South Africa- since the national minimum wage begins at a rate that is below both living wage and decent work wage.⁹

As such, South African policy makers face a number of contradictions with regard to the national minimum wage debate. Tapping into current debates, this paper does not enquire into the moral or economic dimensions of the current debate, but rather, seeks to investigate whether the proposed national minimum wage (NMW) is in fact sufficient to meet basic needs of workers as proposed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The paper also addresses whether the NMW will address South Africa’s dire poverty and if it will meaningfully raise low wage income; and whether or not the national minimum wage will benefit workers and expand the potential for labour absorption in the economy.

Does South Africa’s National Minimum wage cover the basic needs of workers?

Minimum wages are regular labour market policy instruments, with nearly 90% of International Labour Organisation (ILO) member states having some form of minimum wage system in place.¹⁰ Almost half of ILO member states have a national minimum wage system, while the other half has differentiated minima¹¹ – in which minimum wages are specified per sector and are sectoral determined.

South Africa is now on the verge of establishing a national minimum which is proposed at R20 per hour (R20/h) and has become a focus of public debate. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) minimum wage is defined as “the minimum sum payable to a worker for work performed or services rendered, within a given period (...) which may not be reduced either by individual or collective agreement (and) which is guaranteed by law”. ILO Convention No. 131

⁷ African News Agency, “A minimum wage is one thing; a living wage is another”, July 2016, http://www.engineeringnews.co.za/article/a-minimum-wage-is-one-thing-a-living-wage-is-another-2016-07-27/rep_id:4136

⁸ Fin24, “R20 per hour for workers is an insult – Numsa”, February 2017, <http://www.fin24.com/Economy/r20-per-hour-is-an-insult-numsa-20170207>

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Gilad Isaacs, “A National Minimum Wage for South Africa, National Minimum Wage Research Initiative, Summary Report 1, University of the Witwatersrand, page1

¹¹ Ibid

suggests that the primary purpose of such a minimum wage is to provide protection for wage earners against “unduly low wages”.¹²

In other words, a minimum wage aims to set a floor to the distribution of wages, below which no worker can legally be paid. Further, minimum wages, according to ILO’s resolution NO.135, are “one element in a policy designed to overcome poverty and to ensure the satisfaction of the needs of all workers and their families”.¹³ As such, the “fundamental purpose of minimum wage fixing should be to give wage earners necessary social protection”.¹⁴ In recent times the ILO has emphasized the significance of “adequate protection in accordance with the Decent Work Agenda” and observed that for a minimum wage to be *meaningful* it has to “*be set at a level that covers the needs of workers and their families, while taking into account economic factors*”¹⁵.

The ILO argues that, since wages and salaries are the most important element of income, minimum wage policy can simultaneously deal with both the needs of wage earners and their dependents, as well as moderate income inequality.

South Africa, like many developed and developing countries, faces a legacy of ingrained poverty, and because of Apartheid colonialism, there is a high coincidence between identity and poverty and identity and inequality.¹⁶ In general, in South Africa, income inequality has significantly increased over the years.¹⁷ In the view of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and many leading economists, there is an agreement that income inequality has devastating effects on economic growth.¹⁸

In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, inequality has been estimated at a Gini coefficient of 0.66,¹⁹ amongst the world’s highest. A great deal of this inequality is driven by wage-income inequality and research demonstrates that wage income inequality continues to remain high, due to the constant increase in wages at the top end of income distribution compared to those at the bottom. Income inequality amongst racial groups has somewhat decreased over the past twenty-one years, however, the income gap has increased between various social groups that make up the population.²⁰

The black middle class has grown in significant numbers; at the same time, the income gap within the black community greatly increased, generating a huge gap between the black middle class and the black working class.²¹

¹² International Labour Organization, “Towards A South African National Minimum Wage”, August 2015, page4

¹³ Op Cit, Gilad Isaac

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Op Cit International Labour Organization

¹⁷ Haroon Borat and Carlene Van der Westhuizen, “POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND THE NATURE OF ECONOMIC GROWTH IN SOUTH AFRICA”, http://www.humanities.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/36/DPRU%20WP12-151.pdf

¹⁸ Op Cit, Gilad Isaac,

¹⁹ Arden Finn, “A National Minimum Wage in the Context of the South African Labour Market”, <http://nationalminimumwage.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/NMW-RI-Descriptive-Statistics-Final.pdf>, page 5

²⁰ “The national minimum wage in South Africa: Impact on job creation and income inequality”, <http://www.budgetspeechcompetition.co.za/winners-and-finalists/2015-winners/Mususumeli-Rikhotso.pdf>

