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Decent work and economic growth in the South African agricultural sector

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Purpose: The research examined how decent work conditions influence economic growth, more specifically the impact on private household direct retirement investments. Pension or retirement fund contributions, which ought to be invested, accruing interest, served as a proxy for long-term direct investments, which would theoretically lead to economic growth, highlighting the role of improved labour standards in driving economic growth.

Design/methodology/approach: The rationale for the study was to address the lacuna of empirical evidence underscoring decent work conditions in the agricultural sector and the effect thereof on economic growth, such as long-term investment in a retirement fund. Data from 1006 agricultural workers obtained by means of the Quarterly Labour Force Survey administered by Statistics South Africa were analysed quantitatively. The sample was generated by means of a stratified two-pronged sampling technique. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were computed.

Findings/results: All the facets of decent work statistically significantly influenced the economic growth proxy except for the employee contract. A significant portion of the sample reported having access to fundamental rights such as paid leave and paid sick leave. Conversely, 91.7% of the sample did not have trade union membership, limiting collective bargaining power within the sector.

Practical implications: The agricultural sector could increase its contribution to economic growth by stimulating direct investment, for example, by providing agricultural employees retirement fund benefits.

Originality/value: The study highlighted gaps in the sectoral decent work conditions and emphasises the role of employee benefits in fostering economic growth, providing actionable insights for policy makers to improve labour conditions.

Keywords: decent work; social protection; sustainable development goals; economic growth; benefits.

Introduction

The agricultural sector is a cornerstone of South Africa's economy, contributing to both employment and economic development. Although its share of the national gross domestic product (GDP) stands at approximately 2.53% (Mpundu & Bopape, 2022), agriculture is crucial for food production, job creation and poverty alleviation, making it a key driver of economic growth. In many low- and middle-income countries, the agricultural sector is the largest contributor to employment, serving as a catalyst for development and social stability (Zhang & Diao, 2020). Despite its importance, the agricultural sector in South Africa faces significant challenges, particularly concerning labour practices and economic sustainability.

A substantial portion of the agricultural workforce in South Africa endures poor working conditions, low wages and insufficient social protection (Selepe, 2024). The mentioned anomalies are compounded by challenges in attracting and retaining a stable workforce, especially as agricultural labour remains mainly informal and seasonal. Globally, countries face similar labour challenges, though the challenges may vary between regions and agricultural sub-sectors. For instance, the sector contends with an ageing farm owner-operator population in the Global North, raising concerns about long-term labour shortages (Burton & Fischer, 2015; Chiswell & Lobley, 2018). Such labour challenges have placed renewed emphasis on improving work conditions through initiatives like the 'decent work' agenda, as defined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

The concept of *decent work* (DW) has emerged as a focal point for improving labour conditions across sectors. Introduced at the 1999 International Labour Conference and subsequently

incorporated into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), decent work is central to Goal 8, titled 'Decent Work and Economic Growth' (United Nations, 2015). The decent work agenda addresses labour market imbalances by promoting employment creation, social protection, rights at work and social dialogue (Cohen & Moodley, 2012). In the context of South Africa's agricultural sector, achieving decent work is crucial not only for employee well-being but also to foster long-term, sustainable economic growth as well as promote food security.

Despite its relatively small contribution to the GDP, South Africa's agricultural sector remains vital to the economy, which is ascribed to the role thereof in employment, food security and resource management. The sector contributes approximately 5.5% of total employment and absorbs a significant portion of the unskilled and semi-skilled workforce, especially in rural areas (Greyling, 2012; Sihlobo & Nel, 2016). Nevertheless, many agricultural workers in South Africa live in poverty, experience wage disparities and face a lack of formal employment protection. This reality highlights the need for policies that promote decent work to improve productivity, reduce poverty and drive economic growth. As such, Meemken et al. (2024) noted that working conditions in food systems remain perilous globally, and national representative agricultural worker data are required to document the scale and nature of working conditions to inform policy design and implementation.

Scholars have long recognised the potential for decent work to contribute to economic growth, particularly in sectors like agriculture, which are labour-intensive. Decent work practices can enhance productivity by fostering healthier and safer working environments, ensuring better remuneration and promoting job security. However, Naidoo et al. (2007) posit that the experiences of farm workers are mostly absent from extant research on decent work in the agricultural sector. The mentioned decent work practices could lead to higher economic output and greater stability within the labour market (Heeks et al., 2021; Selepe, 2024; Van Zanten & Van Tulder, 2021). Therefore, understanding the relationship between decent work and economic growth is vital to ensuring the agricultural sector's sustainability within the South African context.

Problem investigated

Despite the agricultural sector's potential to promote economic growth, it remains associated with poverty, inequality and deprived living standards. Studies show that agricultural workers in several low- and middle-income countries, including South Africa, frequently live below the international poverty line. For example, Mphuka et al. (2017) found that most individuals employed in Zambia's agricultural sector live on less than $1.90 daily. Similarly, Castañeda et al. (2018) highlight the pervasiveness of poverty in agricultural communities. The mentioned status quo underscores the urgent need for structural transformations that promote decent work to lift agricultural workers out of poverty.

