POLAC INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ECONOMICS
AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCE (PIJEMS)
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCE
NIGERIA POLICE ACADEMY, KANO

ANALYSIS OF JOB RETENTION SCHEMES AND COVID-19 LOCKDOWN: A FOCUS ON KADUNA STATE GOVERNMENT

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Abstract

The paper investigates the efficiency of job retention strategies which were employed by Kaduna State Government to ensure that the employment contracts of its employees were not terminated during Covid-19 and beyond. The study employed a systematic search strategy to select relevant contents of existing relevant literature from hard and soft copy materials in academic journals, papers, book sections, research projects and internet materials. In addition, information was collected through interview with a number of key informants. The result revealed that work from home using different types of electronic devices was introduced, the Federal Government passed the Emergency Economic Stimulus Bill and gave intervention funds to states governments to reduce the financial burden they were forced to carry as a result of the lockdown; while each civil servants were forced to forfeit a quarter of their salaries for three months. Cash donations were also made by companies, development parties and individuals to the State Government to reduce the financial burden it was forced to carry in its efforts to curb with Covid-19. The study recommends that E- learning should be introduced in Kaduna State Government offices and its staff should be adequately trained and equipped with online training facilities. The government should make it a policy to save specific amounts of money at specific intervals of time to enable curb any event that might threaten jobs in the future.

Keywords: Covid-19, Government, Job retention schemes, Kaduna state, Workers.

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a global pandemic on the 11th of March, 2020, causing huge impact on people's lives, families and communities. According to Tyrnchenko (2020), the virus spread to all continents in the world except Antarctica, infecting people in many countries and around the world. Numerous measures were taken by individuals, Non-governmental Organizations, National Governments, and Regional Governments among others to curb its effects and to restrict its spread. Lukuma and Sunday (2020) noted that these measures encompass closure of schools, restrictions on internal and international travels, social distancing ban on weekly markets and even lockdowns. The effects of the virus and measures which were taken to curtail is spread hit businesses and consequently affected employment contracts.

The incidence triggered devastating threats to the global economy particularly job crisis where employers in both public and private organizations, engaging in large and small scale businesses were confronted with challenges of whether to lay-off their staff, cut their hours of work, give unpaid leave, retrain them to work from home, reduce their salaries or to declare them redundant. In response to this, groups of countries such as the (OECD) initiated policy tools to contain employment and social furloughs of the COVID-19 crisis. A number of region and sub- regions also adopt strategies to retain their workers. Governments of different countries, employers of different organizations and their employees initiated numerous approaches towards ensuring employment preservation at the period of COVID-19 and beyond. The workability of these job retention schemes vary from one country to the other and from one organization to the other.

According to Seun-Oguntuga and Olorunmaye (2020), the corona virus lockdown had severe implications on employment contracts in Nigeria. In order to retain their workers, employer adopted new ways of meeting their obligations under the employment contracts. As part of the strategies, working from home, deferment or reduction of salaries, deferment of bonuses, paid and unpaid leaves were adopted. As a means of monitoring the rate of retrenchment by private organizations, particularly the banking institution, the Federal Government of Nigeria pass a law that no bank should retrench its staff without seeking for permission from the federal government. In addition, the federal government provided subsidies to some organizations and palliatives, particularly the junior staff to enable them cope with cut down salaries at the period of lockdown and beyond.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Review

Job Retention Scheme

Job Retention Scheme (JRS) is one of the guiding principle or initiative employed by government and private organizations to preserve jobs at firms experiencing a temporary reduction in business activities by alleviating firm's labour cost while supporting the income of workers whose hours are reduced. They can take the form of short time work (STW) scheme that directly subsidized hours not worked for; examples of countries which adopted this strategy are Germany and France. They can also take the form of wage subsidy (WS) schemes that subsidizes hours worked but they can also be used to top up the earnings of workers on reduced hours worked, such as the Dutch Emergency Bridging Measure or the Job Keeper Payment in Australia. A crucial aspect of all Job Retention Schemes is that employees retain their employment contracts with employers even if work is suspended. Corona-Virus Job retention scheme is for all categories of employees, either temporary, permanent or contract appointment in any work organization and their names appear in the pay-roll of the organization before the inception of corona-virus.