²¹ Ibid

A number of indicators might be useful in offering us direction in the settings of a national minimum wage level for South Africa. One conceivable approach suggested by the ILO, is to consider national poverty thresholds, also called poverty lines.²²

In the case of South Africa, the National Minimum wage Research Initiative (NMWRI) at the University of Witwatersrand, using figures developed initially by the Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) at the University of Cape Town by Budlender et al, calculates the national poverty line as R1319 in April 2015 and R1386 in February 2016.²³

They argue that the absence of a wage earner in a household manifestly affects household poverty. Though having a wage earner in a household can alleviate dire poverty; a more important consideration is vital, since the ILO explicitly conditions that in a developing country, is the cost of living ought to be measured not for an individual but for a family with dependents instead.²⁴

As shown in Table 1 below, poverty rates in households without any wage earner was 88% in 2012, where as in households that had at least one resident wage earner, the poverty rate was 50%, displaying the centrality of wage earnings to both absolute poverty and modestly reducing inequality.²⁵ According to National Minimum Wage Research Initiative, 55% of full-time workers in South Africa can be classified as being part of the working poor.²⁶

Table1: Poverty and wages

	No earner in household	Earners in household
Non-poor	11.9	50.0
Poor	88.1	50.0
	100	100

Source: Finn (2015) from NIDS Wave 3 dataset.²⁷

The working poor can be categorised as “workers who live in households in which monthly household income per capita falls below the poverty line”.²⁸ According to the National Minimum wage Research Initiative, the working poor line is R4125 per month in April 2015 prices or R4317 in February 2016 prices; this takes into account 1) dependency ratios (which includes co-residence and non-co-resident

²² Elena Konopelko, “Indexing, Setting and Adjusting A National minimum Wage”, <http://nationalminimumwage.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/NMW-Policy-Brief-7-Web-Version.pdf>

²³ Op Cit, Gilad Isaacs , A National Minimum Wage for South Africa, National Minimum Wage Research Initiative, Summary Report 1, University of the Witwatersrand

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid, page 9, (Also to note in calculating the ‘working-poor’ threshold National Minimum wage Research Initiative at the University of Witwatersrand, first identify ‘full-time’ wage earners who work at least 35 hours a week, live in poor households, taking household size and a cost-of-basic-needs poverty line into account. They then calculate the household poverty gap – the total amount of money required to lift a poor household up to the poverty line – and average the poverty gap per earner in each working-poor household. They then compute the mean wages of earners in these households. This mean is then added to the average poverty gap per earner for each household; the sum is sufficient to bring household income per capita in each of these households up to the poverty line. In order to calculate this threshold they use the NIDS Wave 3 (2012) data)

dependents), 2) defining poverty; which is shown above as R1319 (per capita per month in April 2015) and 3) what the depth of poverty in each household is.²⁹ However, it is important to emphasise that the poverty line represents nothing more than the survival level and does not account for the requirements for a decent standard of living.³⁰ See Table Two below for ‘working-poor’ figures.³¹

Table 2: Working-poor line

Study	Poverty line (2015)	Working poor line
Budlender et al.	1 319	4 125

Source: Finn (2015) from NIDS Wave 3 dataset.³²

If the ‘working poor’ line is R4125 in 2015, what is the proportion of workers in South Africa that earn below the working poor line? As we can see in Table 3 below, 95% of domestic workers earn less than R4125 per month, while 89.6% of workers in the agricultural sector earn below R4125 per month.³³ Nearly half of those working in the manufacturing and transport sector earn below this line. In mining and utilities, 23% and 31% respectively, have the lowest proportion of working poor.

Table 3: Proportions above and below working-poor line by different categories

Industry	Above line	Below line	
Agriculture	10.4	89.6	100
Mining	77.1	22.9	100
Manufacturing	50.8	49.3	100
Utilities	68.9	31.1	100
Construction	36.9	63.1	100
Trade	39.8	60.2	100
Transport	52.5	47.5	100
Finance	52.7	47.4	100
Services	61.2	38.8	100
Domestic services	4.8	95.2	100

Source: Finn (2015) from LMDSA 2014 dataset.³⁴

Accounting for South Africa’s poverty line, working poor line, and the proportion in each labour market earning below the working poor line, the issue to consider is whether or not the proposed national minimum wage for South Africa - as a minimum wage floor below which no employer is to pay their employee – is able to meet their central objective of covering the basic needs of workers and their families.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid, (Further detail and methodological caveats see Finn 2015)

³² Op Cit, Gilad Isaac, page 9

³³ Ibid, page10

³⁴ Ibid

An additional complication, is that at NEDLAC the national wage minimum was calculated by using the formula, R20 per hour multiplied by 40 hours work week by 4.33 weeks, which gave them the sum of R3500 per month.