In South Africa, as a developing country, achieving decent work in agriculture is a matter of labour rights and a critical factor in realising the sector's full economic potential, especially because agriculture is typically a principal source of income and employment for the rural poor (Jäckering et al., 2021). The country can create a more stable and productive agricultural workforce by addressing wage disparities (Li & Zhou, 2025), formalising labour arrangements (Jäckering et al., 2021) and reducing seasonal unemployment (Kandilov & Kandilov, 2019). Furthermore, aligning agricultural labour practices with the SDGs, particularly Goal 8, will be critical for ensuring that economic growth in the sector is both inclusive and sustainable (Asim et al., 2024).

The nexus between decent work and economic growth in South Africa's agricultural sector is central to ongoing debates about sustainable development. Scholars such as Diao et al. (2019) argue that an agricultural sector-led transformation can deliver higher economic growth than a services-led transformation. Decent work, by promoting fair wages, safe working conditions and social protections, can be a crucial driver of the mentioned transformation. Improving labour standards will not only enhance the livelihoods of agricultural workers but also contribute to greater economic stability and growth by increasing labour productivity and fostering innovation. Moreover, the agricultural sector plays a significant role in managing natural resources in South Africa, with 80% of the country's land surface and 63% of its freshwater resources used for agriculture (Venter, 2017). Sustainable labour practices prioritising decent work are crucial for ensuring the sector's ability to address food security challenges, environmental sustainability and economic growth. As South Africa strives to meet its SDG commitments, particularly Goal 8, exploring the interrelationship between decent work conditions and economic growth in the agricultural sector becomes increasingly pivotal.

The agricultural sector is vital to South Africa's economy, but the sector faces significant labour challenges that hinder its potential for sustainable growth (Aroba & Rudolph, 2024). Achieving decent work conditions in this sector is imperative, not only for the well-being of employees but also for fostering economic growth and stability (Jäckering et al., 2021). As South Africa strives to meet the United Nations' SDG 8, it is essential to explore the nexus between decent work and economic growth, recognising that improving labour conditions can be a crucial driver of economic transformation and sustainability in the agricultural sector (Asim et al., 2024). As such, Van Zanten and Van Tulder (2021:210) maintain that the accomplishment of the SDGs is contingent on solving the 'nexus' challenge. Hence, economic sectoral activities undertaken present a key lever for operationalising SDGs. The research presented attempts to address the 'nexus' challenge.

Legislative framework

The concept of *decent work* was introduced by the ILO and reinforced by seminal work, such as the United Nations General Assembly (1948) on human rights, which emphasised

several key components *viz*. the right to work, just and favourable working conditions, protection against unemployment, non-discrimination, fair remuneration and the right to unionise (Blustein et al., 2016). The mentioned elements of decent work form the basis of various international labour frameworks and are crucial in fostering both individual employees' well-being and broader economic stability. The ILO (2008a) further elaborates on decent work by identifying four core elements: (1) promoting employment, (2) strengthening social protection, (3) encouraging social dialogue and (4) ensuring fundamental labour rights in a dignified and just workplace. These rights encompass the foundation of employment policies in developed and developing economies. This study measures decent work by specific rights, including the right to paid leave, maternity or paternity leave, paid sick leave, unemployment protection, employment contracts, trade union membership and salary negotiation. These dimensions of decent work are hypothesised to be critical for employee welfare and closely tied to economic growth outcomes, particularly in sectors that are labour-intensive, such as agriculture.

Moreover, considering the South African agricultural sector, several legislative interventions have been made to address social protection (viz. *Extension of Security of Tenure Act*, 1997b) and fair remuneration for farm workers. *Per se*, the *Extension of Security of Tenure Act* (1997b) protects agricultural employees from eviction from farms without due process, whereas the *Basic Conditions of Employment Act*, *Act 75 of 1997 Sectoral Determination 13* (RSA, 2016), stipulates the minimum wage for farm workers to be R2778.83 plus Consumer Price Index (CPI) plus 1% compounded year on year. However, Naidoo et al. (2007), reflecting on previous sectoral determinations, note that compliance with the provisions of sectoral determinations is built on a selective basis. This sentiment was echoed by Devereux (2020), noting that these laws were partially or perfunctorily implemented. Thus, sectoral determinations do not fundamentally change the quality of decent work for farm workers.

