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Research Article

Multinational Corporations and Labour Exploitation: A Study of Working Conditions in Developing Countries, with a Focus on Cameroon

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ABSTRACT:
This study examines the impact of multinational corporations (MNCs) on labour standards in Cameroon across three domains: wages, working conditions, and health and safety. MNCs are often seen as engines of economic development and job creation, yet concerns about labour exploitation and weak protections persist. Using a quantitative design, the study surveyed employees' attitudes and experiences and found notable disparities in wage sufficiency and workplace safety. While most respondents earned wages that were competitive relative to statutory minimums, roughly half judged their pay inadequate for their actual cost of living, and a substantial share reported that work-related injuries were common. Working hours were generally viewed as reasonable, but financial adequacy, health and safety, and opportunities for growth and development emerged as persistent problem areas, with many employees citing overwork-related stress and inadequate safety measures. To address these gaps, the study recommends strengthening wage policy so that pay meets real living costs, tightening occupational health and safety through firm protocols and regular training, and supporting work-life balance through flexible hours and stress-management resources. In doing so, the research aims to inform stakeholders and policymakers about the realities of MNC activity in the developing world and to make the case for responsible corporate practices that benefit host communities and give workers a fairer deal.
Keywords: Multinational Corporations, Labour Standards, Wages, Working Conditions, Cameroon.

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Background

The presence of multinational corporations (MNCs) in Africa has grown sharply since the late twentieth century, driven by globalisation, the availability of resources, and the promise of emerging markets. Drawn to the continent first for its natural resources, MNCs have since spread into agriculture, manufacturing, telecommunications, and mining. Although these firms often promise jobs and economic growth, their operations have raised persistent concerns about labour exploitation and working conditions (Kolben, 2017).

Cameroon, in Central Africa, has seen a marked rise in MNC activity, particularly in oil, agriculture, and telecommunications. Several companies play pivotal roles in the economy while also drawing scrutiny over their labour practices. MTN, a leading telecommunications provider, has done much to strengthen the country's communication infrastructure; even so, questions have been raised about labour rights, especially job security and working conditions for its staff (Ewumbue-Monono, 2021).

Eneo Cameroon, the country's main electricity provider, has been central to improving energy access, and in 2022 signed a new collective bargaining agreement aimed at improving corporate performance and customer satisfaction (Ndi, 2022). It has nonetheless faced criticism over service reliability and its labour practices (Ndi, 2022). Orange Cameroon, part of the global Orange group, has invested heavily in the local market and helped expand digital services, yet has attracted similar scrutiny over the treatment of workers and job security (Oni, 2021). In 2025, Orange Cameroon faced a lawsuit from former employees seeking unpaid wages and severance, exposing a gap between its “people-focused” messaging and its alleged treatment of staff (Oni, 2021). Société Générale Cameroon, a prominent bank, has

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advanced financial inclusion and local development — operating 638 employees across 35 branches as of 2020 — but has likewise faced calls to improve its labour practices (Ewumbue-Monono, 2021).

Critics argue that, for all the investment and technological innovation MNCs bring, they also exploit the local workforce. Research suggests that many employees face hazardous conditions, poor pay, and weak protection of their labour rights (Uche, 2018). While Cameroon's government has stressed the importance of foreign investment for development, the balance between attracting MNCs and enforcing fair labour practices for the benefit of local communities remains contested (Ngwa, 2020). This shifting landscape raises central questions about labour rights, economic justice, and sustainable development, and it calls for further research into how such corporations can operate ethically while contributing to national development and the wellbeing of their employees.

The topic is highly pertinent to today's globalised economy. As MNCs push further into developing nations, understanding their effect on local labour markets matters for many reasons — chief among them the need to confront the labour-rights abuses that so often follow in their wake. Focusing on Cameroon, this study seeks to shed light on the particular difficulties Cameroonian workers face.

Problem Statement

The expansion of MNCs in Cameroon brings with it significant challenges around labour exploitation. Despite the potential for economic growth, many workers contend with poor conditions, low wages, and inadequate protection of their rights (Uche, 2018). Reliance on complex global supply chains often blurs accountability, allowing MNCs to pass responsibility for labour practices to subcontractors who may breach ethical standards.