Corona- Virus

Corona-Virus (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by SARS CoV-2, which was first identified amidst an outbreak of respiratory illness cases in Wuhan city, Hubei Province, China. Most people affected by the virus experiences mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. However, some may become seriously ill and require medical attention. Older people and those with underlying medical conditions like cardio-vascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases or cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. Anyone can get sick with COVID-19 and become seriously ill or die at any age.

The virus can spread from an infectious person's mouth or nose in small liquid particles when they cough, sneeze, speak or breathe. Some of its symptoms are fever, cough, and tiredness, loss of taste or smell. They also include sore-throat, headaches, difficult breathing or shortness of breathing, loss of speech, chest pain and variety of other symptoms.

Lock Down

According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, lockdown is an emergency measure or a restriction policy initiated by the government or any authorized body to control the movement of people when certain disorder threatens their lives. Carrol, Rory, Tuckman and Jo (2009), cited an example of lockdown with the one implemented in Mexico due to swine flu from April 30th, to May 5th, 2009. In addition, Sifferlin (2013) noted that Boston in United States was locked down on April 19th, 2013 in order to carry a search for suspected terrorists. Even though these lockdowns did not cause staff retrenchment, they affected work in one way or the other.

One of the recent global lockdowns which have severe impact on employment is that one triggered by Corona–Virus pandemic. According to Flanogan (2020), it is the strictest lockdown ever experiencd in the world. This lockdown lasted for over 8 months in most countries.

Okundare (2020) shared opinion that banks in Nigeria retrenched a sizeable number of their staff due to the perennial crises that covid-19 stemmed to these banks.

The most affected are the young and new entrants into the industry. Many of those affected were the casual workers, contract staff and those performing other support services in the industry. Recent statistics from the national bureau for statistics revealed that out of about 8000 workers in commercial banks lost their jobs in the first 9 months of 2020. Olorounbi (2020) opined that in order to reduce the incidences of job loss in the banks the Central Bank of Nigeria intervened by asking the banks to suspend the retrenchment of its staff. If it becomes necessary for banks to lay off staff, those banks must consult and seek approval from Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN). Apart from commercial banks Corona-Virus also caused retrenchment in other work organizations, particularly private organizations. Niyi (2020) reiterated that majority of private secondary schools in Abuja shed its staff due to Corona Virus lockdown. Oyinoye (2020) reported that the management of the Air Peace, one of the Nigerian Airways laid-off 69 of its pilots due to the influence of Covid-19 pandemic crises. As a means of avoiding further staff rationalization, the airline reduced the salaries of all staff.

The pandemic also caused unexpected retrenchment exercises in developed countries of the world. Anderson (2021) indicated that more than 20 million Americans lost their jobs as a result of corona pandemic in 2020. Michael (2020) stressed that the Canisius College, a private Jesuit College in Buffalo, New York retrenched 23 full-time faculty members and 71 staff members indicating that it was caused by financial difficulty caused by Covid -19 lockdown.

Lockdowns could be implemented in many countries in the near future. According to Muzzucato (2020), this could be in response to climatic change where fuel drilling would be stopped, restriction on the use of private vehicles, imposing energy conservation and so on. This have the potency of causing mass retrenchment exercises than expected.