Operationalising variables

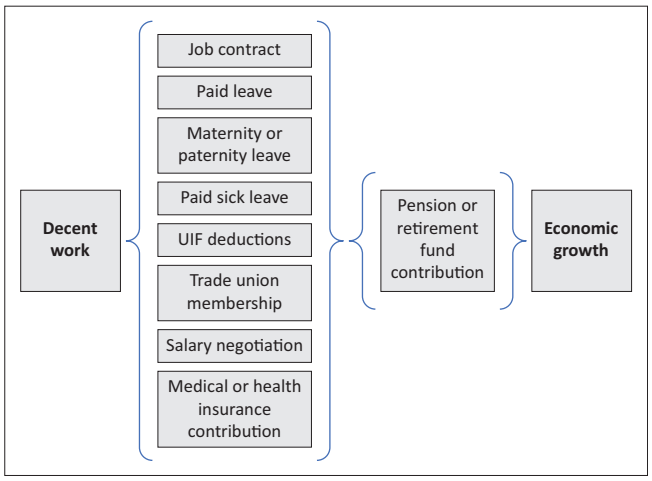
Blustein et al. (2016), reflecting on seminal work by the United Nation's General Assembly (1948), underscored in terms of decent work (1) the right to work, free choice of employment, just and favourable working conditions and protection against unemployment; (2) the right to equal work in the absence of discriminatory practices; (3) the right to negotiate favourable remuneration and (4) the right to join a trade union. The ILO (2008a) elaborates further by defining decent work to include (1) promoting employment, (2) enriching social protection for employees, (3) encouraging social dialogue between stakeholders and (4) fulfilling the fundamental rights associated with a dignified and just workplace. Webster et al. (2015), reflecting on the ILO (2008b) meeting in Geneva emphasised the measurement of decent work to include nine elements, namely, (1) employment opportunities; (2) stability and security at work; (3) adequate earnings and productive work; (4) decent work hours; (5) combining work, family and personal life; (6) equal opportunities and treatment; (7) safe work environment; (8) social security; and (9) promotion of social dialogue.

In the study *decent work* was measured by means of the fundamental rights to a dignified and just workplace enshrined in the *Basic Conditions of Employment Act, Act 75 of 1997*, namely, right to paid leave (viz. just and favourable working conditions), maternity or paternity leave (viz. combining work, family and personal life), paid sick leave (viz. just and favourable working conditions), unemployment insurance (UIF) deduction (viz. protection against unemployment), an employment contract (viz. protection against unemployment), medical or health insurance contribution, trade union membership (viz. the right to join a trade union) and right to negotiate salary increments (viz. right to negotiate remuneration). The rationale for operationalising decent work as defined by the legislative framework is based on the notion that the core elements of the legislation are essential components of decent work. It provides a quantitative metric that can be monitored and enforced, ensuring compliance. Furthermore, it provides a standardised approach that can be universally applied across different sectors, promoting consistency in labour standards.

Moreover, Mohamed (2014), cited by Nwanne (2016), expounds the view that economic growth requires investment financed by private households. Hungwe and Odhiambo (2019), reflecting on extant research, expound that both savings and investments are essential for economic growth. Liu et al. (2022) elaborated by indicating that economic growth is exogenous, resulting from savings. If accrued savings are utilised for productive investment, hypothetically, it would contribute to attaining economic growth during population ageing. In the South African context, Marumoagae (2017) explains further that employers are obliged to invest employees' contributions in retirement funds. Thus, these contributions are invested *in lieu of* employees incurring interest, contributing to attaining economic growth during population ageing. Thomas and Spataro (2016) concur that retirement funds, an aggregate of individual employee contributions, play a pivotal role in capital market development and in triggering economic growth by (1) increasing savings both at micro and macro levels, (2) increasing the availability of long-term capital, (3) improving corporate performance and (4) decreasing volatility in capital markets. Moreover, pension funds can influence the labour market by stimulating employee mobility in the job market and therefore labour force participation (Thomas & Spataro, 2016). Because pension fund contributions can stimulate economic growth, growth was operationalised in the research reported on as contribution to pension or retirement fund part and parcel of the employment relationship thus pension fund investments which was deemed a proxy for economic growth towards economic sustainability. Based on the operational definitions put forward, the following conceptual model was developed for the reported research (see Figure 1).

To quantify decent work in this study, several key variables were operationalised based on South African labour laws, particularly the *Basic Conditions of Employment Act, Act 75 of 1997*. These variables are critical indicators of a dignified and fair workplace, contributing to both productivity and economic stability. Furthermore, the indicators were mostly based on the Decent Work Index developed by Webster et al. (2015) for farm workers and include:

- *Paid leave:* Refers to the right to take time off work while still receiving a salary, reflecting fair and just working conditions. Paid leave forms part of social security, according to the Decent Work Index (Webster et al., 2015).
- *Paid sick leave:* Protects workers during illness while ensuring continued income, contributing to employee welfare and productivity. Similarly, paid sick leave is part of Social Security according to the Decent Work Index (Webster et al., 2015).
- *Medical or health insurance contributions:* Reflect social security according to the Decent Work Index (Webster et al., 2015) and represent workplace benefits that contribute to employee health and well-being.
- *Maternity or paternity leave:* Ensures employees can take time off for family responsibilities, highlighting favourable working conditions and combining work, family and personal life. In the current study, maternity and paternity leave was indicative of combining work, family and personal life as per the ILO (2008b) guidelines.
- *Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) Deduction:* Reflects the protection against unemployment, a key aspect of stability and security at work (Webster et al., 2015).
- *Employment contract:* A formal agreement ensuring job security and protection against unemployment, which is critical for decent work and part and parcel of stability and security at work (Webster et al., 2015).
- *Trade union membership:* Represents workers' rights to collective bargaining and participation in workplace decision-making. Trade union membership is deemed part of the social dialogue indicator (Webster et al., 2015).
- *Salary negotiation:* Indicates the right to negotiate fair wages, directly impacting economic participation and labour satisfaction. Salary negotiation was deemed a proxy for adequate earnings (Webster et al., 2015).