Cameroon's regulatory framework, though established, suffers from uneven enforcement owing to corruption, limited resources, and political instability (Banda, 2021). As a result, many MNCs exploit gaps in regulation, putting profit ahead of the welfare of local workers. Violations of labour rights frequently go unaddressed, producing unsafe workplaces that jeopardise employees' health and safety. There is a pressing need for research that clarifies these dynamics, informs policy, and strengthens corporate accountability.

Raising awareness also matters, since it equips consumers and advocacy groups to demand ethical practices from MNCs. Without sustained attention to these problems, the benefits of MNC operations in Cameroon may continue to bypass the very workers they employ.

Research Objectives

1. To assess the contribution of MNCs to labour standards in Cameroon, including wages, working conditions, health and safety, and trade union rights.
2. To investigate how workers and stakeholders perceive MNC practices, and to evaluate critically whether MNCs improve or compromise labour standards.

Research Questions

1. What are the overall effects of multinational corporations on labour conditions in Cameroon, particularly with regard to wages, working conditions, health and safety, and union rights?
2. How do workers and stakeholders perceive MNC practices, and do they believe those practices promote or worsen labour standards?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its several contributions to understanding labour standards in the context of MNCs operating in Cameroon. By examining how MNCs affect wages, working hours, health and safety, and union rights, the research aims to illuminate issues that matter not only for workers but for Cameroon's broader socio-economic life.

Enhancing understanding of labour standards

The study helps fill gaps in the literature on labour standards and MNCs in developing countries, and in Africa in particular. By assessing how MNCs shape working conditions in Cameroon, it provides empirical data and analysis that sharpen our understanding of the relationship between corporate practice and labour rights — and of whether MNCs act as agents of positive change or perpetuate exploitation. Labour standards are not only a matter of regulatory compliance; they touch on social justice, equity, and workers' rights. Examining how MNCs affect these standards therefore contributes to a fuller picture of labour relations in a globalised economy, one that is useful to academics, policymakers, and advocacy groups working to improve conditions in developing nations.

Informing policy development

The findings offer a practical basis for policy. By identifying where MNC practice falls short — on wage adequacy, safety, or union rights — the study can help policymakers craft targeted, enforceable regulation and close the gaps that allow exploitation to persist. Clear evidence of the areas most in need of reform can also support better monitoring, stronger enforcement, and more effective dialogue between government, corporations, and labour representatives.

Empowering workers and stakeholders

Finally, the study centres the perspectives of workers and stakeholders, including labour-rights campaigners and policymakers. By drawing on their views, it aims to give them greater voice on MNC practice — something that matters most where employees feel powerless in the face of large multinational firms. In giving workers space to describe their challenges and experiences, the research fosters a sense of agency and makes the case for the collective action and solidarity needed to win better conditions. Its findings can also motivate trade unions and civil-society organisations to press for evidence-based policy change.

Literature Review

Review of Concepts

The dual impact of multinational corporations on economic development

Multinational corporations are enterprises that manage production or services across several countries (Cavusgil et al., 2014). They typically seek to raise profitability by tapping lower labour costs, drawing on natural resources, and entering new markets (Harrison & Dhanaraj, 2016). Their role in developing countries is genuinely double-edged. On one hand, MNCs can stimulate growth by creating jobs and introducing new technology; on the other, they can drive labour exploitation through low wages, poor conditions, and neglect of health and safety (Meyer, 2017).

MNCs are often drawn to developing countries by the prospect of cost savings. Relocating production to regions with lower labour costs can substantially cut operating expenses (Gereffi & Lee, 2016), but this pursuit of efficiency can create ethical dilemmas when it comes at the expense of local workers. Sweatshops — notorious for long hours, minimal pay, and unsafe environments — mark the severe end of exploitation within MNC supply chains (Bendix, 2018). Not all MNCs behave this way: some prioritise corporate social responsibility and work to uphold ethical standards, investing in better conditions, fair pay, and community development (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Still, the prevalence of exploitative practice underscores the need for robust regulation and vigilant monitoring to keep MNCs operating responsibly.

