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Economic and Social Wage Aspects According to 8th Sustainable Development Goal: Selected Indicators

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective is to evaluate and recommend indicators related to the achievement of the 8th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) from the perspective of the economic and social aspects of work.

Research Design & Methods: The selection of 2010 as the starting point for the research, five years before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, was deliberate. This choice aimed to underscore the transformations within the Polish economy driven by the country's socio-economic policies prior to the introduction of the 17 SDGs. Simultaneously, it served as a foundation for subsequent observations. A critical assessment of the indicators previously employed to evaluate the achievement of the 8th SDG, alongside recommendations for tailored indicators that align with the goal's principles – such as economic growth linked to decent wages – constituted a central element of the analysis.

Findings: In the years 2010–2021, the share of the minimum wage in the average salary has increased, which is justified by social motives. Its dynamic growth, in turn, is an economic rationale. Despite an increase in labour productivity, no significant increase in the share of labour in national income was observed in the period under review.
Implications/Recommendations: A notable limitation is the scarcity of publications addressing the assessment of the achievement of SDG 8, particularly in relation to the existing catalogue of indicators developed by Eurostat. This catalogue has been criticised for the lack of universality in its indicators. Expanding the range of these indicators could contribute to the development of a more comprehensive and authoritative set of measures.
Contribution: The proposed indicators for assessing the implementation of the 8th SDG in the context of decent work provide a foundation for a qualitative revision of the diagnostic indicators catalogue utilised by organisations such as Eurostat.

Article type: original article.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, national economy, capital and labour, minimum wage, average wage.

JEL Classification: Q01, H10, E22, E24, E29.

1. Introduction

The achievement of political compromise in the areas of environmental, social and economic development has led to the setting of directions for future global economic development scenarios (UN, 2015; Ripple *et al*., 2017). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – as the result of an agreement by United Nations member states – represent a kind of political compromise.

National governments have committed to protecting ecosystems, promoting equity within the framework of sustainable development, and recognising the interrelation between these goals that are important for improving human welfare. Exposing the role of local – in this case, national – policy responses is one element of the coherent policy proposed in the Agenda (Nordbeck & Steurer, 2016; Verschaeve, Delputte & Orbie, 2016; Mortensen & Petersen, 2017; Małecka, 2023). Given the wide variety of areas covered by the 17 SDGs, it is worth focusing on one of them, which concerns decent work, taking into account the economic and social aspects (Goal 8), which is essential for those who provide work. Decent work and sustainable economic growth, at the heart of Goal 8, are central to a country's development and prosperity, as well as the well-being and personal fulfilment of its people (Gawrycka & Szymczak, 2015). Goal 8 includes the promotion of sustainable, inclusive, and balanced economic growth, as well as full and productive employment and decent work for all those in work. The assumption was made that the creation or functioning of high-quality, well-paid jobs requires sustained economic growth achieved through high economic efficiency.

According to Ward *et al*. (2016) and Parrique *et al*. (2019), such an approach fosters a concept that takes into account the separation of two critical economic aspects: economic growth and environmental protection through non-degradation. At the same time, it rejects the possibility of achieving sustainable development with the acceptance of lower economic growth and consumption (Ward *et al*., 2016; Parrique *et al*., 2019). The researchers propose that to measure the achievement of this objective, indicators that include the negative externalities of economic growth, including environmental and social aspects that, among others, are determined by the unequal distribution of wealth, should be taken into account.

It is difficult to disagree with the above thesis in particular that the 8th SDG, according to Le Blanc (2015), is one of the most interlinked with the other goals in particular: 1, 2, 4, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16. The 8th SDG links to the 12th SDG on sustainable consumption and production through the goal of decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation and linked to the 10th SDG related to reducing social inequalities through, for example, the protection of labour rights, including those of migrant workers (Le Blanc, 2015).

A study conducted in Sweden by Weitz *et al*. (2018) has demonstrated that SDG 8 is among the goals that exert the most positive influence on other SDGs, confirming its significance for ongoing research in the field of sustainable development. The necessity of continuously improving the metrics used to assess progress has been emphasised in the findings. The study was based on an analysis of 34 sustainability objectives, with two indicators assigned to each goal (Weitz *et al*., 2018). At the same time, the aforementioned authors stress that when the indicators adopted by the EU to assess the achievement of the SDGs are analysed, a significant degree of interconnectedness is not maintained. Only two indicators from SDG 8 are used to assess progress towards the SDGs (European Commission: Eurostat, 2023). Therefore, SDG 8 is considered the goal with the least impact.