However the majority of workers in South Africa work on a 45 hour work week. Based on a 45 hour work week, the national minimum wage would have been R3900.³⁵ Regardless, since South Africa has dire poverty levels with about 54% of full time employees, which is about 5.5 million workers, earning below the working poor line of R4125 a month (would be about R4480 as of October 2016), who cannot meet the most basic needs both for themselves and their dependents³⁶; then the new national minimum wage is in reality, below the basic poverty needs and the working poor line and is not adequate to cover the basic needs of workers as defined by ILO.

What the minimum wage ought to at least do is give workers a minimum wage of at least R4480 (which is the working poor line for October 2016)³⁷ to support themselves and those who are relying on them.

The current proposed national minimum wage when compared to the requirements for a living wage is too low. The current proposed amount does not cover the basic needs of the majority of workers. This is attributable to the legacy of South Africa's historic ultralow wage regime, a product of Apartheid racial exclusion and exploitation.

In addition, the national minimum wage agreement does not state by how much the minimum wage would increase annually, given that it is commencing under the level of the 'working poor' line of R4500 adjusted to inflation. Since this is the case, COSATU correctly argues that the national minimum wage should incorporate a medium term target, and progressively increase the value of the national minimum wage over the years. Subsequently, with the proposed national minimum wage being below poverty line and the working poor line, does this mark a crisis for South Africa's workers in the labour market?

National Minimum Wage: A Crisis or Light for South Africa's workers in the labour market

Whether minimum wages are poverty reducing depends on the amount at which the poverty line is pegged. The relationship between the poverty line and minimum wage has its widest impact on wage distribution and fragments amongst the lowest earning upon whom the impact of minimum wages is the greatest.³⁸ However, the technical definition of poverty reduction might not be the most useful in

³⁵ Interview with Gilad Isaacs, 2 March 2017

³⁶ Gilad Isaacs, "A National Minimum Wage for South Africa – the path to economic growth?", in the Daily Maverick, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-08-11-op-ed-a-national-minimum-wage-for-south-africa-the-path-to-economic-growth/#.WL54bm997IU>

³⁷ Interview with Gilad Isaac, 2 February 2017

³⁸ Since we are dealing with poverty lines, it is crucial to understand that there are a number of developing case studies that have confirmed the correlation minimum wages and the lower rates of poverty. They include countries such as: Honduras, India, where a simulation showed that if minimum wages were expanded to all low-wage earners, poverty would be reduced by seven percentage points, Thailand and the Philippines, where a 1% increase in the minimum wage reduces poverty by 0.46%, and Nicaragua, where the relationship was dependent on intra-household wage sharing. For further reading see Isaac Gilad, "A National Minimum Wage for South Africa, National Minimum Wage Research Initiative, Summary Report 1, University of the Witwatersrand"

understanding the effects of minimum wages, since poverty reduction essentially involves shifting from below the poverty line to just above it.

Consequently, it is simplistic to argue that just because the proposed national minimum wage is below the poverty line, that it has failed workers in its entirety. Although it is important to quantify the working poor line (of R4480), and show how many workers earn below it (which is 54% of full time workers) it can appear arbitrary. A clearer consideration would evidently dismiss this, since would the 'working poor' earning R4480 still be counted amongst the 'working poor' if a person earned one rand more at R4481? Clearly they immediately fall out of the 'working poor' category but continue to live with its effects.

The more appropriate question is, whether the minimum wage is going to meaningfully raise lower wage income? If we take a person currently earning R3000, and their wage is adjusted to R3500, would this be meaningful in the person's life? Obviously, this increases the persons wage by a third, and though they remain under both, below the poverty line and amongst the working poor, it has some, even though modest, impact on their livelihood prospects.