Working conditions

Working conditions cover the aspects of the work environment that affect employees' wellbeing, safety, and job satisfaction (Berg et al., 2018) — among them wage levels, hours, health and safety measures, and respect for workers' rights. In many developing countries, MNCs may put profit ahead of worker welfare, giving rise to hazardous and exploitative conditions. Several elements stand out:

- **Wages and benefits:** Fair compensation is essential if workers are to meet their basic needs and maintain a decent standard of living (ILO, 2019).
- **Health and safety:** Employers are responsible for a safe, healthy workplace free of avoidable hazards — implementing safety protocols, providing protective equipment, and training staff in safe practice (Agarwal, 2021).
- **Working hours and rest periods:** Rules on hours, overtime pay, and rest are needed

to prevent fatigue and protect physical and mental health (Smith & Lee, 2021).

- **Non-discrimination and equal opportunity:** Employers should offer equal opportunity regardless of gender, ethnicity, or other protected characteristics (Kabeer, 2021).

Improving conditions calls for a combination of government regulation, corporate responsibility, and worker empowerment (Meyer, 2017). Governments must enact and enforce protective labour laws; companies should adopt ethical practices and invest in the work environment; and workers, in turn, need the means to advocate for their rights and demand better treatment.

Review of Theories

Global Value Chain (GVC) theory

Global Value Chain theory examines the stages of production that firms distribute across countries and how those stages connect (Gereffi & Lee, 2016). It holds that production is fragmented by comparative advantage — for instance, lower labour costs in developing countries — and that MNCs frequently outsource to such regions to boost profitability, which can lead to exploitation if poorly managed. Three aspects are especially relevant to labour exploitation:

- **Cost minimisation:** The drive to cut production costs through outsourcing to cheaper-labour countries can lead firms to neglect labour rights and standards in favour of profit (Bendix, 2018).
- **Power dynamics:** The theory highlights the imbalance of power between MNCs and local suppliers or workers, which can translate into poor conditions, low wages, and limited rights (Gereffi & Lee, 2016).
- **Compliance and monitoring:** Codes of conduct and CSR initiatives matter only as much as their enforcement; weak regulatory environments in developing countries can allow exploitation to continue (Sullivan, 2020).

GVC theory helps policymakers and stakeholders see the dynamics of exploitation within MNC operations. It points to the need for stronger regulation and international cooperation to hold firms accountable across their supply chains, and for building the capacity of local institutions to monitor compliance and protect workers' rights.

Institutional theory

Institutional theory examines how institutional environments shape organisational behaviour (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). It suggests that organisations, MNCs included, are influenced by the rules, norms, and values of the settings in which they operate, and that they conform to these pressures to secure legitimacy and survive. Applied to labour exploitation, it draws attention to three factors:

- **Regulatory environment:** The strength of labour laws and enforcement shapes MNC behaviour; weak institutions may fail to protect labour rights, letting firms exploit workers with little fear of consequence (Meyer, 2017).
- **Cultural norms:** Local attitudes toward labour and workers' rights influence practice; where such rights are not prioritised, MNCs may adopt exploitative practices that align with prevailing norms (Kabeer, 2021).
- **Legitimacy and reputation:** Aware that legitimacy is tied to labour practice, firms may improve conditions under stakeholder pressure or to protect their reputation — though much depends on the strength of local institutions and civil society (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

Institutional theory thus underscores the value of strengthening local institutions and regulatory frameworks to protect workers. Better governance, greater transparency, and stronger social dialogue are all essential to improving conditions where MNCs operate. Together, Global Value Chain theory and institutional theory offer complementary insight into how MNCs behave in developing countries and what that means for labour standards and worker rights.

Empirical Literature Review

Wages in MNC operations are a central concern, and they tend to reflect both national economic conditions and global market pressures. In Bangladesh's garment factories, for instance, exploitation is stark: wages fall below a living wage even though the country is among the world's largest textile producers. Anner et al. (2020) found that most garment workers earn less than the government-set minimum, pointing to a systemic problem of wage compliance among MNCs. In Nigeria's food and beverage sector, firms such as Nestlé and Coca-Cola have faced accusations of wage abuses; Okeowo (2019) found that although these companies create jobs, the pay they offer is often too low to cover workers' daily needs — a gap between corporate profit and worker income that raises real questions of corporate responsibility.

Working hours are another pressure point in emerging economies. In Bangladesh's garment sector, long hours — often well beyond legal maximums and without proper overtime pay — are common; the Clean Clothes Campaign (2018) reported that most garment workers put in more than 60 hours a week, frequently with little or no overtime compensation, at real cost to their physical and mental health. Nigeria's food and beverage sector shows a similar pattern: Adebayo et al. (2020) found that MNC employees often work overtime without adequate pay, in breach of local labour law. Excessive hours combined with low pay deepen workers' vulnerability and point to the need for stronger regulatory enforcement.