Network analysis at the target level, considering the global aspect, may be associated with inconsistencies between the common objectives studied and the selected indicators (Le Blanc, 2015). Additionally, it has been confirmed that the analysed links of the 8th SDG, observed on a global scale, cannot be effectively assessed using the indicators recommended by the EU (Coscieme *et al*., 2020). Among the six indicators measuring the EU's progress toward SDG 8, three are related to employment (employment rate, rate of uneducated or under-educated youth, and unemployment rate – including long-term unemployment in particular). Two indicators assess the quality of employment (the at-risk-of-poverty rate and the rate of workplace fatalities). In contrast, GDP *per capita* reflects overall economic activity without considering its structure, particularly in relation to the labour market (European Commission: Eurostat, 2023).

The existence of correlations between some employment measures is not disputed. When examining the relationship between the number of unemployed juveniles and the overall unemployment rate, there is a negative relationship between the variables (European Commission: Eurostat, 2023).

In contrast, the value of employment and economic activity (measured by the rate of change of GDP) does not confirm the existence of a significant relationship as it is not linked to most of the other indicators of SDG 8 and does not relate to any measurable policy objective. In reality, GDP *per capita* does not consider inclusivity. The lack of information that can indicate the rate and sustainability of economic growth is also debatable (Fioramonti, 2013, 2017). Therefore, according to Coscieme *et al*. (2020), in order to replace GDP in the SDG 8 indicators set, indicators should be proposed that ensure a more exhaustive analysis of the impacts of economic growth, both locally and globally, in order to increase its coherence with the overall agenda of the SDGs.

Despite the shortcomings identified, monitoring the implementation of SDG 8 in EU countries has become an essential part of ongoing research (European Commission: Eurostat, 2023). The Eurostat report shows that the national economies of the EU member states have made significant progress towards this goal in recent years. An increase in GDP *per capita* has characterised the EU economy; there has been an improvement in the overall employment situation in the EU. The results of the survey indicate that EU countries are on track to meet SDG 8 in 2030 (Rai, Brown & Ruwanpura, 2019; Kreinin & Aigner, 2022; European Commission: Eurostat, 2023).

Referring to the discussion, it was decided to examine the degree of achievement of SDG 8, using indicators that seem relevant for assessing the achievement of the objective under study and are not included in the set of indicators recommended by Eurostat. For economic growth, the labour productivity index and the share of labour in national income were used for decent work, and the minimum and average wages were used.

To achieve the stated objective – evaluating and recommending indicators related to the achievement of SDG 8 from the perspective of the economic and social aspects of work – a study was conducted for the Polish economy. The research focused on analysing the evolution of the relationship between the minimum wage and the average wage against the background of labour productivity changes over an 11-year period (2010–2021). The article is divided into four sections: a literature review, research methodology with the results of the studies conducted, discussion, and conclusions.

2. Literature Review – Selected Issues

Work is defined in different ways depending on the criterion adopted and the scientific discipline of study. It can be treated as a source of income to satisfy human needs or as an essential factor of production that affects the efficiency of a company's operation.

The objectives of enterprises and workers are often in conflict, leading to disputes between these two groups in the market. However, it should be remembered that the appropriate use of labour resources can have a positive impact on both groups of economic entities and, consequently, on the economy as a whole. Entrepreneurs, given the right conditions for business activity, will be able to realise their goals of generating profits and strengthening their position on the market and further development through, among other things, the use of the labour factor in complementarity with capital. Employees, on the other hand, will be able to earn an income from their work that enables them to satisfy their various needs, including those of a higher order, and to carry out their work in better conditions that allow them to achieve work satisfaction. The state will also feel the benefits of being a player in the labour market. The labour income received by employees and the profits of enterprises will increase state budget revenues, including direct and indirect taxes and social security contributions paid. In addition, they will increase the possibility of financing public goods that improve the quality of life of society, especially for those who are not active in the labour market, e.g. children, pensioners, and people with disabilities.

