



## **Challenges of COVID-19 on Labour Administration in Nigeria**

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### ***Abstract***

*This paper attempts to identify the challenges posed by the current COVID-19 on labour administration functions in Nigeria. The paper employs literature and archival materials to examine current trends on the experiences of labour administration in Nigeria. The review includes Nigeria's operating environment, scale and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges to the labour market and global business, challenges to the trade unions and challenges to the state. In particular, the development of the pandemic occasioned by COVID-19 and the resultant responses by stakeholders in employment relations were reviewed. The outcomes of this review show a gap in international best practices and the quality of labour administration in Nigeria. Suggestions are offered to optimise the adoption of best practices in labour administration in Nigeria by looking at the experiences of Singapore and Hong Kong.*

**Keywords:** *Labour Administration, COVID-19, Labour Markets, Sustainable Development.*

### **Introduction**

The advent of COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to labour administration in both developed and developing economies, although these effects are felt more in developing economies. Nigeria, even before the advent of the pandemic, was yet to achieve improved effective functioning of labour administration system necessary for sustainable economic development. The importance of labour administration as a most important institution of governance of the labour market, is illustrated in better working conditions, reduce the number of accidents and industrial disputes, increase the motivation of workers, higher productivity and competitiveness (Casale 2006, ILO, 2006; Fajana, 2008).

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The failure of many developing countries like Nigeria to strengthen its labour administration become evident that it is often plagued with organizational and contextual constraints that hamper effective enforcement of labour standards in many sectors. However, in today's global economy, responding to the effect of COVID-19 pandemic, globalization, social change, a fragile economy, skilled migration, and the changing needs of both workers and employers requires greater levels of innovation in labour administration policies. This means that international experience on effective management of labour administration has become critically important. As these global contending issues are having a sustained impact on the processes and outcomes of business fortunes across economies/countries; hence necessitate IR actors to think differently about their roles and responsibilities on how to ameliorate its effects.

Notwithstanding, the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic has generally established challenges, there exists a few model cases that can be adapted across nations. The objective of this study, therefore, is to examine labour administration in Nigeria, innovative trends in other lands, as well as the prospect of adapting policies and elsewhere to strengthen effective labour administration and optimize its gains in Nigeria.

Therefore, the paper is outlined as follows: A review of Nigeria's operating environment; scale and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic; Challenges to the labour market; Global business challenges; Challenges to the trade unions and challenges to the state. Suggestions are offered to optimise the adoption of best practices in labour administration in Nigeria in the concluding remarks.

### **Nigeria's Peculiarities within the Global Context**

There is no gain saying that Nigeria peculiarities within the global context differ based on some macroeconomic variables such as high level of interest rates, inflation rate, exchange rates, the unemployment rate amongst others. These represent the basic indicators of economic activity in any country (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi, 2008; Jareno & Negrut, 2016). Macroeconomic variables are conceived as adequate economic concepts necessary for the implementation of suitable economic planning for growth and development (Fajana, 2000; Frankel & Ros, 2006; Todaro & Smith, 2009, Fashoyin, 2010). Although, the information varies from country to country (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi, 2008).

However, the current COVID-19 pandemic has taken its toll on commodity-exporting countries like Nigeria. Though Nigeria may appear not to be the only developing economy that relies on a crude commodity like oil, her case seems distressed being a "monolithic" economy in nature. This is so when it is considered that about 90% of her foreign exchange earnings come from oil export, which also accounts for over 70% of her total revenue. Despite more than a decade of rhetoric diversification which is not well pursued, disappointingly, the oil sector merely contributes about 10% to Nigeria's gross domestic product (GDP) (Rudolf & Yates 2004; Fajana, 2005, BGL, 2012; IMF, 2015). These developments created great consequences for the labour market coupled with the fact that labour administration system is not strengthened to respond accurately to the emerging