UIF, Unemployment insurance fund.

FIGURE 1: A macro-economic conceptual framework for decent work and economic growth.

The mentioned variables are essential to a decent work framework and serve as indicators of workplace quality and employee rights, directly influencing labour productivity and economic outcomes. Devereux (2020) reported in a study underscoring some of the Decent Work Indicators (viz. trade union membership, UIF deductions and employment contracts) of a sample consisting of female agricultural employees in the Western and Northern Cape. Furthermore, Mackett (2022), reporting on secondary data, indicated that the decent work indicators for agricultural semi-skilled employees increased in 2018. It should be noted that despite various questionnaires that could be used to measure decent work, extant research utilises decent work indicators for semi-skilled agricultural employees.

Hypothesis development

Decent work and economic growth

A paucity of studies has explored the relationship between decent work and economic growth with extant research (see, e.g., Kreinin & Aigner, 2022; Rai et al., 2019; Skvarciany & Astiké, 2022), suggesting that improved labour conditions can potentially drive economic expansion. Specifically, Skvarciany and Astiké (2022) evaluated European Union countries' implementation of SDG8 indicators, with Germany being the frontrunner. Kreinin and Aigner (2022) examined scientific evidence emphasising a paradigm shift towards sustainability and degrowth based on the assumption that there is an overdependence on economic growth. Rai et al. (2019) opine that when ascribing to a restricted measure of economic growth, which has conventionally been GDP per capita growth, gender inclusivity has been negated. Hence, the corpus of knowledge for the most part underscores theoretical expositions, with limited empirical evidence emphasising the relationship between latent variables. Another lacuna in the corpus of knowledge relates to regionality; thus, most of the research undertaken is in the Global North, with limited research in Africa, especially South Africa. To this end, Bello-Bravo and Lutemia (2020) authored a paper on supporting sustainability for decent work and economic growth in Ghana, focusing on policy directives and implementation as well as the role players responsible, therefore. Webster and Ludwig (2020) explored the concept of decent work for petrol attendants in South Africa, whereas Devereux (2020) reported on decent work indicators for a sample of female agricultural employees in the Western and Northern Cape. Results indicated that 60.3% of the sample did sign an employee contract. Moreover, 76.4% of the sample had UIF deducted from salaries. Contrary to this, 73% of the sample surveyed indicated that employers do not allow union representatives access to the workplace (Devereux, 2020).

Considering the emaciated empirical evidence linking decent work with economic growth, Mackett (2022) aptly

enquires about the decent work agenda in the South African macroeconomy. *Per se*, South African macroeconomic policies underscore economic outcomes for the productive economy rather than broader social well-being-related indicators, reiterating the need for employment growth instead of ensuring citizens' human rights. However, Mackett (2022) reported a weak association between labour productivity and wage growth in the South African agricultural sector, necessitating the need for further exploration. As such, it would appear as if decent work and economic growth are opposing agendas. Hence, Van Zanten and Van Tulder (2021:210) maintain that the accomplishment of SDG8 is contingent on solving the 'nexus' challenge. To this end, Escaleras and Kottaridi (2014) explain that private investment is a critical aspect of economic growth, and it is asserted that private investment should hypothetically lead to economic growth. Marumoagae (2017) explains further that employers are obliged to invest employees' contributions in retirement funds. Thus, these contributions are private investments *in lieu of* employees incurring interest contributing to attaining economic growth. Retirement funds, an aggregate of individual employee's private contributions, play a pivotal role in capital market development and in triggering economic growth by (1) increasing savings both at micro and macro levels, (2) by increasing the availability of long-term capital, (3) by improving corporate performance and (4) by decreasing volatility in capital markets (Thomas & Spataro, 2016). Hence, it would appear as if an aspect of the employer–employee relationship could stimulate economic growth. Against the stated background and in accordance with the conceptual model, the following hypotheses were formulated for the study:

- **H_1:** Employee contract has a statistically significant direct impact on economic growth when operationalised as pension or retirement fund contributions.
- **H_2:** Paid leave has a statistically significant direct impact on economic growth when operationalised as pension or retirement fund contributions.
- **H_3:** Maternity or paternity leave has a statistically significant direct impact on economic growth when operationalised as pension or retirement fund contributions.
- **H_4:** Paid sick leave has a statistically significant direct impact on economic growth operationalised as pension or retirement fund contributions.
- **H_5:** UIF deduction has a statistically significant direct impact on economic growth operationalised as pension or retirement fund contributions.
- **H_6:** The variance in economic growth operationalised as a pension or retirement fund contribution can statistically significantly be attributed to trade union membership.
- **H_7:** Salary negotiation has a statistically significant impact on economic growth operationalised as pension or retirement fund contribution.
- **H_8:** Medical or health insurance contribution has a statistically significant impact on economic growth operationalised as pension or retirement fund contribution.

Research design

An exposition of the research methodology follows, sequentially underscoring the approach, sampling, measuring instrument and statistical analysis.