From an economic point of view, work is one of the main factors of economic growth and development. Work has parallel social and financial functions, being interrelated and interdependent elements of a single whole. Work enables individuals to fulfil the desires of belonging to a group, the desires of having a place in society. This is because it stems from the need to give something of oneself as well as the need to belong (Phelps, 2013).

There are various motives for employees to take up work. Three are most commonly mentioned in the literature: material, social and psychological (Grabiński, 2003). Referring to the first of the above-mentioned motives for taking up work, it should be emphasised that a wage is the essential component of employees' income, enabling them to meet various types of needs. Thus, its level is economically significant, as it determines the standard of living. At the same time, pay is a cost for the employer, which influences the structure of production factors involved in production processes.

In world literature, a crucial macroeconomic issue is participation in the distribution of national income, which is defined by the relationship between wages from labour and capital. In many countries, a systematic increase in the share of wages in national income was observed after the Second World War. In contrast, the 1980s saw a reversal of the trend. The share of capital in national income began to rise again. According to studies carried out by specialists, there are various reasons for this phenomenon. For example, Gomme and Rupert's (2004) research suggests that this was the result of a relatively higher increase in the productivity of capital in relation to labour, while Harrison (2005) pointed to the opening up of economies, globalisation processes and changes in the prices of imported raw materials. Wojtyna (2010), on the other hand, sought reasons in labour market policies.

The results of empirical studies from the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries in OECD countries confirm that the aggregate share of labour in national products was declining. According to Bassanini and Manfredi (2012), this phenomenon can be explained by an increase in total factor productivity (TFP) and capital application related to the diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICT). It should be emphasised that the impact of these determinants was, however, different for various groups of workers. The accumulation of ICT capital (technological change embodied in ICT capital), in particular, reduced the participation of the least educated in the manufacturing process. In contrast, the growth of TFP (non-embodied change combined with entrepreneurship, R&D or organisational and management solutions) had a negative impact mainly on the medium-educated and in favour of the highly skilled (Bassanini & Manfredi, 2012).

Trends of declining importance of labour in income have been observed in the US economy. A study by Elsby, Hobijn, and Sahin (2013) shows that the change in the labour share is not explained by the substitution of unskilled labour for capital or the weakening of workers' bargaining power as a result of declining unionisation. In this case, the process of offshoring labour-intensive supply chains outside the United States was a significant factor. The aforementioned authors point out that the contemporary declining importance of labour is linked to the observed trends in the trade and industry sector resulting from globalisation processes.

The macroeconomic substitution of capital and labour is combined with their significant inter-industry shifts, as Piketty (2015a) has shown in his research, emphasising shifts from industry to the service sector. It should be noted that such observations are often formulated on the margins of ongoing deliberations. It is noteworthy that labour-capital relations have different specificities in the various spheres of economic activity realisation. Therefore, the level of differentiation of the aforementioned sectoral-industrial relations in the economy directly translates into the socio-economic effects of the use of productive factors. They appear at the level of individuals or enterprises, as well as in regions and national economies, determining the existing disparities (Cyrek, 2016, 2017).

According to Piketty (2015b), the substitution of labour for capital can lead to inequalities. He points out that there are three components to income inequality, i.e. inequality of labour (wage) income, inequality arising from the ownership of capital and the income derived from it, and the relationship between these quantities. The latter implies an overlap between wage and capital benefits and, therefore, an accumulation of these, which can be referred to as micro-, meso- and macro--economic levels. In sectoral-industrial terms, this cumulation can mean the same activities generating high incomes from labour and capital. In such a situation, structural differences between sectors, regions and economies lead to a significant accumulation of development inequalities. The lack of sectoral accumulation of wage and capital gains, on the other hand, leads to a minimisation of the impact of structural differences on income inequality. Measures aimed at levelling development could then focus on the effect of minimising wage or capital inequalities. In the case of capital inequalities, it is more difficult to pursue policies aimed at levelling income inequalities, which is due, among other things, to the free movement of capital between countries, especially in times of globalisation processes. In the case of wage inequalities, state policies in the area of social policy and wages can play an important role, especially in the area related to the setting of the minimum wage.