2.2 Empirical Review

COVID-19 has caused a serious threat to global health and in an attempt to curb it, a global lockdown was initiated. This consequently affected businesses and threatened employment retention all over the world. In an attempt to reduce the incidences of job losses that might be accompanying it, temporary initiatives were employed to enable employer to pay part of their employees' wages. This was introduced by regions, governments of different countries, employers in the public and private sectors, employees, and so on to enable employers retain their employees who they may otherwise have to be lay-off during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic threatened and undermined the progress made on improving the welfare of the population of countries that form the Western Balkan region. The pandemic led to rise of unemployment rate and erasing about 139,000 jobs, increasing poverty rate, especially in Albana, Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegra in 2020. To arrest some of the worst impact of the pandemic on employment, large job retention scheme involving employee subsidies and other social assistance programs such as cash transfer were introduced by six countries in the region. Notwithstanding these measures, not much has been achieved on the aspect of job preservation (World Bank Report, 2020).

Interestingly, the United States offered a different approach from the furloughs where employers were subsidizing between 60% and 100% of their employees' wages through grants. However, the united states have adopted a different approach to manage job losses. At the federal level, the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act introduced a pay check protection program which provides loans to small businesses to cover payroll cost, among others. 75% of the loan proceeds must be used for pay roll cost. The program is designed to help employers retain their employees at their current pay rate (where it does not exceed $100,000 per employee per year) for eight weeks of pay-roll (Davies & Agyemara, 2020).

Similarly, Russia enacted its own federal support of interest free loan though it is restrictive to businesses stipulated by the government, especially tourism and transportation, for payment of salary cost (Davies & Agyemara, 2020).

Japan on the other hand initiated the Employment Adjustment Subsidy (EAS) for hours not worked for to a maximum of 100% for Small and Medium Enterprises (SME'S) and 75% for larger firms but was adjusted in

May to 80%. The program was extended to cover non-regular worker who were not covered by the employment insurance. The scheme was further extended to cover employees in SME'S whose employers did not apply for the subsidy in spite reduction of working hours. The workers were given the opportunity to apply directly on their own and would have 80% of their usual earning covered (Scorpetta, Pearson, Salvatori & Hijzen, 2020).

Scorpetta, Pearson, Salvatori and Hijzen (2020) further discussed the strategies adopted by other countries. According to them, Australia and New Zealand introduced a lump sum subsidy that serves as a minimum salary for all employees which employers were mandated to pay their workers. In Poland, employers were expected to pay 50% of the usual wages to workers whose jobs have been temporarily suspended and are partially reimbursed by the state. Netherland introduced a temporary wage subsidy where employers must continue to pay employees 100% of their usual wages and receive a subsidy proportional to the reduction in sales and not the reduction in working hours as in the traditional STW scheme. Finally, in Canada and Estonia, the subsidy was fixed and proportionate to the usual wages regardless the extend of reduction in working hours. However, the percentages of subsidies provided by the two countries vary. While Canada approved 75%, Estonia offered 70% respectively.

Most countries introduced work from home strategy. This strategy allows workers to work from everywhere regardless of the distance without necessarily have to commute to a central place of work such as office, ware-house or retail store using electronic devices equipped with different soft wares. This was initiated in different countries to meet with the regulations of lockdown and social distancing at the period of the corona pandemic while work continues. As at September, 2021, 45% of full time United States employees worked from home (Saad & Wigert, 2021), Finland 25.1%, Luxembourg 23.1%, Ireland 21.5%, Austria 18.1%, Latvia 4.5% and so on(Europa, 2020).

African countries also took measures to retain workers at the period of coronavirus lockdown. Fox and Signe (2020) noted that salary cuts was one of the outstanding policies by most African governments to enable organizations retain their staff. In line with this, some high ranking and high paid official in many countries such as Kenya, Mozambique and Rwanda have agreed to forfeit part of their salaries as a means of reducing personnel cost. The central banks in some countries like Uganda and Nigeria waive taxes, reduce interest rates and provide special financial assistance to public and private banks as well as ease regulations to cost of borrowing. However, these measures could not provide adequate solution to job losses in Africa. Lukuma and Sunday (2020) cited example that business activities in Uganda reduced by more than half and the result shows that over 80% businesses in agriculture reduced their workforce by more than a quarter.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Stakeholders Theory of R.E. Freeman

