Fair, Feminist, Futuristic:
Platform Models for a Digital New Deal

Concept Note & Event Report

IT for Change

July 2024

Fair, Feminist, Futuristic: Platform Models for a Digital New Deal

Roundtable Discussion at the 32nd IAFFE Annual Conference

July 2024

Roundtable Concept Note

The dominant Big Tech paradigm has produced new versions of an economic crisis, exacerbating intersectional inequalities and condemning many parts of the world to a dismal future of precarity, exploitation, and exclusion from the gains of digitalization. It is evident that Big Tech derives its structural power from platform infrastructures it unilaterally controls, enabling it to mine data of people and their interactions in order to re-engineer the foundations of market ecosystems.

Feminist research and worker initiatives on the platform economy emphasize the need to reinvent dominant business models of the platform economy in order to re-appropriate the gains of digitalization. Born-digital initiatives, such as platform cooperatives as well as traditional cooperatives in the Global South, have attempted to carve out such alternative platform models grounded in the principles of collective ownership, sustainable production, data governance based on community data rights frameworks, distributive justice, and institutional arrangements for data stewardship.

This roundtable, titled '**Fair, Feminist, Futuristic – Platform models for a Digital New Deal,'** aimed to take us through the goals, journeys, trials, and tribulations of alternative platform models across different sectors – agriculture, services, community care, etc., in order to take us closer to the realization of a systemic restructuring of the digital economy and society for gender transformation. The primary aim of the roundtable was to explore theory and practice in developing alternative and equitable platform models, particularly so in the context of today's evolving digital landscape.

However, there is a real danger of such experiments becoming "flashes in the pan" unless macroeconomic policy ensures insulation against the real threat of their co-option and capture by Big Tech, or their slow death due to lack of access to financing and institutional support. In reality, alternative experiments can only succeed once they scale to achieve network effects: this requires concerted digital- and sector-specific policy that can enable both the creation of alternative platforms, and their continued support through fiscal support. There is a lacuna of multi-scalar policy responses needed to establish regenerative digital economies.

The roundtable began with presentations from four speakers on developing feminist platform models; our panel consisted of research-practitioners working towards building collectivist platform models, with the goal to widen the benefits of the digital economy. Our speakers attempted to address the following issues:

1. The platform model and how it enables benefit-sharing of data.

2. Mechanisms of governance of alternative platforms/data cooperatives/digital ecosystems.

3. Challenges to governance, scalability, and funding.

In the second round of the roundtable, we aimed to bring together the larger digital policy community to offer their insights on the necessary macroeconomic interventions needed for these experiments to not only thrive within today's landscape of data capitalism but continue to remain true to their initial goals of equitable profit/benefit-sharing. As our input presentations showcased experiments of feminist platforms across domains of agriculture, gig work, and care work, the policy insights spoke to a variety of factors, including but not limited to the governance of agricultural data, data rights of workers, labor and feminist platforms, and regulation needed for equitable digital innovation.

Roundtable Session 1 Report

Moderated by **Ranjitha Kumar, IT for Change,** the first half of the roundtable began with four input presentations that took the audience through a series of alternative, feminist platforms that are currently up and running, or in the ideation stage.

In this session, we saw presentations from **Viraj Samir Desai (IT for Change in collaboration with SEWA Cooperative Federation), Stacco Troncoso (DisCO Coop), Prerak Shah (Vrutti), and Emma Back (Equal Care Coop).**

Setting the context for the input presentations, Ranjitha provided a brief background of the roundtable to the audience, while also introducing IT for Change's flagship project that inspired this roundtable, titled [Re-wiring India's Digitalising Economy for Women's Rights and Well-being](#). Funded by the European Commission and FES, this four-year-long project looks at piloting alternative digital ecosystems that are organized through principles of benefit-sharing of gains made from data; governance of data based on community data rights framework; and collective ownership.

The input presentations were kicked off by Viraj Samir Desai from IT for Change, co-leading an effort to theorize a data cooperative in collaboration with the SEWA Cooperative Federation. Viraj spoke about the unique challenges the agricultural sector in India faces, with over 80% of its farmers being small, marginal, and landless: cooperatives then, become useful intermediaries for these farmers to amass collective

bargaining as a tool, helping them better negotiate with the extremely competitive and volatile agrarian market. Viraj summarized SEWA's goal to theorize a phygital, low-tech-federated data cooperative that will enable farmers to access input services (seeds, fertilizers, etc.) and reach markets digitally and with time, also provide advisory and instructional services. The data cooperative is driven by principles of data minimalization, anonymization, informed consent, and distributive justice, collectively termed as irrefutable data rights of farmers and agriculturalists who will become part of this digital ecosystem. As a federated system, the data cooperative's storage and processing affordances will follow the existing decentralized structure of the Federation governance, ensuring community leaders – central to the SEWA model – continue to remain as key human intermediaries to this process of digitizing and digitalizing.

The second input presentation saw Stacco Troncoso introduce us to his co-founded project, the DisCO Coop, which stands for Distributed Cooperative Organizations. DisCO is a federated network of individuals and cooperatives coming together to create a radically, alternative way to create data commons, and use the benefits of this data to further their incomes and businesses. Stacco describes DisCO as a means of realizing activism in the workplace, what he terms as "the most appropriate place" for realizing the-colonial and anti-capitalist strategies to organize using data.