The minimum wage guarantee comes with economic effects. On the one hand, it increases the labour income of workers; on the other hand, it increases the operating costs of enterprises by forcing them to improve labour productivity through, for example, technological changes and by sharing income with workers, thus contributing to both social and economic objectives. Income derived from labour performs economic and social functions simultaneously through interconnectedness and interdependent elements. It, therefore, creates a complex system of flows of resources generated by the labour factor between enterprises, households and the state, linking decent work to economic development, on which the 8th SDG is based.

The choice of indicators such as the minimum and the average wage for assessing the realisation of decent work stems from a rationale related to workers' feelings about social justice in the area of sharing the income generated, their satisfaction and dignity, and the possibility of achieving the income effect of wage growth (substitution of work by leisure time). It should be noted that there are numerous publications citing different views on the role of the minimum wage as a determinant of its social and economic function (Rutkowski, 2013). In Rutkowski's (2013) view, the minimum wage fulfils two essential roles: it influences the functioning of the labour market and provides legal protection for the wage level of the lowest-paid workers. From the point of view of the economic system, the minimum wage is a guarantee of a minimum salary that is a consensus between the principles of a functioning competitive market economy and the idea of distributive justice. The dispute over the level of the minimum wage is determined by the views of mainstream (neoclassical) economics on the one hand and the ethical concept of a fair wage on the other. The minimum wage is an element of social policy, a form of external intervention in the functioning of the labour market. The social function of the minimum wage is linked to the idea of a fair wage, i.e. the protection of workers and their families from exploitation and poverty (Rutkowski, 2013). There are problems in defining the essence of a fair wage. According to Prokop (2021), a fair wage is a wage that is "adequate," "fair," "acceptable" to the individual, and consistent with the principles of social justice as defined in the Polish Constitution (Article 2 of the Constitution).

3. Methodology

The selection of 2010 as the starting point for the research, five years before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, was deliberate. It aimed to illustrate the ongoing changes in the Polish economy resulting from the implementation of the country's socio-economic policies prior to the introduction of the 17 SDGs. At the same time, it provided a foundation for further observations. The study includes a critique of the indicators previously used in research to assess the achievement of the 8th SDG (European Commission: Eurostat, 2023). It proposes custom indicators that align with the assumptions of the 8th Goal, namely economic growth linked to decent wages. Bearing in mind that the category of minimum wage is related to the decent wage, which reflects the idea of reasonable work, the study focused on changes in the development of the ratio of the minimum wage to the average wage. Taking into account the economic growth category, which is an element of the 8th SDG, it is worth paying attention to the development of the level of the minimum wage against the background of changes in the dynamics of GDP *per capita* and labour productivity. In order to deepen research related to the distribution of earned income in the economy, changes in the share of the minimum wage in average wages relative to the share of labour in national income were assessed.

Data taken from the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS, 2022, 2023) and Eurostat (European Commission: Eurostat, 2023) were used for research related to the assessment of the achievement of SDG 8. These data refer to:

– real GDP *per capita*,
– labour share,
– minimum wage,
– average wage,
– labour productivity.

The research was conducted using the deductive method, using elements of descriptive statistics, which made it possible to examine the dynamics of change and observe the relationships between variables. The presented research results made it possible to formulate a number of conclusions and indicate whether economic or social reasons can justify the observed changes in the Polish economy.

4. Results

The research started by indicating changes in the dynamics of minimum and average wages in Poland in 2010–2021 (Fig. 1).

During the period under review, the gross minimum wage increased from PLN 1,317 in 2010 to PLN 2,800 in 2021, i.e. by 112.6%. In the same period, the average gross wage increased from PLN 3,224.98 in 2010 to PLN 5,662.63 in 2021, an increase of 75%. Thus, the share of the minimum wage in the average wage increased from 41% in 2010 to 49% in 2021. Between 2010 and 2017, the growth rate of the minimum wage was higher than the growth rate of the average wage. In 2013, the minimum wage increased by 6.7%, while the average wage increased by only 3.6%. In 2018–2019, the minimum wage grew more slowly than the average wage in the national economy, e.g. in 2018, the minimum wage grew by 5%, while the average wage rose by 7.3%. In 2020, the minimum wage increased by 15.6% and the average wage by only 5%. The sharp decline in the growth rate of the average wage in 2020 was a result of the constraint on the operation of businesses during the period of COVID-19. The increase in the minimum wage, on the other hand, was due to the statutory increase in the minimum wage set on the basis of sound economic performance in the economy in previous years. Thus, in 2020, the share of the minimum wage in the average wage was more than 50%, reaching the highest share in the period under review.