Research approach

The research reported on was underpinned by a post-positivist paradigm and adopted a quantitative research approach. Quantitative research is deemed as administering a measuring instrument to gather numerical data enabling investigation of relationships or associations amongst variables (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018) and generalising the said findings to the population (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Thus, the main purpose of the research reported on was to generalise the findings to the agricultural sector. The research approach was operationalised by means of secondary data analysis executed on an open-source dataset obtained from Statistics South Africa. Trinh (2018) maintains that secondary data analysis denotes analysing pre-existing numerical datasets to test research hypotheses that diverge from the original data-gathering purpose. Secondary data sources subsume datasets collected by government and research institutions, thus reputable third parties (Sun & Lipsitz, 2018). Jonck and Nwosu (2022) elucidate that retrieving secondary data from an electronic platform necessitates examining the metadata, *inter alia*, measuring instrument, statistical release, extant outputs and the dataset captured in a case-by-variable data matrix to ensure suitability of secondary data for testing of the research hypotheses.

Population and sampling

The target population comprises economically active citizenry employed in the agricultural sector during the first quarter of 2024. Statistics South Africa (2024) defined the agricultural sector as, *inter alia*, crop farming, game farming, mixed farming, animal farming, forestry and fishery. Working age and economically active were the only exclusion criteria implemented. Thus, the population elements had to be between 15 years and 64 years of age at the time of data-gathering and participating in activities contributing to the production of goods and services during the reference period (Statistics South Africa, 2024). The population frame was estimated at 941 000 employees who were employed in the agricultural sector during the reference period (Statistics South Africa, 2024). The final sample comprised a total of 1006 ($N = 1006$) participants generated by means of a stratified two-pronged sampling technique. The two-pronged sampling approach consisted of a probability portion-to-size sampling of 3324 primary sampling units and 33 000 dwellings (Statistics South Africa, 2024). A sample of $n = 1006$ participants is on the 99th confidence level representative of the population, with a 5% margin of error (Orban, 2021).

Research participants

The final study sample ($N = 1006$) comprised 67.4% ($n = 678$) male participants, with the remainder of the sample being

female (n = 328; 32.6%). Considering the population grouping, 73.5% of the sample representing 739 participants were black African, followed by 20.1% (n = 202) Coloured participants and 6.5% (n = 65) white participants. In terms of the provincial distribution, most of the sample resided in the Western Cape (n = 210; 20.9%), 11% of the sample (n = 111) came from the Eastern Cape, 9% (n = 91) from the Northern Cape, 9.9% (n = 100) from the Free State, 13.3% (n = 134) from KwaZulu-Natal, 6.8% (n = 68) from the North West province, 4.2% (n = 42) from Gauteng, 11.6% (n = 117) from Mpumalanga and 13.2% (n = 133) from Limpopo. Considering the highest educational level, most of the participants had formal schooling (n = 877; 87.2%), 1%, representing 10 participants, had a technical qualification, 3.6% (n = 36) held a diploma and 1.8% (thus 18 participants) had tertiary education. Lastly, 17 participants were uncertain (1.7%) and 48 participants, representing 4.8% of the sample, had had no schooling. With reference to the age distribution, 29% of the sample (n = 292) were between 30 years and 39 years old, followed by 24.5% (n = 246) of the sample between 40 years and 49 years of age, 20.2% (n = 203) of participants were between 20 years and 29 years of age, with 17.8% of participants (n = 179) between 50 years and 59 years of age and 6.4% of participants (n = 64) were 60 years and older. Lastly, 2.2%, representing 22 participants, were 19 years and younger. With reference to marital status, most of the sample have never been married (n = 464; 46.1%), followed by participants who were married (n = 311; 30.9%), 17.5% (n = 17.4%) of the sample were cohabiting, 3.2% were either a widow or widower and 2.4%, representing 24 participants, were divorced or separated.

Measuring instrument

Principally, survey research was conducted by Statistics South Africa (2024) by means of the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS). The QLFS is a national household-based survey administered annually to gather data underscoring employment and descriptors thereof, namely employment profile, hours worked and employment satisfaction, to mention a few. The measuring instrument consists of 161 items covering three facets related to labour, *viz.* unemployment indicators (i.e. reason for being unemployed and searching for employment), employment indicators (i.e. type of employment, employment characteristics and employment satisfaction) and work activities (i.e. hours worked doing specific tasks). A biographical section gathers information from participants related to gender, age, educational level, province and marital status (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Specific variables included for statistical analysis were found in the employment descriptor section subsuming employment contract, paid leave, maternity or paternity leave, paid sick leave, UIF deduction, medical or health insurance contribution, trade union membership, salary negotiation and pension or retirement fund contribution, also referred to as a retirement annuity or investment.