Union rights are equally important to protecting workers' interests. Labour unions in Bangladesh have long faced serious obstacles, including harassment and repression. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2019) reported that many workers have been intimidated for attempting to organise or join unions, which limits their ability to bargain for better wages and conditions. Despite some gains, such as the Bangladesh Labour Act, enforcement remains weak and workers continue to face barriers to collective bargaining.

Methodology

The study used a quantitative research design to examine working conditions in MNCs in Cameroon systematically. A quantitative approach was chosen because it gathers numeric data that can be analysed statistically to reveal patterns and relationships around labour exploitation. A survey questionnaire was developed to collect data on the key variables, using closed-ended questions across several areas:

1. Wages: prevailing wage levels, whether pay was considered sufficient relative to the cost of living, and how it compared with local minimum-wage laws.
2. Working hours: average weekly hours, any incidence of forced overtime, and adherence to legal limits.
3. Working conditions and wellbeing: health and safety, employee benefits, training and development, and work-life balance.

The target population comprised employees of various MNCs in Cameroon — among them MTN, Orange, and Société Générale — together with customers of these organisations. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, yielding a sample of 56 individuals. Data were collected through online surveys using Google Forms, and the resulting quantitative data were summarised as charts using the platform's built-in analysis tools to draw out meaningful patterns and conclusions about working conditions and labour exploitation in these firms.

Results and Findings

Employee wages and standard of living

Views on wage sufficiency were split, and leaned negative. About half of employees felt their pay was adequate for their standard of living — 21.8% “very enough” and 27.3% “somewhat enough” — while a slightly larger share found it wanting, with 36.4% saying their wages were “not very enough” and 14.5% “not at all enough.” Taken together, 50.9% considered their wages insufficient, which signals real financial pressure for a majority and a clear case for stronger wage policy.

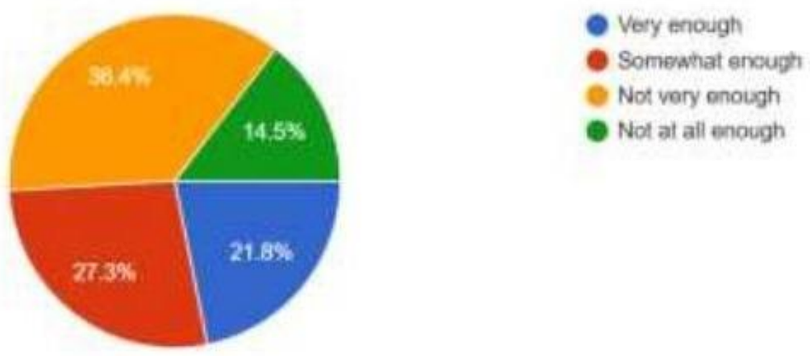

Figure 1: *Employee Wages and Standard of Living in Multinational Corporations.*

Comparison of MNC wages to local minimum-wage laws

Measured against statutory minimums, pay looked more favourable: 48.2% of employees earned "much higher than minimum wage" and 35.7% "approximately the same," while only about 14.3% earned slightly lower (with a negligible share much lower). Most MNC employees were therefore competitively paid relative to local law — a striking contrast with the previous finding, where many still judged their pay inadequate for the cost of living.

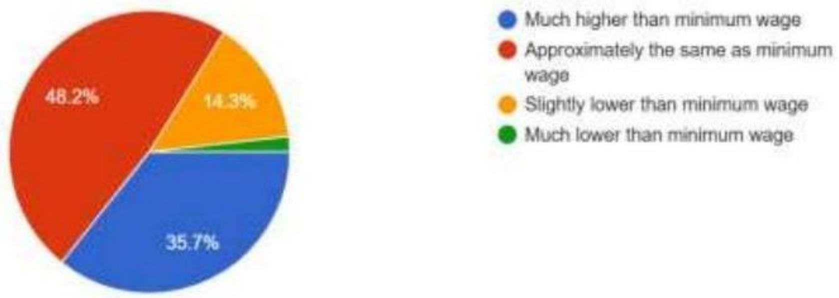

Figure 2: *Comparison of MNC Wages to Local Minimum-Wage Laws.*

Reasonableness of working hours

Working hours drew a generally positive response. Some 46.4% of employees found their hours "very reasonable" and 32.1% "somewhat reasonable," while 21.4% found them "not very reasonable." A clear majority — about 78.5% — viewed their hours favourably, though roughly one in five did not.