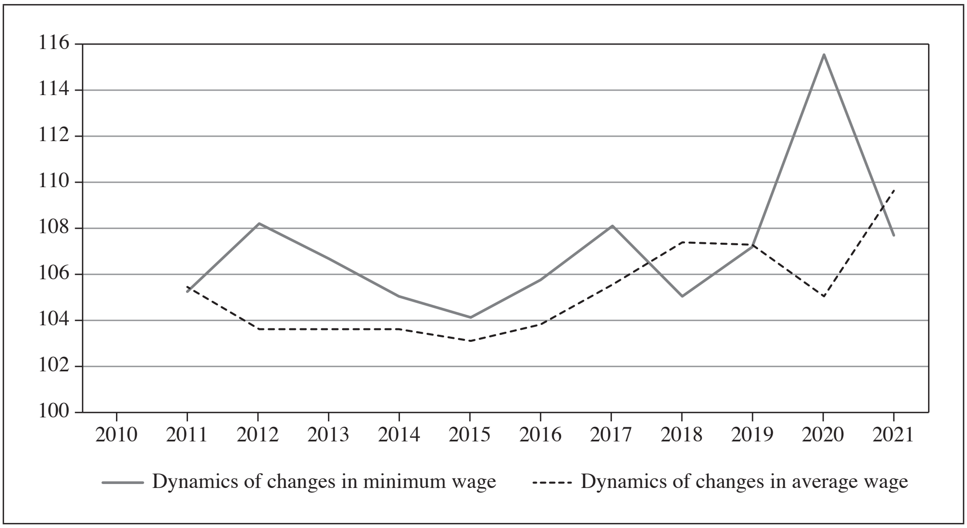

Fig. 1. Dynamics of Changes in Minimum and Average Wages in Poland 2010–2021 (in %)

Source: the authors, based on ZUS (2022, 2023) and European Commission: Eurostat (2023) data.

It is worth looking at whether the growth in labour productivity has kept pace with the dynamics of changes in the share of the minimum wage in the average salary (Fig. 2)

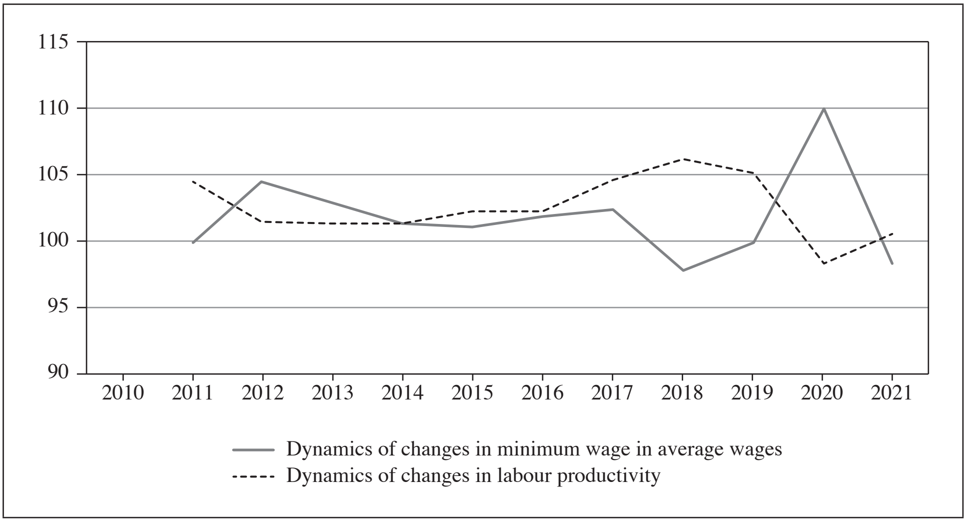

Fig. 2. Changes of the Minimum Wage in Average Wages against Changes in Labour Productivity in Poland in 2010–2021 (in %)

Source: the authors, based on ZUS (2022, 2023) and European Commission: Eurostat (2023) data.