Statistical analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and SPSS AMOS version 29 were used to perform descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics were calculated to provide a profile of the sample and ascertain the measures of central tendency and normality. Skewness values below ±3 and kurtosis values below ±10 were deemed indicative of a normal distribution (Zake et al., 2024). Structural equation modelling (SEM) was performed to test the hypotheses inferentially. Structural equation modelling is a multivariable statistical test utilised to construct theoretical concepts, assess measurement reliability, hypothesise and test theory, determine the fitness of the statistical model and ascertain the direct and indirect effects of variables (Moshabi et al., 2024). Li (2021) explained that in applied research, the use of SEM with mixed scale types (viz. continuous and categorical variables) is becoming increasingly prevalent. Statistical significance was set at either the 95th ($p \leq 0.05$) or 99th ($p \leq 0.01$) percentile.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg, Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management (IPPM) Research Ethics Committee (IPPM-2024-924). Subsequent to deidentified secondary data analysis being performed in the research study, no interaction with human and/or animal research objects occurred. Coded data void of any identifiable information do not require ethical approval. Despite this, ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional ethics committee. Considering *Protection of Personal Information Act* requirements, if the dataset is available on a public electronic repository, for example, the Statistics South Africa portal, permission for further use and analysis is implied (Tripathy, 2013). Furthermore, demographic variables or personal information were excluded from data analyses.

Results

The primary purpose of the research reported on was to ascertain the causal relationship between decent work and economic growth operationalised as private household pension or retirement investments in the South African agricultural sector. To contextualise the inferential analysis, Table 1 and Table 2 depict findings from the descriptive analysis.

As can be seen from Table 1, 52.4% (n = 483) of the sample indicated that they did receive paid leave, while 46.5% (n = 428) of the sample indicated that they did not receive paid leave. Moreover, 10 participants were uncertain. In terms of paid sick leave, 57% (n = 525) of participants indicated that they did take paid sick leave; in contrast, 42.3% (n = 390) of participants did not get paid sick leave, with 6 participants (0.7%) expressing uncertainty.

Considering maternity or paternity leave, most of the sample (n = 589; 64%) indicated that they were not allowed to go on maternity or paternity leave, while 34.5% (n = 318) of the sample were allowed to go on maternity or paternity leave and 1.5% of the sample representing 14 participants were

TABLE 1: Descriptive results relating to the decent work indicators.

Variable	Level of the variable	*n*	%	Cumulative %
Paid leave	Agree	483	52.4	52.4
	Disagree	428	46.5	98.9
	Uncertain	10	1.1	100.0
Paid sick leave	Agree	525	57.0	57.0
	Disagree	390	42.3	99.3
	Uncertain	6	0.7	100.0
Maternity or paternity leave	Agree	318	34.5	34.5
	Disagree	589	64.0	98.5
	Uncertain	14	1.5	100.0
UIF deduction	Agree	591	64.2	64.2
	Disagree	320	34.7	98.9
	Uncertain	10	1.1	100.0
Medical or health insurance contribution	Agree	25	2.7	2.7
	Disagree	893	97.0	99.7
	Uncertain	3	0.3	100.0
Employment contract	Agree	664	72.1	72.1
	Disagree	257	27.9	100.0
Trade union membership	Agree	69	7.5	7.5
	Disagree	845	91.7	99.2
	Uncertain	7	0.8	100.0
Salary negotiation	Negotiation between participant and employer	64	6.9	6.9
	Negotiation between union and employer	71	7.7	14.7
	Bargaining council or other sector bargaining arrangement	111	12.1	26.7
	Employer only	609	66.1	92.8
	No regular annual salary increases	66	7.2	100.0
Retirement fund contribution	Agree	157	17.0	17.0
	Disagree	748	81.2	98.3
	Uncertain	16	1.7	100.0

UIF, unemployment insurance.

TABLE 2: Summary results of the measures of central tendency.

Variable	Median	Mean	SD	Kurtosis	Skewness
Paid leave	1.00	1.49	0.52	0.29	-1.39
Paid sick leave	1.00	1.44	0.51	-1.48	0.40
Maternity/paternity leave	2.00	1.67	0.50	-1.03	-0.36
UIF deductions	1.00	1.37	0.51	-0.78	0.80
Employment contract	1.00	1.28	0.45	-0.03	0.99
Trade union membership	2.00	1.93	0.28	8.00	-2.36
Medical or health insurance	2.00	1.98	0.17	28.88	-4.23
Salary negotiations	4.00	3.59	0.98	1.31	-1.38
Retirement fund contribution	2.00	1.85	0.41	-1.11	1.41

UIF, unemployment insurance; SD, standard deviation.

uncertain. Moreover, most of the sample (n = 591; 64.2%) indicated that UIF was deducted from their salaries, while 34.7% (n = 320) did not contribute to the unemployment insurance fund. Also, 1.1% of the samples, representing 10 participants, were uncertain. With reference to medical or health insurance contribution, only 2.7% of the sampling representing 25 participants indicated that the employer was contributing on their behalf. The majority indicated that a health or medical insurance contribution (n = 893; 97%) was not made on their behalf by employers in the agricultural sector, while 3 participants expressed uncertainty. Considering having an employment contract, most participants (n = 664; 72.1%) agreed to having a contract; on the other hand, 27.9% (n = 257) indicated the absence of an employee contract. With reference to trade union membership, most of the participants, representing 91.7% (n = 845) of the sample, indicated that they do not have trade union membership; only 7.5% (n = 69) of the sample indicated that they do have trade union membership, and 0.8% representing 7 participants were uncertain.