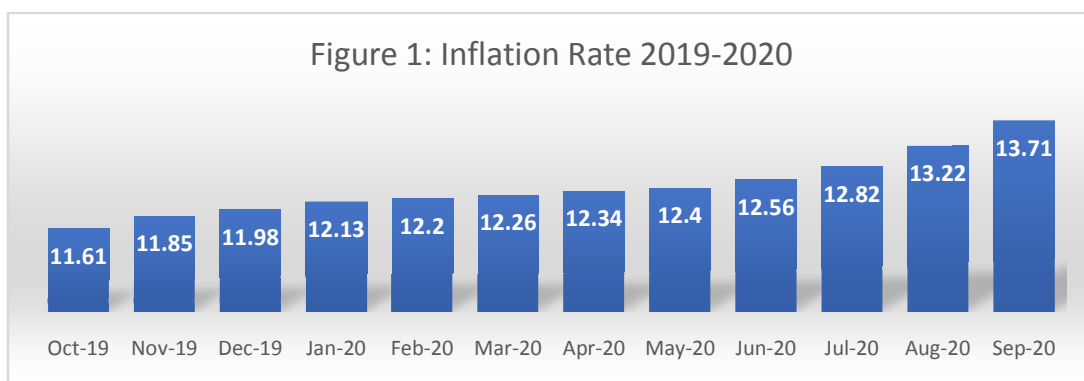
challenges with capability of applying appropriate management strategy with evidence-based policy that can provide for competitive enterprises, public services efficiency, broad access to employment opportunities and decent work agenda.

### ***Current Labour Market Trends***

The following demographic characteristics are noted: the population of younger people relative to the older ones is increasing; the share of women and children in market activities is on the increase; foreigners, some with suspicious qualifications, are no longer found wanting in the national labour markets on account of liberal immigration policies; there exists a large number of skilled Nigerian job seekers. Furthermore, generational diversity is recognised and significant.

Culturally, societal values are receding. Culture is perceived as a shared assumptions, developed as a way of doing things by a given group (Barney, 1986; Hofstede, 2000; Lunenburg, 2011; Armstrong, 2014). On account of long years of conquest and dominance by foreigners, societal values have decayed, and are looking for rebirth. Nigeria seemed to have lost values of enterprise, prudence, fairness, equity, justice, quality, respect for elders, respect for life, etc.

Politically, developments in Nigeria have been astonishing for the management of workplace and national management of people. Politicians and military elites have improperly and inequitably been advantaged in the allocation of national resources (Anifowose & Babawale, 2003; Akinboye, 2013). The view is held contemporarily that the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic would have been minimal on Nigeria if her leaders had been visionary and disciplined. The economic environment has continued to witness renewed and sustained recession, characterised by galloping inflation, unemployment, and declining businesses (Osigweh & Fajana, 1993, Okafor, 2011). The unprecedented situation has led Nigeria annual inflation rate rose to 13.22% in August 2020, the highest rate since February of 2018 (NBS, 2020) as depicted below:



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020.

Consequently, restructuring and reorganisation, retrenchment have continued to occur in virtually all establishments. As predicted, mergers and acquisitions became unavoidable

for some organisations to survive, especially after the consolidation of the financial sector on account of recent state reforms (IZA, 2020; IMF, 2020).

### ***Scale and Spread of COVID-19 Pandemic***

As the global corona virus pandemic continued ravaging the world through the last quarter of 2020 with many businesses yet to pick-up with structured finance suffered deterioration in issuance volume across fixed-income asset classes, education, aviation other services sector were not left out (IMF, 2020). The global economic decline with the stock market slump, unemployment rate which stands doubled in most developing countries. There was a significant asset pricing effects on balance sheets, and liquidity retraction due to rising risk aversion; now affecting most insurance companies and pensions funds (IMF, 2020).

In effect, world growth is slowed down, reducing trade expansion etc. International investment (bonds, FDI) declined. The sharp tightening in financial conditions put pressure on leveraged investors, hence force them to close some of their investment position to meet commitment or to reposition their portfolios in line with a dynamic reality. Emerging market stocks confidence declined and aid flows to developing countries came under renewed pressure (World Economic Forum, 2014; IMF, 2015). This means that poverty and human development are negatively affected as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are even less likely to be met (growth and aid are main drivers). The poor would be affected on account of limitations of family support (Asia), few universal benefits (Latin America) and narrow safety nets (Africa).

Proactive macro-economic policies are expected to vary with countries depending on their stages of development. Countercyclical monetary policy and real exchange rate management (including capital controls) would be necessary: Medium Income Countries with forex reserves already do this, but Low-Income Countries are constrained by IMF. Support of domestic banks (especially for agriculture and SMEs), would be necessary to underwrite long-term investment lending; keep real interest rates low, and raise tax pressure (not rates) to maintain fiscal balance and reduce public borrowing.