Stakeholders theory was formally propounded in 1984 by R.E. Freeman in his book titled "Strategic Management: A Stakeholder's Approach" (McAbee, 2022). From this theoretical stance, an organization's stakeholders include the totality of people affected by the company and its working. They are groups without whose support; the organization will cease to exist (Simon, 2016). They are both within and outside the organization. These groups comprise of employers, employees, customers, trade unions, communities, government, financial institutions, suppliers (Simon, 2016). According to the theory, every stakeholder is of immense importance to organizational progress and therefore, an organization cannot ignore any stakeholder and succeed (Simon, 2016).

Base on this theory, employees are the major stakeholders in any work organization and therefore should be fairly treated by providing them with favorable working conditions and attractive pay if the organization desires to survive, progress and consequently earn a high reputation (McAbee, 2022).

In line with this theory, Corona Virus lockdown threatened the job security of Kaduna State Government employees. The virus and lockdown had severe implications on finances of the state government which consequently threatened employment retention amongst

State Government workers. In order not to let this valuable workers lose their jobs and also lose its reputation, the Kaduna State Government employed a number of measures to improve on its finances so that it would be able to retain its staff. The State Government encouraged other stakeholder to join forces with it to prevent job losses in the state. Since the incidence is likely to affect them directly or indirectly, these participants made inconceivable efforts to ensure that the state government retained its workers.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted the qualitative research design where the study relied basically on hard and soft copy materials such as textbooks, journal articles, newspapers, book sections, research projects, internet materials, government circulars and documents, among others. The materials which were selected captured the salient issues and perspectives of the matter being studied. In addition, information was collected through in-depth interviews with two top government functionaries and two employees on job retention strategies at the period of COVID-19 and beyond.

3.2 Data and Sources

In the course of this study, both primary and secondary data on measures taken to prevent job loss by the Kaduna State Civil Servants were collected. The primary data were collected from official circulars, government publications as well as interviews with top government officials and civil servants. On the other hand, secondary data for this study were collected from Newspapers, research project, book sections and internet materials

2.4 Method of Data Analysis

The data which were collected from all sources were transcribed and placed thematically according to the various objectives of the study. The data from written materials were assessed and analyzed while information collected through In-depth interviews was presented using verbatim quotations, telling what was actually said by making summaries such as: ‘ A government official commented thus:….’, ‘according to him:……’, and so on. This information was used to confirm the written materials from both soft and hard copy materials.

4. Results and Discussion

A. Temporary lay-off: The pandemic threatened the employment contracts of many workers in the state ministries and departments. In order to protect its staff from permanent job loss, the state government initiated a temporary lay-off of some categories of staff and the most affected are the casual staff, particularly cleaners. The state government was forced to take this step as a result of loss of revenue which affected its capacity to discharge its responsibility on payment of staff wages. A government functionary interviewed on this issue stressed that the government never intended to lay-off this category of workers but due to financial constraint it faced at that period, it was necessary for the state to take this step. According to him:

> *…..Effort was made by the state government to retain all those who were in its pay-roll but the government was compelled by insufficient funds to lay-off staff with casual and contract employments.*

B. Working from home: The lockdown and social distancing occasioned by COVID-19 led to loss of time in the world of work. To ensure that works continue and to reduce lay-off in work organizations, the state government equipped its staff with on-line knowledge to enable them work from home. Through this, electronic work was initiated in schools, government offices, and the organized private sectors. Following the recommendation of the minister of education, Malam Adamu Adamu to universities, colleges of education, polytechnics and other institutions of learning to activate virtual learning, the Kaduna State University commenced online lectures to keep lecturers working while at home or in their offices(Vanguard News, 2020). Lectures were organized for secondary students and primary school pupils using mass media of communication such as radio and television stations.