Considering salary negotiations, the following options emerged, namely negotiation between participant and employer (n = 64; 6.9%), negotiation between trade union and employer (n = 71; 7.7%), bargaining council or other sector bargaining arrangement (n = 111; 12.1%) and employer discretion (n = 609; 66.1%). On the other hand, 7.2% of the sample representing 66 participants indicated that they do not receive regular annual salary increases. Lastly, in terms of retirement fund contribution, most participants (n = 748; 81.2%) indicated that they do not contribute towards a retirement fund, while 17% (n = 157) of the sample do contribute and 1.7% representing 16 participants were uncertain.

Table 2 provides a summary of the measures of central tendency.

According to Table 2, participants scored positively with reference to paid leave, paid sick leave, UIF deductions and having an employment contract. On the other hand, the mean scores were below the median scores towards negative for maternity or paternity leave (median = 2; mean = 1.67), trade union membership (median = 2; mean = 1.93), medical or health insurance (median = 2; mean = 1.98) and salary negotiations (median = 4; mean = 3.59). Considering skewness and kurtosis, only health and medical insurance contribution scores exceeded the recommended guidelines; *inter alia*, for skewness, the guideline value is below ± 3 and for kurtosis, the values are below ± 10 (Kline, 2015). Thus, based on the results presented in Table 2, the supposition of univariate normality was met, and normality was supported except for medical or health insurance contributions.

Prior to adding structural paths to the measurement model, the model fitness was determined, and minimum fitness was achieved. Table 3 presents the resulting path estimates.

The structural paths presented in Table 3 indicated that an employment contract did not yield a statistically significant effect on economic growth (β = 0.013; standard error [SE] = 0.008; p = 0.089). As a result, Hypothesis 1 was rejected. Furthermore, paid leave had a positive statistically significant effect on economic growth (β = 0.084; SE = 0.006; $p \leq 0.01$**), supporting Hypothesis 2. Additionally, maternity or paternity leave had a positive statistically significant effect on economic growth (β = 0.211; SE = 0.006; $p \leq 0.01$**), resulting in the acceptance of Hypothesis 3. Paid sick leave statistically significantly influenced economic growth (β = 0.099; SE = 0.006; $p \leq 0.01$**), providing support for Hypothesis 4. Additionally, UIF deductions had a positive statistically significant effect on economic growth (β = 0.064; SE = 0.006; $p \leq 0.01$**), supporting Hypothesis 5. Also, trade

TABLE 3: The structural model's regression results.

Structural paths	β	SE	*p*
Economic growth ← Employee contract	0.01	0.01	0.089
Economic growth ← Paid leave	0.08	0.01	0.000***
Economic growth ← Maternity or paternity leave	0.21	0.01	0.000***
Economic growth ← Paid sick leave	0.10	0.01	0.000***
Economic growth ← UIF deduction	0.064	0.01	0.000***
Economic growth ← Trade union membership	0.19	0.01	0.000***
Economic growth ← Salary negotiations	0.02	0.00	0.000***
Economic growth ← Medical or health insurance contributions	0.39	0.01	0.000***

p, Two-tailed statistical significance; SE, standard error.
*, Significantly different from zero.

union membership had a positive statistically significant effect on economic growth (β = 0.19; SE = 0.006; $p \leq 0.01$**), supporting Hypothesis 6. Salary negotiation had a positive statistically significant effect on economic growth (β = 0.024; SE = 0.003; $p \leq 0.01$**), supporting Hypothesis 7. Lastly, medical or health insurance contributions had the greatest effect on economic growth (β = 0.389; SE = 0.006; $p \leq 0.01$**), supporting Hypothesis 8.

Discussion and implications

The study aimed to examine the influence of decent work indicators on economic growth in the South African agricultural sector, focusing on variables such as paid leave, sick leave, maternity or paternity leave, UIF deductions, medical insurance, employment contracts, trade union membership, salary negotiations and retirement fund contributions. The results provide valuable insights into the workforce's access to these decent work indicators and the influence thereof on economic growth, mainly through pension or retirement fund contributions.

A significant portion of the sample reported having access to fundamental rights such as paid leave (52.4%) and paid sick leave (57%). Additionally, 72.1% of participants reported having an employment contract, a key indicator of job security. However, a significant portion of employees still lacked essential components of decent work. For example, the majority (64%) of participants indicated the lack of maternity or paternity leave, highlighting a significant gap in gender-sensitive work policies in the agricultural sector. An even more critical finding was that 97% of the sample lacked employer-contributed medical or health insurance, pointing to a lack of social protection. Furthermore, trade union membership was notably low, with 91.7% of workers not belonging to a union, which might limit their collective bargaining power for better wages and conditions. Additionally, 66.1% of participants indicated that salary increases were at the employer's discretion, reflecting limited negotiation power for agricultural farm workers. Results presented confirmed research by Devereux (2020), which indicated that 60.3% of the sample did sign an employment contract and 76.4% of the sample had UIF deducted from their salaries. On the contrary, 73% of the sample surveyed indicated that employers did not allow union representatives access to the workplace (Devereux, 2020). Similarly, Visser and Ferrer (2015) reported that only 46.4% of agricultural employees were entitled to paid leave and 35% to paid sick leave, 67.1% had deductions for UIF and 81.4% reported that salary negotiations took place between the employee and employer only. When comparing the decent work indicators of the current study with those reported in 2014, there was a slight increase, confirming assertions by Mackett (2022).