### **Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

#### ***Challenges to the Labour Market***

COVID-19 pandemic has put nearly half of global jobs at risk, due to economic lockdown and social distancing measure introduced to curb the spread of the virus globally. This means that continued decline in working hours which developing economy like Nigeria is not familiar with. Hence put an end to lots of livelihoods and means of survival. The COVID-19 pandemic implies a recession of global job markets; A recall of jobs held overseas by workers of the west; Low-income countries of NIC and Africa has been adversely affected by low demands for labour, e.g. Exports drop to the US has caused the loss of jobs in Asia (ILO, 2020, IZA, 2020). National Bureau of Statistics China (2020) claimed that total value added of industrial enterprises in China declined by 13.5 per cent during the first two months of 2020. Other labour markets effects include retrenchment of expatriates to cut costs by firms in Nigeria; Students and unemployed people lose hope in the viability of the labour market;

Low remittances from abroad; Desperate strategies to improve employability and inappropriate coping strategies, e.g. the use of drugs, alcohol – the cheap ones increased to a large extent.

### ***Global Business Challenges***

Firms of various sizes and capacities in Nigeria have been experiencing capacity cuts, business losses, redundancies and retrenchments, increased demand for alcohol and other dangerous emotional suppressants by the youths. Chevron Nigeria has decided to cut its workforce by 25 per cent as part of cost-reduction measures in October 2020. In the aviation sector, thousands of airlines workers are threatened, despite U.S. Government's \$25 billion payroll support programme meant to save job cuts. In October, Royal Dutch Shell announced that it would sack between 7000 to 9000 workers, while not less than 44,000 airlines workers have agreed on exit packages and left while more than 74,000 others have agreed to undertake unpaid leave (CBS News, 2020). The resultant effect of these are emotionally distressed, grievances in workplaces and homes, demonstration and protest in Nigeria, Belarus, England, America and across the globe with the slightest provocation from the government.

### ***Challenges to the Unions***

Management and labour regarded the economic meltdown as a 'common enemy'. This called for more efficient management, quality cost reduction, insurance of standard growth and corporate survival. Labour continues to face a decline in purchasing power, with a minimum wage in Nigeria unable to purchase a bag of rice, Assurance of quality service delivery, adhering to standards, but not sacrificing staff welfare. All these have lots of psychological effects on workers attitudinal behaviour in both the home and the work environment.

### ***The Burden of the State***

The economic contraction arising from COVID-19 has constituted a setback on the targets set for the sustainable development goals SDGs. It appears 60% of the Nigeria population survive on less than the international guideline for extreme poverty of \$1.9 a day. Travel bans, border closures, stay at home and quarantine measures strategies adopted by governments has affected citizens incomes and standards of living, particularly for private and casually employed workers (ILO 2020, World Bank, 2020). The prospects for achieving the target of reduction on extreme poverty appear unpromising. This situation agrees with ILO (2020), which emphasises that strain on incomes arising from the decline in economic activity will devastate workers close to or below the poverty line. Against the backdrop of the burden of the state, the role of labour administration has come under focus.

### ***Labour Administration***

Definition: ILO Convention No. 150 and Recommendation No. 158 concerning the role, functions and organization of labour administration (1978) lay down an international framework within which the preparation, implementation, coordination, supervision and evaluation of national labour policy are carried out.

The Convention defines the concept of labour administration and the areas it covers as: a coherent national labour policy; a coordinated system; organization integrating the active participation of management and labour and their respective organizations; and appropriate human, financial and material resources for an effective and efficient service.

At the national level, this apparatus is generally found within a labour ministry or related agencies. The contribution of the national labour administration towards achieving conditions where "women and men obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity" (Decent Work, p.3) concerns all or part of the following fields, depending on the individual country:

#### **Labour**

- Working conditions
- Wages
- Employment conditions
- Safety and health at work
- Social security
- Labour inspection
- The working environment

#### **Employment**

- National employment policy
- Unemployment insurance schemes
- Vocational guidance
- Vocational training programmes
- Employment services

#### **Information and Research**

- Collection of information
- Surveys
- Forecasts
- Dissemination of information

#### **Labour Management Relations**

- Definition of the framework and rules for the representation of labour and management
- Collective bargaining
- Settlement of collective disputes

#### *How is labour administration organized?*

No specific forms of organization or operation are promoted or to which precedence is given since ministries and/or related agencies take many forms. They should, however, cover the main functions or fields of activity of labour administration and, above all, they should be coordinated.