Between 2011 and 2016, the national economy was characterised by relatively low labour productivity growth, averaging around 2% per year. It is worth noting that in 2012, labour productivity was lower than the increase in the minimum wage. In the year under review, the minimum wage increased by 8.2%, while labour productivity increased by 1.47% compared to the previous year. Thus, the increase in the minimum wage was 6.73 percentage points higher in relation to the rise in labour productivity. This was not justified from an economic point of view. This means that social considerations largely drove the increase in the minimum wage. In 2020, the minimum wage increased by 15.6% compared to the previous year. In the same year, labour productivity decreased by 1.6% as a result of the aforementioned pandemic period.

Taking into consideration the entire research period adopted for the study, from an economic point of view, such a high increase in the minimum wage was not justified by the results of changes in labour productivity in the Polish economy.

Against the background of the above considerations, it is worth looking at how the dynamics of changes in the minimum wage developed in correlation with the dynamics of changes in GDP *per capita* (Fig. 3).

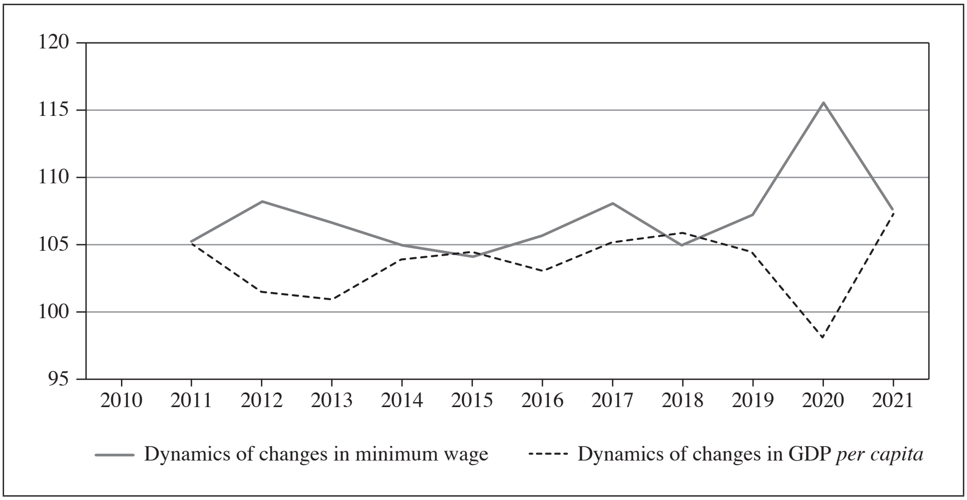

Fig. 3. Dynamics of Changes in Minimum Wages and Dynamics of Changes in GDP *per capita* in Poland in 2010–2021 (in %)

Source: the authors, based on ZUS (2022, 2023) and European Commission: Eurostat (2023) data.

During the period under review, the growth rate of the minimum wage was higher than the growth rate of GDP *per capita*. The exception was in 2018 when the growth rate of GDP *per capita* was one percentage point higher than the growth rate of the minimum wage. As mentioned, 2020 saw the highest spread between the growth rate of the minimum wage and GDP *per capita*. The growth of the minimum wage in that year was 15 percentage points higher than the growth of GDP *per capita*. It can be concluded that the observed increase in the minimum wage was the result of the social policies implemented.

5. Discussion

Referring to studies examining the relationship between changes in the minimum wage and labour productivity as factors influencing the share of labour in national income, it is worthwhile to analyse the connection between the share of the minimum salary in the average wage and the share of labour in national income. As previously noted, the distribution of national income between labour and capital has varied significantly across countries (Gomme & Rupert, 2004; Harrison, 2005; Wojtyna, 2010; Bassanini & Manfredi, 2012).

In many economies, a systematic increase in the share of wages in national income was observed until the 1980s. However, this trend reversed thereafter, with the share of capital in national income beginning to rise. Considering the diverse factors affecting changes in labour's share of national income, it is essential to explore how these dynamics evolved in Poland, where notable changes in the minimum wage, average wage, and labour productivity were recorded between 2010 and 2021 (Fig. 4).