Consider if the national minimum wage was pegged at just at R3000 instead of the current R3 500, would it raise the lowest wage incomes? Based on the data supplied in table 3, the answer would simply be yes. 82% of workers in the agriculture sector; and 85% of workers in the domestic services sector; would experience a marked, though modest increase in their monthly earnings.³⁹

Calculated in 2018 prices, the number of ultra-low wage levels will increase to R20 per hour for formal sector workers; R18 per hour for farmworkers (at 90% of the national minimum wage), R15 per hour for domestic workers (at 75% of the national minimum wage).⁴⁰

When the national minimum wage does come into effect, approximately 4.3 million low wage workers will have their wages raised.⁴¹ Therefore, we could argue that the current R20 per hour national minimum wage will positively affect each labour sector in various different ways, with the most marked effect being felt amongst agricultural workers and in the domestic services sector. This is to be expected given South Africa's legacy of apartheid and the racialised ultralow wage labour market, a national minimum wage set at any sensible level will generate an impact on a vast number of workers.⁴²

Nonetheless, the current proposed national minimum wage would raise average wages and in turn inevitably result in rises in household income, driving greater consumer spending, leading to greater demand in the economy, requiring increased output. These accumulated multiplier effects may have a

³⁹ Op Cit, Gilad Isaac, "A National Minimum Wage for South Africa, National Minimum Wage Research Initiative, Summary Report 1, University of the Witwatersrand", page 15

⁴⁰ Neil Coleman, " We need a National Minimum Wage deal which benefits the majority", Daily Maverick, February 2017, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2017-02-17-we-need-a-national-minimum-wage-deal-which-benefits-the-majority/#.WMZWtm997IU>

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

positive impact on growth levels as well as productivity, though they may not be immediately felt and will take a moderate amount of time to actually make an impact.⁴³

The introduction of a national minimum wage is alongside the inception of a progressive labour regulatory regime since 1996, one of the most significant labour market interventions of the last fifteen years.

Troublingly, the entire spectrum of the contemporary debate on the National Minimum Wage, lacked a paradigm that located the minimum wage as a precursor to, and progression towards a living wage, and later, “decent life” wage related to debates about “decent work”.

Instead of locating the Minimum Wage as a consequential step along a continuum, “minimum wage”, “living wage” and “decent wage” tied to a decent work agenda have been cast as isolated, and frequently competing, rather than complementary ones.

NUMSA for instance, argues that the focus on minimum wages is useless and unproductive one, and that the focus should be on the “living wage”. This appears to have inserted a political agenda in pursuit of state power and the attendant demonisation, of what NUMSA considers an “establishment” approach, which has introduced untold fissures into the campaign for an eventual decent work agenda. Consequently, the Union Movement as a whole has not succeeded in framing and mobilising on the “national minimum wage” as a progressive struggle.

The current national minimum wage, despite its shortcomings ought to be viewed as a victory for workers, and a contingent necessity in pursuit of the decent wage agenda in which adequate remuneration and other social protections are guaranteed to all.

In the interim, the national minimum wage will most likely assist in creating social stigma and a moral economy of shame around under paying workers and will create steps towards formalising informal work. Through national minimum wage the hands of workers can be strengthened. Its introduction will see a reduction by half in the number of people currently paid below the minimum wage.

In societies where a National Minimum Wage framework is in place, it is demonstrated that compliance with the framework is consistently higher, compared to jurisdictions where there is a sectoral or regional determination of a minimum wage system, in place.

This is a positive for South Africa. To enhance the effectiveness of a National Minimum Wage policy in the long run, the framework agreement needs to put in place annual adjustments to assess the degree to which the National Minimum Wage meets the needs of workers and what adjustments are necessary in order to incept a decent wage. Compliance and enforcement have been generalised problems in the South African State and Society.

The success of a National Minimum Wage policy is dependent on compliance and enforcement, and the current dysfunctionality in the State can be prove counter-productive to a well-intentioned National

⁴³ Ibid

Minimum Wage plan. South Africa needs to leverage the inception of the National Minimum Wage Policy and the simultaneous opportunity to restructure its labour and other inspectorates to ensure proper management, administration and compliance. This will strengthen, not just the State, but have a marked effect on the livelihoods of workers and their families.

Conclusion

The argument that the current proposed national minimum wage is a total sell-out is a misleading one. That the current level at which it is pegged cannot meet all the conditions of a decent wage, does not automatically render it immoral. Rendering the current National Minimum Wage as immoral, requires an unrealistic level of moral absolutism.

Introducing a National Minimum Wage occurs within a specific historical and socio-economic context but is also introduced contingently, with a view to the future. In a low growth, high unemployment context – introducing a minimum wage at too high a level creates, not only a disincentive for expanding the job market and further job creation, but runs the real risk of attrition in current job levels leading to higher unemployment and social instability. Equally, its vital to point out that although the current national minimum wage is in fact way below the poverty line and working poor line, it does not in itself represent a crisis for workers since as soon as it comes into effect, approximately 4.3 million low wage workers will have their wages meaningfully raised.

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