#### *The importance of labour administration*

The concept of labour administration contains the principal elements of what is understood by "good governance". This is exemplified in:

- Participation: social dialogue and tri-partism
- Credibility: fair policies, laws and rules which are known and applied uniformly
- Transparency: decision-making, information and government services available for all
- Responsibility: an open organization which is accountable for its mandates and activities

*Strengths:* Labour Administration is an acknowledged actor in the elaboration of government economic and social policies; a major source of information in its fields of competence for



various stakeholders government, employer and worker decision-making; an active intermediary for preventing and settling industrial disputes, social partners amongst others.

*Weaknesses:* The conditions under which labour administrations operate have changed dramatically over the last few decades, due both to technological, economic and political developments and to the globalization of trade. These amongst others have affected many countries including Nigeria to have lost their *raison d'être* and their influence.

*Challenges:* Labour administrations must - through social dialogue in particular-find means of redefining their organization and intervention strategy so that they can better respond to expectations.

Table 1: Typology of Challenges in Labour Administration

	Setting	Challenge types
1.	In developing countries	the informal economy
2.	Countries in transition	new political and social democracy and transition to the market economy
3.	In industrialized countries	budget restrictions, effectiveness, efficiency
4.	In supranational groups	clarification and harmonization of the principles and objectives of the member countries

*Source: Adapted from the ILO 2007*

ILO support in this field takes the following form:

- assessment and support for strengthening institutional organization and management;
- a source of information on comparative labour administration systems, examples of "good practices" and publications;
- means of strengthening the influence of labour administrations such as strategic information, social dialogue, etc.

#### *Labour Administration in Nigeria*

The chief labour administrator in Nigeria is the Ministry of Labour. It has a chequered history of achievements and challenges. In 1942, when the World War II was being prosecuted, the Department of Labour was established primarily due to government concern about the rationalisation of the civilian personnel left in the country after the enlistment and foreign deployment of Nigerian troops (FolayanOjo, 1998; p15). After the war, a general demobilisation was necessary for the management of the labour market to increase the absorption capacity of the market especially in favour of the returning Nigerian soldiers, who in the main came back from Burma and Korea. The resettlement effort predates the establishment of employment exchanges by the Department of Labour. The Department became the Federal Ministry of Labour in 1954, Federal Ministry of Employment, Labour and Productivity in 1979, and was later renamed the Federal Ministry of Labour and

Productivity. The Ministry is practically involved in relevant activities that enhance the development of personnel management in Nigeria. These include:

- guiding personnel managers and their assistants on labour matters,
- handling disputes and registration of trade unions and inspection of their accounts,
- keeping a register of unemployed people who are actively seeking employment,
- inspecting factories,
- collecting, collating and presentation of labour statistics (e.g., data on strikes, lockouts, industrial disputes, industrial accidents, registered unemployment, vacancies and social security statistics), and
- ensuring compliance with labour laws.

These activities have in part encouraged several employers to set up personnel departments in their organisations (Fajana, 1991) and to recruit persons who could advise them on labour issues and also act as the link between the company and the Ministry of Labour on union matters (FolayanOjo, 1998).

Other extra ministerial organisations that have intricate connections with personnel and human resource management are:

- The National Manpower Board
- The National Directorate of Employment
- The Industrial Arbitration Panel
- The National Industrial Court
- The National Productivity Centre
- The Michael Imoudu National Institute for Labour Studies
- The National Salaries, Incomes and Wages Commission

### **Factors Constraining International Best Practices of Labour Administration in Nigeria**

International best practices (IBPs) of Labour Administration are those systems of state industrial relations characterised by strategic practices resulting in few ultimatums, negotiations over a reasonable (not prolonged) time duration, absence of the threat of strike action, willingness to observe and implement collective agreement, as well as good faith negotiations, and adherence of parties to comply with regulations for standard industrial practices. These are far-fetched in Nigeria, as there several constraints limiting effective enforcement of labour standards in Nigeria. Some of these conundrums have included:

#### *Organizational Constraints in a Dynamic Milieu*

The Nigerian economy have witnessed considerable reform upon reforms, changes in terms of the dominant sectors and structure, ownership of businesses, growth of the informal sector, and demographic profile of the workforce over time. These amongst other have created uncertainties in the governance, policy instability and misdirection, the adoption of inappropriate development options by national leaders compounded the challenges that faced the Ministry, which was rather unable it to adequately cope and achieve international best practices.