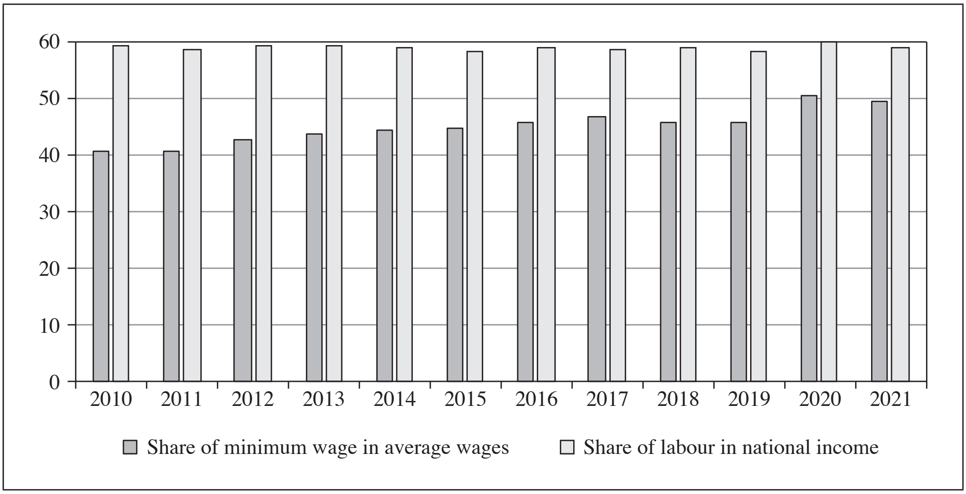

Fig. 4. Share of Minimum Wage in Average Wages and Share of Labour in National Income in Poland in 2010–2021 (in %)

Source: the authors, based on ZUS (2022, 2023) and European Commission: Eurostat (2023) data.

The labour share of national income in Poland during the period under review remained relatively stable, with year-to-year variations of +/– 1 percentage point. In contrast, the share of the minimum wage in average wages increased by approximately 9 percentage points over the same period. This suggests that the minimum wage played a pivotal role in stabilising the labour share of national income. However, it is essential to consider that the results may have been influenced by the distortions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The systematic increase in the share of the minimum wage in average wages (an 8-percentage-point rise) underscores the consistent implementation of SDG 8, aligning with the principles of reducing inequality (Le Blanc, 2015), promoting fair pay (Prokop, 2021), and ensuring decent work to achieve economic security. These findings corroborate Fioramonti's (2013, 2017) argument that GDP *per capita* is an inadequate indicator for assessing the achievement of SDG 8. What remains noteworthy is the discrepancy between the 47% growth in GDP *per capita* and the 31% growth in labour productivity during the period under review. This divergence could be attributed to an increase in consumption levels, which poses a challenge to achieving SDG 12. These findings align with the concerns raised by Ward *et al*. (2016) and Parrique *et al*. (2019), highlighting the potential conflict between economic growth and sustainable consumption.

6. Conclusions

The presented research confirms that the over 110% increase in the minimum wage observed in Poland between 2010 and 2021 was primarily driven by the social policy implemented. Nevertheless, economic factors also played a significant role, as evidenced by the concurrent increase in GDP *per capita* by nearly 48%, labour productivity by 31%, and average wages by 75.6% during the study period.

The research demonstrates that the 8th SDG was continuously implemented in Poland during the period under review. Between 2010 and 2021, economic growth, measured by the GDP *per capita* indicator – often criticised as a financial measure by many researchers – showed an increase of 47%. The realisation of Goal 8, in terms of continuous and sustainable economic growth, is further substantiated by the recorded labour productivity growth rate of 31% during the study period. This indicator, derived from the proposed analysis and research, could serve as an extension of the catalogue of indicators for assessing the achievement of SDG 8, mainly because it links national income with labour.

Referring to the main objective of the study – assessing and recommending indicators related to achieving SDG 8 from the perspective of economic and social aspects – it should be emphasised that Poland consistently implemented social policies aimed at enhancing social justice in the distribution of national income between 2010 and 2021.

During this period, the share of the minimum wage in average wages increased by 21%, leading to the conclusion that social motives largely justified this growth. Furthermore, the dynamic increase in the minimum wage (over 70%), which boosted the incomes of the less affluent, provides an economic rationale. However, despite the increase in labour productivity, no significant rise in the share of labour in national income was observed during the study period. The dynamic growth of the minimum wage, identified in the literature as a factor influencing changes in the labour share of national income, likely mitigated this effect.

Authors' Contribution

The authors' individual contribution is as follows: Each contributed a third.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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