Workplace Health and Safety as Panacea for Economic Recession

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Abstract

Nigeria has been experiencing economic recession with its attendant consequences from the advent of this present democratic dispensation till now. Economic recession connotes a marked slippage in economic activities. While gross domestic product (GDP) is the broadest measure of economic activity, economic recession is the negative GDP growth in two consecutive quarters. Other indicators of economic recession are unemployment, low personal income and industrial production. This paper takes a look at workplace health and safety as panacea for economic recession. It states the history of economic recession in Nigeria. It mentions the causes of economic recession as high interest rates, inflation, reduced consumer confidence and reduced real wages. Also, the paper states the effects of economic recession to include decrease in sales of goods and services, increase in unemployment, high inflation rates, budget deficit in government spending, decline in the stock market, increase in crime rate and strained family relationships. The paper says that workplace health and safety save lives and money, identifies and prevents hazards, promotes workers' health, increases productivity, increase in small and medium scale businesses and rapid industrialization. It discusses ways of curbing economic recession through workplace health and safety. Lastly, it states the conclusion and recommendations.

Keywords: Workplace, health, safety, panacea, economic recession

Introduction

Occupational health as defined by the joint committee of the International Labour Organization-ILO and World Health Organization-WHO (1950) is the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of workers in all occupation (Olusegun, 2015). It is further explained as the sum total of all activities and programmes that are engaged upon, aiming to attain and maintain the highest level of health and safety for all people who are engaged in any type of work (Aibor & Olorunda, 2006). It involves the protection of workers' health from any hazard to which they may be exposed to in the work environment. It is a preventive and proactive approach which involves risk assessment, hazard identification, hazard mitigation, hazard elimination and treatment of work-related injuries. The totality of these programmes in the workplace is generally referred to as occupational health and safety (OHS) (Onojeharho, 2011).

There is a plethora of hazards (safety and health hazards) which people are exposed to in their jobs; from the formal industries (banking, oil and gas, textile, agricultural, construction, food and beverage etc.) to the informal (logging & sawmill, roadside mechanic, carpentry, local welders, pepper grinders, market traders etc.). Exposure to these hazards occurs for fairly long hours on a daily basis as the majority of the active hours of the day is spent at work (0800hours to 1600hours or 0900hours to 1700hours); at least 8 hours per day. These hazards include chemical, biological, physical, mechanical, psychological and ergonomic hazards. For any person affected, it could be either or a couple of the various forms of hazards.

Precisely, occupational health is the process of health protection, promotion, safety and welfare of workers in their routine and incidental duties (Aibor & Olorunda, 2006). The routine

duties of an employee are his day-to-day functions which he performs in his workplace while the incidental duties are other assignments which might be assigned to him. In all, the workers should not be exposed to hazards of any kind. Occupational health is the study and recognition of factors inherent or associated with the works, processes or working environment that exercise or may exercise harmful effects on health and the utilization of the study to provide necessary facilities or modify the work methods or working areas to promote the health, safety and well-being of workers in all occupations (Mfon, 2006). From the above definitions, it is clear that occupational health is the study of the work which a man does, its diseases and hazards with the intention of preventing and or controlling the diseases and hazards and promoting the health of the workers. Occupational health is not unconnected with the procedures, measures, methods, modalities and principles used at the work place and work in general. Parks (2007) said that the history of occupational health and safety dates back to the 16th century in Central Europe when keen medical and scientific observers noted the high morbidity and mortality among workers in the mining industry, one of the oldest industries known to man.

The National Bureau of Economic Research [NBER] (2017) defines a recession as "a significant decline in economic activities spread across the economy, lasting more than a few months, normally visible in real GDP, real income, employment, industrial production, and wholesale-retail sales." More specifically, recession is defined as when businesses cease to expand, the GDP diminishes for two consecutive quarters, the rate of unemployment rises and housing prices decline. Many factors contribute to an economy's fall into a recession, but the major cause is inflation.

History of economic recession in Nigeria

Abdullahi (2016) said that the present economic recession being experienced in the country started since 1974 when the vision of the founding fathers was neglected by their successors. He noted that Nigeria was far behind many countries, not only among the developed nations, but even among the African countries. He stated this while delivering keynote address at a National Agricultural Summit and Exhibition in Kaduna. He also said that Nigerian economy had always been diversified, but the country was still economically, politically and socially not making the required. Meanwhile, Okonjo-Iweala (2016) noted that the present economic recession started in the last political dispensation under President Goodluck Jonathan when the then governors refused the proposal of the federal government to save for the future. However, Tijani (2016) observed that Nigeria is in her worst economic recession.

Causes of economic recession

According to Zafar (2016) and Frederick (2016), the following factors are the causes of economic recession; high interest rates, inflation, reduced consumer confidence and reduced real wages. Each shall be discussed:

1. **High interest rates** are a cause of recession because they limit liquidity or the amount of money available to invest.
2. Another factor is increased **inflation**. Inflation refers to a general rise in the prices of goods and services over a period of time. As inflation increases, the percentage of goods and services that can be purchased with the same amount of money decreases.
3. **Reduced consumer confidence** is another factor that can cause a recession. If consumers believe the economy is bad, they are less likely to spend money. Consumer confidence is psychological but can have a real impact on any economy.
4. **Reduced real wages**, another factor, refers to wages that have been adjusted for inflation. Falling real wages means that a worker's paycheck is not keeping up with

inflation. The worker might be making the same amount of money, but his purchasing power has been reduced.