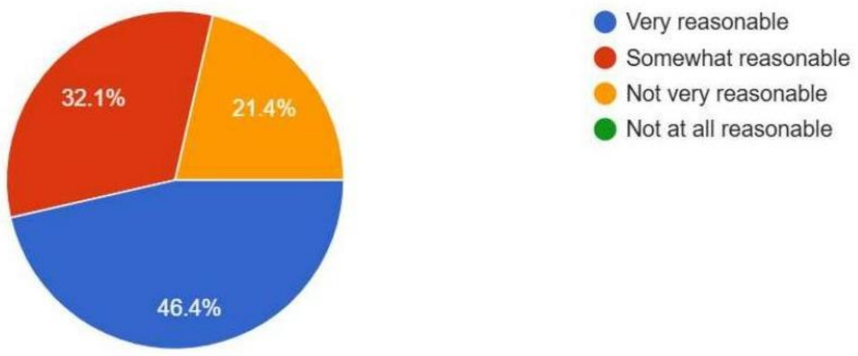

Figure 3: *Reasonableness of Working Hours for MNC Employees.*

Frequency of work-related injuries and illnesses

Perceptions of workplace safety were mixed. The single largest group, 44.6%, considered work-related injuries and illnesses "rare," but a combined 53.6% saw them as at least somewhat common — 37.5% "somewhat common" and 16.1% "very common." That a slight majority regarded injuries as common signals that occupational safety remains a live concern, even as a plurality reported few incidents.

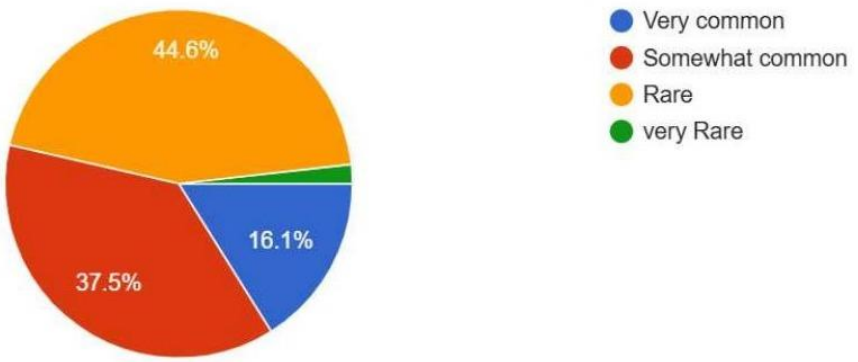

Figure 4: *Frequency of Work-Related Injuries and Illnesses in MNCs.*

Impact of MNC activities on labour standards in Cameroon

Sentiment toward MNCs' overall effect was strongly positive. A large majority felt labour standards had improved — 53.6% "somewhat improved" and 41.1% "strongly improved," some 94.7% together — with only a small segment perceiving any worsening. On balance, respondents saw MNC activity as a net gain for labour conditions in Cameroon.

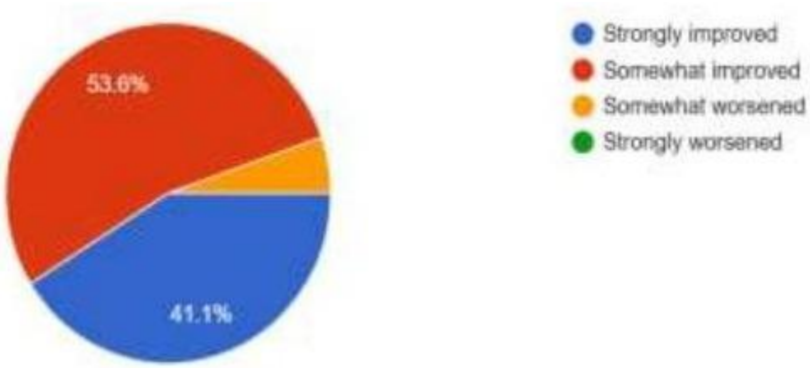

Figure 5: *Impact of MNC Activities on Labour Standards in Cameroon.*

Adequacy of employee benefits

Benefits were viewed broadly favourably: 37.5% of employees rated them “very good” and 32.1% “somewhat good,” while 21.4% found them “not very good” and 8.9% “not at all good.” About 69.6% were positive overall, though a meaningful minority of roughly 30% saw room for improvement.