In addition, the state government, through a circular S/KDS/HS/133/VOL.T/1 instructed all state workers below Grade Level 12 to work remotely as from Monday, 23rd march, 2020 until they are requested by their supervisors when the need arises. Sequel to this directive, the state government staff began to perform their duties and also hold meetings from their homes using desktop, laptops, tablet computers and smart phones equipped with soft wares such as Google meet, zoom, cisco WebEx, Microsoft team and WhatsApp. This initiative was threatened by poor infrastructural availability and skeletal network services, inadequate training, high internet data cost, absence of e-learning facilities, and so on.

C. Strengthening of Revenue Generation by Kaduna State Government

COVID-19 pandemic threatened businesses and public governance, affecting the capacity of states to generate optimal revenue required to carry out their responsibilities. In order to cope with this ugly scenario, the Kaduna State Government was compelled initiate ways of improving its internal revenue generation at the period of lockdown. Kaduna State Government (2021) reported that the total revenue generated by Kaduna state in 2016 was about N80.25bn, in 2017 N105.23 billion, in 2018 N130.72 billion was generated while in 2019 N162.63 billion was generated. It was expected that the revenue generation will decline drastically due to closure and poor turnover by many businesses but dramatically, the data shows that it reduced by only N4.67 billion, indicating that as much as N157.96 billion was generated. This meteoric performance of the state government in terms of was triggered by the state government to enable it raise funds to curb the precarious situation. The money which was generated by the state government went a long way to meet some of its financial obligations, particularly payment of worker's salaries and other related issues. This reduced the financial pressure on government which might eventually provoke a retrenchment.

D. Intervention by the Federal Government: Like other countries of the world, the overriding concern of the Federal Government of Nigeria was to ensure that many workers did not lost jobs due to the sudden and unpredictable decline of revenue and shut down of businesses resulting from imposed restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19 virus. The lockdown insinuated by COVID-19 threatened many employments and the federal government employed certain initiatives to alter attempts made by employers to reduce the size of work force in the world of work. On 24th march, 2020, the House of Representatives passed the Emergency Economic Stimulus Bill. This bill aims at discouraging corporate organizations from retrenching its workers in response to the prevailing state of the economy. To ensure that the Federal Government actualizes its desire, the bill also proposed to offer relief packages to employer who maintained its employees from 1st march to 31st December, 2020. Their companies will enjoy 50% tax rebate on total amount due or pay as you earn under the personal income tax. The Federal Government also issued a directive to all levels of government not to retrench worker due to COVID-19. In addition, the Federal Government also donated the sum of N1,000,000,000.00 (One Billion Naira)to Kaduna State as part of COVID-19 Intervention Fund (Kaduna State Government, 2021). In spite attempt by federal government to hinder states from retrenching its staff, Kaduna State Government went ahead to lay-off contract its workers.

D. Cash Donations: Coronavirus lockdown has triggered untold hardship on investments and this seriously affected revenue generation by all levels of governments whilst aggravating new avenues for government expenditures. This further affected government's capability to pay staff salaries and this consequently threatened its ability to retain existing staff. The Kaduna State Government in conjunction with the Nigeria Labour Congress(NLC) agreed that a quarter of each Kaduna state and Local Government worker's net pay should be donated to the State Government for a period of three months to assist it to handle cases of COVID-19 (Adebayo, 2020). One of the workers was interviewed to confirm whether their salaries were actually deducted and he commented thus:

> **….***of course, 25% Net Pay of each worker's salary was deducted for the period of three months. Even though we were not adequately informed of this*

arrangement, a great number of workers supported it.

In-depth interview was conducted with a government official to find out why government had to temper with worker's salaries at the period of COVID-19. His response confirmed that government's revenue generation was threatened by the pandemic. He stressed that:

It was necessary for Government to take this step as a means of reducing its expenditure on staff salaries and to enable her pay provide some essential services to the public.

