

Research Consultancies: Digital Futures in Asia
Location: Not a constraint. Remote consultancies.
Deadline: 20 March 2021, 11:59 PM CET

Introduction

In a post-Covid context, the rapidly unfolding datafication of the economy has acquired heightened momentum. Large technology corporations have continued to gain new footholds and expanded/entrenched their control in a number of domains, capitalizing on the infrastructural deficits opened up by the global pandemic. Mainstay sectors are going through a deep digital churn, while emerging ones like tele-medicine, fintech, digital payments, online education are rapidly evolving in the unique context posed by the Covid crisis.

Asia finds itself in the eye of this perfect storm for a wholesale digital transformation. The region is home to two-thirds of the world's population and a significant market-base for dominant Chinese and US tech interests today. It also boasts of several home-grown tech-hubs that have had enviable growth trajectories in the past decade. These developments have run parallel to digitally-led strategies within national policies of various countries to leap-frog systemic issues.

IT for Change is looking to assess and understand the impact of these critical shifts in the Asian region. We are inviting proposals from consultants to work on our 'Digital Futures in Asia' series to develop rigorous regional outlooks in three critical sectors – work, finance and social media – which are at a crucial juncture and stand to be wholly transformed through the process of digitalization.

- 1. Future of work.** Asia is home to two-thirds of the world's informal work force, who continue to struggle for decent wage and working conditions and social protections. The region also represents huge inequalities. The shift towards the platform economy and servicification has by and large been characterized as an 'opportunity', a discourse that is also reflected in new trade deals in the region. Post-covid, in some countries in the region, there has been a roll back of labor guarantees, which has further exacerbated labor informalization and precarity. Commentators have also observed that automation, re-shoring, and phasing out of traditional manufacturing processes in many countries in the region is potentially likely to precipitate job losses and lead to labor market polarization. The implications of these trends, particularly in the backdrop of the pandemic, are beginning to unfold, and need to be unpacked towards shaping equitable work futures in the platform economy. The regional outlook paper is expected to provide a state of play analysis of key trends in Asia with respect to digitalization-induced shifts in the labor market, platform economy, and digital infrastructure policies, sectoral changes with platformization – for instance, in food chains, impacts of regional trade agreements on digital economy policies, etc., highlighting emerging concerns for economic development and policy responses for work and livelihoods.
- 2. Future of finance.** An aggressive push to go cashless in Asian economies has lent a big boost for digital finance platforms that are emerging as the mantra for financial inclusion. The region has the largest unbanked population in the world and thus has emerged as an ideal playground for the growth and experimentation in digital payments, products, and services of a wide array. As private finance service platforms have grown by leaps and bounds, a parallel regime of privatized standards and infrastructure and essential financial services pose significant challenges for oversight and regulation. In the absence of robust regulatory frameworks, low-income users also remain vulnerable to predatory fintech lending practices and discriminatory credit scoring. The regional outlook paper is expected to map how the wide array of fintech services is transforming the finance landscape in Asia, the impacts of these transformations for social and economic equity, and emerging issues of concern for policymakers with respect to regulation of financial services and capital markets.

3. **Future of social media.** Media regulation is today at a cross-roads. Social media has rapidly grown into a hydra that is becoming difficult to contain. Countering misinformation, fake news, and hate speech are critical factors in determining the health of public discourse and the fate of democracies worldwide. Meanwhile, platform-based, on-demand content and media consumption patterns that are driven by algorithms also point to a shifting cultural economy that can be captured by Big Tech easily. The fast-changing context reveals several gaps in old norms and policies, with concerns about a) economic governance issues such as concentration and media diversity, revenue sharing models between traditional and new media, taxation of OTT content, etc., and b) content regulation approaches, especially how legal oversight for social media regulation/self-regulation can protect and promote freedoms in the public sphere, including the right to voice and public participation for all. The regional outlook paper is expected to map current debates in Asia along these two broad dimensions – exploring social media governance from the standpoint of preserving the plurality and inclusivity and the democratic fabric of the public sphere – take stock of emerging regulatory attempts by countries in the region, and map the new directions needed for overhauling social media design.

Scope of assignment

For each of the three themes above, we propose to recruit a consultant who will be expected to undertake an Asia-wide scoping study for that theme. This will include detailed desk research of ongoing developments, trends, and key policy measures, as well as expert interviews with various stakeholders. The final report will be 8,000-10,000 words long. The report will map: a) the current state of play with regard to the theme, b) analyze the current policy trends and gaps, c) sketch a future outlook for the sector, offering directions for policies that can forward equity and justice-oriented goals.

We recognize that the Asian region covers a vast number of countries and geographies. For the purpose of this call, our focus is contained to countries located in South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal), Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore), and East Asia (South Korea, Japan, and China).

Towards this, IT for Change will be able to award up to USD 3600 per consultancy, per thematic area.

Tentative timeline of work

Expression of interest	20 March 2021
Communication of results	25 March 2021
First draft	01 May 2021
Final report	05 June 2021
Production follow-ups and sign off process	By 30 June 2021

Who can apply?

We welcome applications from individual researchers, organizations, and research teams with demonstrated research expertise in the areas of digital society/economy. Researchers from different organizations can send in a joint expression of interest. All applications must, however, identify a lead applicant who will assume primary responsibility. Multiple consultancies for the same proposal will not be made out.

Applicants can be based anywhere in the world, but must be able to demonstrate a strong grounding in the regional context they wish to examine and present a concrete plan in their application on how they will tap into primary insights from the region.

How to apply?

Interested applicants can send an email to [jobs\[at\]itforchange\[dot\]net](mailto:jobs[at]itforchange[dot]net) with the subject line 'EOI: Digital Futures in Asia Series – (Selected Theme)' with the following supporting documents:

- A 3-4 page expression of interest that outlines the scope of enquiry, including methodology, and timeline.
- A statement elaborating on credentials (expertise in the domain, familiarity with region, research background)
- CV(s) of applicant(s)
- Two recent writing samples (links or attachments)

If you are sending in multiple expressions of interest, to apply under more than one theme, please include the additional theme(s) in your subject line.