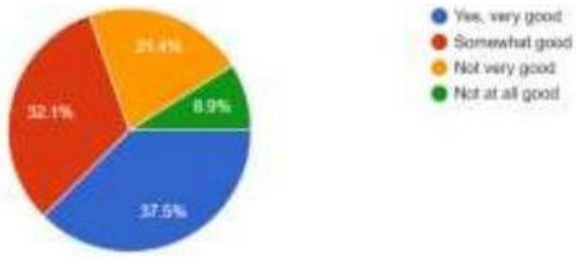

Figure 6: *Adequacy of Employee Benefits in MNCs.*

Training and development opportunities

Opinion on training and development was more evenly divided. Some 35.7% found opportunities “very sufficient” and another 35.7% “somewhat sufficient,” while 26.8% felt they were not very or not at all sufficient. With more than a quarter dissatisfied, this stood out as an area with clear room to grow.

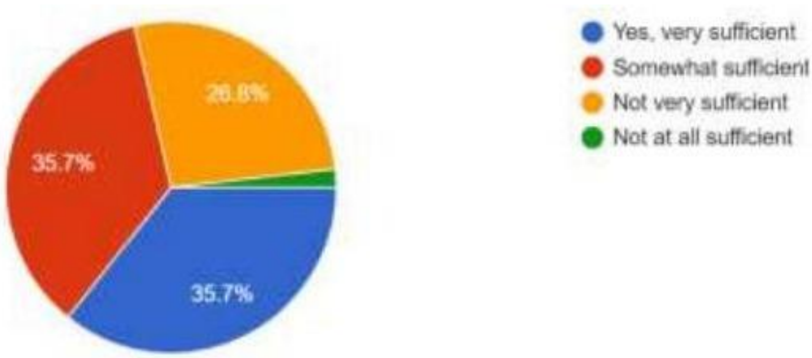

Figure 7: *Training and Development Opportunities in MNCs.*

Work-life balance

Work-life balance was seen positively by most, but not all. About 42.9% described it as "somewhat good" and 19.8% as "very good" — roughly 62.7% positive — while 19.6% found it "not very good" and 17.9% "not at all good." A solid majority were content, yet well over a third reported difficulty, marking work-life balance as another target for improvement.

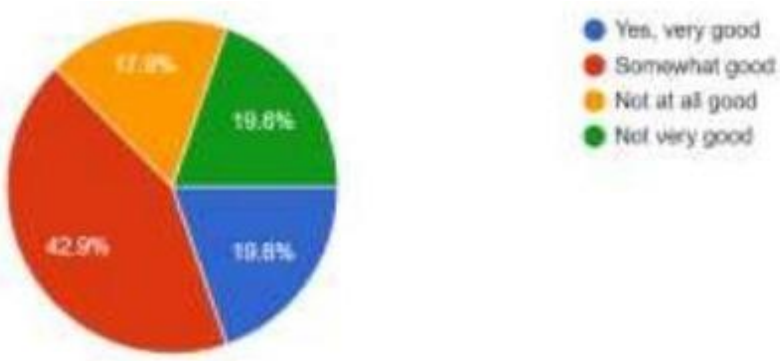

Figure 8: *Work-Life Balance for Employees in MNCs.*

Discussion

Taken together, the findings paint a nuanced picture of labour standards and employee experience in MNCs operating in Cameroon. On pay, the results pull in two directions. Measured against local minimum-wage laws, most employees were competitively paid, with 48.2% earning well above the minimum (Figure 2). Yet when the question shifted to whether wages were sufficient for their standard of living, only about half felt adequately paid, and 50.9% found their pay "not very" or "not at all" enough (Figure 1). In short, MNC wages tend to clear the statutory floor without necessarily meeting the real cost of living — a gap that leaves a majority of workers under financial strain.

Working hours drew a more favourable response, with 78.5% finding their hours reasonable (Figure 3); overwork, while not absent, was not the dominant complaint. Health and safety was more troubling. Although 44.6% regarded injuries as rare, a combined 53.6% saw work-related injuries and illnesses as at least somewhat common (Figure 4), which points to safety as a genuine weak spot.