### *Political Unwillingness and Selfishness*

The state in Nigeria has manifested inexplicable confusion over important state matters. Policies were not faithfully pursued or were defamed and discontinued on account of lack of political will. The selfishness of political leaders led to the mushrooming of development-oriented programmes in the informal economy, with all kinds of poverty alleviation programmes which tenure ended with each administration.

### *Inadequate Funding and Inappropriate Application*

Until recently, factory inspection continued to attract very low budgetary allocations. Although in the last decade, the quantum of funding seem to have increased, for instance, N144,000 in 2001, to the sum of 50 million in 2006. This is not enough to meet up with the Ministry challenges. This prompted the Minister of Labour Dr Chris Ngige to have said that it had not been rosy for the ministry in terms of funding, as the ministry is handicapped to execute its mandates of inspection and ensuring workplace safety due to lack of operational vehicles and shortage of personnel (Pulse.ng, 2020). In fact, judging from the sum of N2,881,052,588.89k which was only approved to the ministry for 2020 Capital Projects and Programmes. The sum would be grossly inadequate for effective functioning of labour administration.

### *Attitude of Victimized Groups*

Labour administration is currently facing the challenge of appreciation by the group that are ordinarily being protected by the Ministry. Often-times, on account of fear of victimization by the employer, especially in the informal economy, the workers are apt to discourage state interventions which would have improved the quality of social protection offered them.

### *Lack of Biting Teeth by the ILO*

By its structure and processes, the ILO in its standards-setting and monitoring activities has been unable to effectively sanction erring countries. Consequently, employers with the tacit support of the state deploy sub-standard labour practices and get away with them.

### *Adoption of HRMT and New Forms of Work Models*

The Human Resource Management Technique, otherwise called the employee relations model, emerged as a response to the challenges of managing people at work in the early 1980s against a backdrop of changing demographics, harrowing economic situations, and increasing political discontents. The essence of this model is to make unionism and hence collective negotiation unattractive to workers. By focusing on the welfare of workers as individuals, maintaining an open door industrial communication policy, the model has helped banks employees in Nigeria to shun collective action and embrace employers' wage awards.

### *Labour Market Segmentation*

Divisive systems of the labour force into segments (protected, unprotected; privileged, unprivileged) may affect labour administration since the state cannot afford to be caught

disobeying its laws. For instance, where the labour movement is artificially divided into junior versus senior staff associations, with one division say, senior staff, at a privilege, the dominant segment is likely to develop exclusive forms of instrumentalism. Contrariwise, the relatively underprivileged segment is likely to yield "spontaneous but ill-organised forms of erratic and ill-focused radicalism" (Poole 1986, p73). The example of stratification along with ethnic (Nigerian versus expatriates) line perhaps served to limit the effectiveness of collective actions before and during colonialism and possibly presently.

#### *Power and Influence of the State and Private Employers*

Employers, managements and the state must be accorded power in the industrial relations system in the explanation of the effect of collective actions. For instance, labour radicalism is produced where the employer's strategic choice is militancy and a lack of willingness to recognize and avoid unfair labour practices. The powerful role of the state on the industrial relations system almost invariably invokes politically conscious labour movements. The employer or state power is sometimes institutionalised in the collective bargaining process. In such cases, the labour union may exhibit strategies that seem to evade the use of such bargaining (Fajana, 2005; Fajana2006; Fajana, 2008). In particular, the labour minister is empowered to refer unresolved disputes to the Industrial Arbitration Panel (IAP) and the NIC. Union officials question the effectiveness and independence of the NIC because it refused to resolve disputes stemming from the state's failure to fulfil collective agreements provisions for public sector employees. Union leaders criticize the arbitration system's dependence on the labour minister's referrals.

#### *Gender Issues*

The Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR Report, 2002) noted that few women are employed in the formal economy and that this is due to "social discrimination in education and training", and to a "gender-based division of labour in the formal economy". Women are disproportionately represented in some sector (Fajana, 2005; Fajana, 2008).

#### **Remedies Adaptable from Other Countries**

The stage of economic development impacts the evolution of labour market policies and processes and the instruments deployed by the labour administration system. Extant models in countries at a similar stage of development may be helpful for adaptation in Nigeria.