Apart from donations offered by the state civil servants, the State Government also solicited for cash and material donations from companies, development parties and individuals. The response to this call was highly encouraging and it was estimated that the cash balance in the state COVID-19 account amounted to about 1.35 billion naira in June, 2020 apart from food items, ambulances and medical equipment which were donated. Apart from donations that were made internally, the World Bank also donated the sum of N100,000,000.00 (One Hundred Million Naira) grant to Kaduna State Government to fight the pandemic (Kaduna State Government, 2021). These donations did not only reduce the financial burden that the government had to carry at the period of this financial adversity but also created a friendly relationship between the government and the donors, particularly the state and local government staff. All these consequently contributed in preventing a lay-off or retrenchment of workers to a greater extend.

E. Creating an Enabling COVID-19 Safe Working Environment.

The pandemic persisted for a long time and the government at all levels in Nigeria felt it can no longer continue with the temporary lay-off and work from home strategies. Like the Federal Government and other states in Nigeria, the Kaduna State Government instructed its ministries, agencies and parastatals to plan on how to return to work by providing a COVID-19 safe working environment. The following guidelines were given by government to enable those ministries and agencies achieve a safe working environment.

i. Provide adequate ventilation to offices
ii. Test people coming into the workplace
iii. Place hand sanitizers at different locations in the workplace
iv. Use of face masks
v. Compulsory test and vaccination for all workers
vi. Social distancing and others, and so on.

To achieve this goal, the government provided sufficient funds to procure the necessary equipment and also sponsored mass awareness campaigns to enlighten the public particularly workers on the need to abide by these guidelines. When the government realized that the COVID-19 protocols were breached, a memo, with number S/KDS/HS/41/S.VII/VOL.1/106 was dispatched to all government offices of the state reminding civil servants to adhere to COVID-19 protocols. In support of the above information, a government official reiterated:

The Government disburses money to its Ministries and various Departments to ensure that COVID -19 protocols were followed. State representatives were delegated to different places to ensure that the funds provided were judiciously used. In addition, the government sent reminders to its offices on need to abide by the COVID-19 protocols.

In order to create a very conducive atmosphere for return to work, the Kaduna State Government also conducted a COVID-19 test for its entire staff and workers who were tested positive were taken to the centre for COVID-19 isolation and treatment. The state government also ordered that its entire staff should be vaccinated against COVID-19. All these efforts were made to create a COVID- 19 free working environment and to ensure that workers carry out their obligations devoid of fear of being infected.

In order to confirm the above, In-depth interview was conducted with a government employee on steps taken by the government to create a conducive atmosphere for resumption to work. The worker said:

The government provided all the necessary logistics required to create a COVID-19 safe environment. In addition, the government ensured that all it's staff were tested and vaccinated against the virus.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Covid-19 pandemic threatened businesses and public governance, affecting the capacity of states to generate optimal revenue required to carry out their responsibilities. This conversely threatened employment contracts of civil servants in Kaduna State and the world in general.

To avoid closure of firms and job loss that may crop-up in unforeseen future pandemics, government may consider income tax reduction, tax holiday, tax credit and to a greater extend, tax refund.

E-learning should be introduced in work organizations to familiarize staff on electronic work as a means of preparing them against any event that may disrupt work at any point in time. In addition, E-learning should also be introduced in school curriculum, particularly secondary and tertiary institutions to familiarize school student on the application of electronic devices in their day to day activities. In addition, facilitators of the various computer programs should be offered ample opportunities to upgrade their skills to make them more efficient. Government should improve on; and make infrastructures for e-learning available and accessible. Government should ensure that various networks providers upgrade their services and also work towards reducing data cost by providing subsidies to subscribers or controlling its prices.

To shoulder the financial cost of COVID-19, Government had to solicit financial support from individuals and organizations. This is because it did not save enough money against colossal calamities that may crop up. In line with this, the Government should make it a policy to save specific amounts of money at definite intervals of time to enable it curb any event that might threaten jobs in the future. Non-Governmental Organizations should also be encouraged to take precautionary measures against any lockdown which may occur in the future.

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