Webster et al. (2015), reporting on decent work indicators for farm workers, partly corroborated the finding presented in that the mentioned study reported farm workers to have poor wages, limited benefits, a lack of institutional voice and lastly a lack of work–life balance. Furthermore, Naidoo et al. (2007) confirmed that the agricultural sector complies with the provisions of the sectoral determinations on a selective basis. This sentiment was echoed by Devereux (2020), noting that these laws were partially or perfunctorily implemented.

Regarding economic growth, the study revealed that 81.2% of participants did not contribute to a retirement fund, suggesting insufficient private investment and long-term financial planning. The high percentage of agricultural workers not contributing to pension funds indicates that the agricultural sector might well make a limited contribution to economic growth, primarily through mechanisms like direct investment. Furthermore, the sector might have a limited contribution to (1) increasing savings both at micro and macro levels, (2) increasing the availability of long-term capital and (3) by stabilising volatility in capital markets (Thomas & Spataro, 2016). Moreover, all the indicators of decent work, except for an employee contract, statistically significantly influenced economic growth, which is evidence of the importance of decent work in relation to economic growth. Empirical evidence relating to the influence of decent work indicators on economic growth within the South African agricultural sector could not be identified, indicative of the originality of the research reported on.

Policy and managerial implications

The policy implications from this study highlight several areas requiring attention to improve decent work for agricultural employees at a macroeconomic level. Firstly, while some fundamental labour rights, such as paid leave and employment contracts, are being met, there are significant gaps in critical areas like maternity or paternity leave, health insurance and union membership. Policy imperatives should be developed to address these anomalies to align with decent work standards set by the ILO and national labour laws. These conditions can enhance job satisfaction, reduce turnover and boost productivity. The absence of maternity or paternity leave for most employees points to a lack of gender-sensitive policies. Implementing such policies would promote gender equality, improve work–life balance and

increase female participation in the workforce, contributing positively to both organisational and economic growth. Lastly, the low levels of trade union membership and reliance on employer discretion for salary increases reflect workers' lack of bargaining power. Managers should foster a collaborative environment that encourages collective bargaining, empowering employees to negotiate wages and benefits. Establishing collective bargaining agreements or sector-wide councils could improve decent work indicators and equity. Moreover, Visser and Ferrer (2015) suggested that government should play a more active role to bolster the collective bargaining power of employees by altering the *Labour Relations Act* to make it easier for both unionised and non-unionised workers to bargain collectively and take part in protective strikes. Furthermore, to facilitate the appointment of labour representatives on farms, provide or facilitate labour rights training to agricultural employees and give them access to a regularly updated database of organisations that aid farm workers.

Also, the finding that 81.2% of workers do not contribute to a retirement fund raises concerns about long-term financial security and economic growth. Policy imperatives could consider implementing mandatory retirement contributions or incentivising savings plans to ensure that employees are financially secure beyond their working years. This would enhance employee well-being and position the agricultural sector as a sustainable contributor to national economic growth. Additionally, information sessions could be implemented to inform employers of the importance of direct investments for the agricultural sector and to economic growth. To attract and retain talent, managers in the agricultural sector could offer more comprehensive benefits, including health insurance and retirement planning options. By providing these benefits, the agricultural sector can contribute more effectively to economic growth, as employees with adequate social protection tend to be more secure and productive. Moreover, pension fund benefits can influence the labour market by stimulating employee mobility in the job market and therefore labour force participation (Thomas & Spataro, 2016).

Limitations

The subsequent caveats should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. Foremost, the statistical analysis was based on secondary data downloaded from the Statistics South Africa portal and consequently subject to the suppositions made in the statistical release. The accuracy of the results is preceded in the same way, particularly related to the measuring instrument, which presents inadequate information as to the emergent psychometric properties. Future research endeavours could focus on the development of a measuring instrument specifically aimed at semi-skilled agricultural employees. Additionally, research on the influence of decent work on economic growth should be expanded to verify results presented in the current study.

Conclusion

The results indicate that while there are positive strides in terms of decent work indicators in the agricultural sector, substantial improvements are needed in health insurance, maternity leave, union representation and retirement fund contributions. Because the agricultural sector is a key stakeholder in food security, there is an urgent need to improve the overall work conditions of farm workers to offer better social protection and encourage collective bargaining. These efforts will improve the South African agricultural sector's contribution in terms of economic growth by increasing savings both at micro and macro levels, increasing the availability of long-term capital and stabilising volatility in capital markets.

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Authors' contributions

P.J. and C.M. contributed equally to the conceptualisation, writing and editing of the manuscript and share first authorship. All authors contributed to the article, discussed the results and approved the final version for submission and publication.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, P.J., upon reasonable request.

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