Perceptions of MNCs' broader impact were strongly positive, with roughly 94.7% feeling that labour standards had improved to some degree (Figure 5). Benefits were viewed favourably by about 70% of respondents (Figure 6), but training and development split opinion, with more than a quarter finding provision insufficient (Figure 7), and work-life balance left over a third of employees dissatisfied (Figure 8).

The overall pattern is one of relative strength on formal wage compliance, working hours, and general perceptions of labour standards, set against clear gaps around wage adequacy for the cost of living, occupational health and safety, staff development, and work-life balance. It is in these areas that targeted improvement would do the most to turn MNCs' formal compliance into genuine worker wellbeing — and the finding underscores the need for continued scrutiny of labour practice in developing countries such as Cameroon.

Conclusion

The study finds that while MNCs in Cameroon generally offer competitive wages and reasonable working hours, real problems persist around financial sufficiency, health and safety, and employee development. A sizeable share of employees consider their pay inadequate for the cost of living and report that workplace injuries are common — clear signals of where MNCs must improve. So although these corporations appear to strengthen labour standards in some respects, there remains a pressing need for better practice to secure comprehensive employee wellbeing and satisfaction.

Recommendations

1. **Enhance wage policies.** MNCs should review and adjust wage structures so that pay meets the real cost of living and employees feel financially secure and fairly compensated.
2. **Improve health and safety standards.** Firms should implement rigorous safety protocols and regular training to reduce the risk of workplace injuries and illnesses.
3. **Promote work-life balance.** Flexible working hours and access to stress-management resources can address concerns about overwork.
4. **Increase training opportunities.** Expanding training and development would give all employees access to skills-building and career advancement.
5. **Establish feedback mechanisms.** Clear channels for employees to raise concerns and suggestions would foster a culture of open communication.
6. **Strengthen union rights.** Supporting the formation and functioning of trade unions would empower workers and help protect their rights.
7. **Conduct regular assessments.** Periodic evaluation of employee satisfaction and safety standards would help identify problems early and guide improvement.

Implications for Cameroon and Government Ministries

The findings carry practical implications that reach well beyond individual firms, because the gaps they expose fall squarely within the remit of several Cameroonian government bodies. Turning this evidence into better labour outcomes will depend on coordinated action across those institutions.

The clearest implications concern wages and enforcement. That so many employees earn above the statutory minimum yet still find their pay inadequate for the cost of living speaks directly to the Ministry of Labour and Social Security (MINTSS), which oversees labour law and the guaranteed minimum wage (SMIG). A periodic review of the SMIG against the real cost of living, backed by a better-resourced labour inspectorate, would help close the gap between formal compliance and genuine wage adequacy. The Ministry of Finance (MINFI) has a complementary part to play, since the fiscal incentives used to attract multinational investment can be tied to fair-pay and local-employment commitments.

The health-and-safety findings — with more than half of respondents describing work-related injuries as at least somewhat common — point to the labour inspectorate under MINTSS and to the National Social Insurance Fund (CNPS), which administers occupational-risk coverage. Firmer enforcement of workplace-safety standards, regular inspections, and clearer injury-reporting requirements would address a problem the data show is far from marginal. The Ministry of Public Health (MINSANTE) can reinforce this through occupational-health guidance and monitoring.

Weaknesses in training and development speak to the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training (MINEFOP), which is well placed to encourage — or require — multinational employers to invest in staff skills through partnerships, apprenticeship schemes, or incentives linked to vocational-training levies. With more than a quarter of employees finding provision insufficient, this is an area where policy could add value quickly.

On union rights and worker voice, MINTSS again holds the central role, since it governs freedom of association and collective bargaining. Strengthening protections for workers who organise, and fostering genuine social dialogue between MNCs, unions, and government, would help correct the power imbalance the study describes.

Finally, the broader task of balancing foreign investment against fair labour practice falls to the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development (MINEPAT) alongside MINFI. Cameroon's appetite for multinational investment need not come at workers' expense: investment-promotion policy can be designed so that the jobs, technology, and capital MNCs bring are matched by binding commitments on wages, safety, and staff development. Aligning these ministries around a shared labour-standards agenda would let Cameroon keep attracting multinational capital while ensuring its own workers share fairly in the gains.

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