#### *Singapore*

In the case of Singapore, investment in human capital, advances in technology with the increasing mobility of capital and labour has makes her a globally competitive workforce. To achieve this goal, the Ministry of Labour was revamped as the Ministry of Manpower with enlarged functions. Several initiatives were put in place to constantly upgrade and retrain the workforce. Some of which includes offered a wide variety of training programmes that span the full spectrum of the employment arena. With the aim of preparing the labour force towards knowledge-based economy and later post-digital world. Also designed

programme to upgrading of skills of the managerial cadre, in order for them to be qualified, competent and motivated towards coordinating various organisations functions. The country also developing a comprehensive market-driven and performance-based, continuing adult education and training framework. Furthermore, Labour Relations Department is also charged with the responsibility of assisting employers and employees in both the unionized and non-unionised sectors to resolve trade or employment/salary disputes amicably through conciliation, with the view to promoting harmonious labour-management relations.

### *The Hong Kong Experience (HKE)*

The HKE model aims to develop a well-trained, well-motivated and adaptable workforce. One of the most effective employment services operating in Asia is within the Department of Labour in Hong-Kong (ILO, 2006). The administrative region was able to make. The website of the Employment Services as one of the most popular government websites accounting for about one-third of the page views for all government websites. The Labour Department operates job centres to help jobseekers find work and employers recruit staff. Vacancy-search terminals installed at all job-centres facilitate jobseekers to gain access to the huge vacancy data banks. To protect the interests of job-seekers, a mechanism is put in place to vet all vacancies received from employers who are encouraged to offer market wage rates.

In sum, the two Asia countries examined have demonstrated great resilience in the area of labour administration reform. Their vast market potential and large diversified labour pool have made them a favoured investment destination for western companies (Segers, 2016). Foreign direct inflow (FDI) generated, absorbed knowledge and best practices from foreign firms have further enhanced their local firm operational capacities and helped build up their domestic market share (Segers, 2016; Brocke & Mendling, 2018). This undoubtedly has re-shaped the global economic landscape and make Asia a global economic power centre of the world, shifting economic attention from the West to the East (Segers, 2016).

### **Recommendations**

To strengthen labour administration institutions and processes in the future, the following additional recommendations are requisite:

- 1) Legislation concerning export processing zones (EPZs) must be revised so that minimum standard labour laws are applied everywhere in the country without exception, including in the EPZs.
- 2) A large proportion of women are engaged in the informal economy with no trade unions and collective negotiations. Thus, the government should enforce the employment protection rights of pregnant women, to improve the participation of women in higher-skilled jobs, and to end societal discrimination of women more in general. More priority has to be given to better access to education and training for girls.
- 3) The adoption of employee relations model threatens the survival of trade unions and labour administration worldwide. Consequently, this practice needs to be revised or modified by employers to include more inclusiveness typical of the original model

- pioneered by Mr Boulwaire at General Electrics in the 1960s. Boulwairism is based on principles where all parties commit to the values of integrity and honesty.
- 4) Efforts should be made to increase cohesion among segmented sectors of the workforce. Workers and their representatives should take advantage of the liberalization of trade union federations to achieve greater strengths by coming together within organizations, industries or regions to enhance collective bargaining with respective employers in practicable bargaining units.
  - 5) Nigeria's federalism should be restructured and aligned along international standards to empower the peripheries (states and local governments) reasonably with the affordability and the teeth to negotiate wages and resolve conflicts more meaningfully.
  - 6) The police should be offered training in industrial relations to identify and streamline their workplace conflict role with that of the Ministry of Labour. The Nigerian Police can therefore be given the capacity to augment labour administration in more meaningful ways other than keeping striking workers under 'law and order'.
  - 7) Finally, the theory of the State's role in industrial relations needs to be reviewed on account of the trends of issues emerging with the enforcement of labour standards and the overall effectiveness of labour services. At the same time, in line with the new forms of work in the aftermath of COVID-19, that will influence the world of work in the coming years.

## **Conclusion**

One of the most important institutions of governance in the labour market is the labour inspection system which contributes to the strengthening of institutions for wage determination, particularly minimum wages. Assessments by ILO in several countries *inter alia* indicated the need for the creation of a special unit for labour inspection at headquarters that will enhance the stature of the inspection system and provide motivation for the inspecting officers. However, stakeholders of every nation economy must realise that labour administration has a pivotal role to play in managing changes in societies. Through preparation and implementation of laws and regulations, tasks concerning national employment policy, conditions of work and working life, terms of employment, services and advice to employers and employees and their organizations, representing the State concerning international labour affairs amongst others.

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