Effects of an economic recession

According to Uzie **(**2016) and Shukla (2009), the effects of economic recession are stated as follows:

1. Decrease in sales of goods and services, due to decreased finances available to individuals and families, the purchase of goods and services decline, this affects the purchasing power of the people.
2. Increase in unemployment, due to decreased sales of goods and services by business owners and Companies, a reduction in the workforce takes place as a result leads to loss of jobs.
3. High inflation rate, Nigeria has been experiencing high inflation rate due to scarcity of foreign exchange, a weak Naira, high interest rates, poor electricity supply, dependence on importation and the high cost of doing business in Nigeria. As Nigeria goes into a recession the inflation rate will go higher as the above-mentioned factors still persist for a longer time as the case may be.
4. Budget deficit in government spending, the National and States budgets will experience spending deficit due to shortfalls in government revenues. The government may decide on borrowing to cover for the fall in revenues, and this will increase the debt burden of the Federal and State Governments. When burden increases, the masses suffer more as a result of debt servicing.
5. Decline in the stock market, investors would avoid investing in companies that might suffer losses, while some investors would pull their funds from the stock market due to economic uncertainty. .
6. Increase in crime rate, as life gets hard for many and living conditions get worse, crime rate will escalate. There will be increase in robberies, kidnapping, petty stealing, fraudulent schemes and other financial crimes including advance fee fraud (419), and internet financial crimes.
7. Strained family relationships, as a result of unemployment, loss of income and high cost of living, inter-family relationships might be strained which may lead to marital and family conflicts.

Ways of curbing economic recession through workplace health and safety

1. Workplace health and safety ensures that workers are saved from sudden and untimely deaths. Oche (2016) said that Statistics by ILO show that every day, 6,400 people die from an occupational accident or disease globally, amounting to 2.3 million deaths each year.
2. It is preventive and proactive in approach as it foresees, identifies and prevents hazards before they turn to bad occurrences with unexpected or unpredictable consequences. Prevention is effective, always better and less costly than treatment and rehabilitation (curative).
3. It ensures that workers' health is not adversely affected by their work and work is not affected in return by poor health.
4. It fosters healthy workforce leading to increased productivity for the business owner and the economy at large. Healthy workers are essential to the success of any organization and they are the best assets in any industry.
5. It also reduces work-related sickness absence. This is an invaluable cost-saving benefit to employers. Sickness absence is one of the main causes of economic loss to employers due to lost productivity/output/man-hour loss, and time and resources spent on sickness absence management.

6. It helps businesses to attain compliance with the relevant laws. This ensures that businesses save cost by reducing potential claims and litigations.
7. A business organization that is successful with the health and welfare of its workers enjoys goodwill (betters company image) which gives such business an edge. Some companies will only award contracts to contractors with health and safety provisions.
8. It is another way of caring (health protection) for the public's health. Most of the health problems that people generally suffer from can be traced to work/job tasks (e.g. low back ache, respiratory problems, deafness, infertility, cancers etc.)
9. Nigeria with the largest population in Africa (approximately 170 million people) without OHS means a lot of people in Africa are exposed to occupational and safety hazards and continue to live with the consequences of such exposure. If Nigeria gets it right; Africa gets it right.
10. Majority of the employers and employees in small and medium scale businesses (formal and informal sectors) are ignorant of the hazards inherent in their jobs. They do not even know how or have the resources to protect themselves, hence the need for government to protect the health and safety of its citizens by implementing OHS. Nigeria's economy, at the moment has more people in the small and medium scale industries.
11. Nigeria has the largest economy in Africa, with fast growing industrialization; there could therefore not be a better time for OHS to be implemented than now. In addition, since Nigeria aims to be amongst the top 20 most industrialized country in the world, having and implementing OHS will align her with global industrial best practices and standards as practiced by the current top industrialized countries of the world.
12. It will improve the life expectancy of Nigerians which currently stands at 52 since many deaths (unreported and unaccounted for) occur directly at work or at a later time from work-related injuries and exposures. This will in turn reduce the suffering of children who could lose their bread winners to industrial accidents and deaths.

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper being presented in this conference is timely as the 28th of April this year is World Day on Safety and Health at Work. Since 2003, the ILO has been observing this day on Safety and Health at Work capitalizing on its traditional strengths of tripartism and social dialogue. The theme for this year's celebration is "OPTIMIZE THE COLLECTION AND USE OF OHS DATA. ILO (2017) says that its campaign for the 2017 World Day for Safety and Health at Work focuses on the critical need for countries to improve their capacity to collect and utilize reliable OHS data. This is in line with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted on September 25, 2015 by member States United Nations General Assembly [UNGA] (2015). It encompasses a global plan of action with specific targets to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all. With its adoption, the capacity to collect and utilize reliable OHS data has also become indispensable for countries to fulfil their commitment to implement and report on some of the agenda's 17 sustainable development goals and their targets. Sustainable development goal 8, in particular, among other things provides for the promotion of "inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" and its Target 8.8 focuses on the "protection of labour rights and promotion of safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment." The ILO instruments recognize that the collection and utilization of reliable OHS data are indispensable for the detection of new hazards and emerging risks, the

identification of hazardous sectors, the development of preventive measures, as well as the implementation of policies, systems and programmes at international, national and enterprise levels. OHS data provide the basis for setting priorities and measuring progress which are key factors in workers' health. The following recommendations are hereby made as panacea for economic recession:

1. Governments at all levels should create meaningful employments for the citizens.
2. The government should encourage Small and Medium Enterprises for the creation of more jobs.
3. Government should formulate occupational health and safety policies for the promotion of the health of workers.
4. There should be proper legislations for control of hazards in the workplace.
5. Legislations should be enforced within the work environment.
6. The factory inspectorate division of the ministry of labour and productivity should be well staffed to enable it adequately carry out factories' inspection in the country.
7. Factories' owners and employers of labour should provide and enforce the use of personal protective equipment (PPE).
8. Employees should comply with the use of PPE and safety rules at the work place.

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