Describing the functioning of DisCO, Stacco delineates how the open-source nature of the platform allows for digitally innovative, small businesses and individuals to come together and share software, allowing each party to individualize it based on the needs of their work/projects. Stacco also emphasized the need to move beyond the metrics of scale: from his years of activism and running DisCO, he points out that the push to achieve scale comes with increased centralization and inability to maintain the federated, open-source rule book of DisCO, hence his choice to operate the platform in a more boutique fashion. Highlighting the massive size of the cooperative industry (rivaling the market capitalization rate of pre-pandemic Big Tech), he urges tech and workers to design their own federated platforms, where ownership is collective, noting that it is one of the best ways to beat capitalism.

Following Stacco, Prerak Shah from Vrutti brought the audience back to experiments in agriculture in India. Unlike the SEWA Cooperative Federation, Vrutti is a social enterprise that works with Farmer Producing Organizations (FPOs) in India, organizations led by farmer members existing in a variety of configurations – from cooperatives to corporate-owned. In the past few decades, FPOs have received significant support from the Indian government, highlighting them as important intermediaries that can enable farmers to reach markets through the collectivization of produce and input costs, eventually enabling them to achieve better profit margins.

Prerak introduces the work Vrutti does with almost 200,000 farmers across India as one that is attempting to disrupt existing big-tech agricultural systems in India through the power of scale and federation. To that end, Vrutti, in collaboration with the Platform Commons Foundation, is piloting a series of innovative, farmer-first applications that attempt to digitize the entire agricultural supply chain of small, member-owned and controlled FPOs, often comprising of small and marginal women farmers. Recognizing the all-encompassing power of Big Tech to harness scale, Prerak highlighted the need to work in collaboration with existing collectives such as FPOs and cooperatives, despite known operational issues. Using digital applications, he notes, it not only enables the FPOs to circumvent the agrarian market middlemen, but also improve the value of produce across the supply chain. For example, farmers who work with FPOs that have Vrutti's input services apps have access to ecologically diverse seeds, as well as bio-pesticides. All of these, he notes, is key to ensuring that farmers who practice agroecological techniques can harness digital technologies – collectively owned and controlled by them through the FPOs. He also added that such farmers have bumped up the value of their product by at least 20%, enabling them to make a better profit and improve their standard of life.

Our last presentation was from Emma Back from Equal Care Coop. Scoping out the abysmal landscape of care work in the UK, Emma began her input by narrating the experiences of care workers who are often extremely poorly paid, but work significantly beyond the legal working hours of the country, with no holidays and breaks.

On the flipside, she notes that finding good care workers is also a hassle for consumers: oftentimes, the element of trust is non-existent, where many customers who are looking for care workers to either improve their own lives or the life of a loved one are unable to ascertain safety and kindness. To resolve this crisis of demand-supply matching, Equal Care Coop recognized the need for a multi-stakeholder cooperative to act as a digital intermediary, allowing them to pay care workers a fair rate, as well as providing customers the reassurance of quality care work.

A revolutionary aspect of the platform, she notes, is the ability to set one's hours and the kind of care work one is comfortable offering. Care workers in the market are few and far between, and are often doing care work across the spectrum. This ability to choose – driven by the cooperative's digital layer built to maximize decentralized, multi-layer stakeholdership – allows workers to receive flexibility and good pay, and most importantly, a realization of workers' rights as care workers. Emma's input also describes the care-first nature of their cooperative, where all decisions of the cooperative, including health-related, are collectively made; the platform allows for both self-employed women as well as women from agencies to find work.

Roundtable Session 2 Report

Moderated by **Ranjitha Kumar, IT for Change**, this round brought in three prominent people from the gig/informal workers and agricultural policy community in order to begin a dialogue on challenges to realizing feminist, alternative platforms and the need for the community to focus on macroeconomic policy advocacy in order to remain sustainable and scalable experiments. In this round, three members were invited to reflect and provide feedback to the panelists: **Alessandra Mezzadri**, a faculty member at **SOAS**, UK; **Prapti Barooah**, Senior Research Analyst at the **International Food Policy Research Institute**; and **Ambika Tandon**, a PhD student at **Cambridge University's Geography department** and formerly a lead at the **Centre for Internet and Society**.

In large, this round of the panel was designed to address the following themes:

1. Challenges to governance, scalability, and funding of feminist, worker-led platforms.

2. Existing regional and international policies that offer scaffolding/support to coop platforms.

3. The multi-scalar policy responses needed to ensure the success of these platforms.

In this interactive round, the panel and the audience collaborated to brainstorm the above themes, with many emerging insights.

1. The question of funding and achieving sustainability

Funding of these platforms – from both the public coffers as well as private/donation-based funding – was a consistent theme used to realistically assess the viability of these platforms. Emma candidly spoke of how the cooperative is yet to achieve the business goals that it aimed for several years ago – this was also an issue that was brought up by the policy community and spoke to all members of the panel.

Though funding from private sources seems the most viable option now, the panelists and audience recognized its inherent limitation, and its potential to interfere with feminist platforms' mission and goals. The need for support from public infrastructure – either in the form of funding or digital support – is a key aspect of how these platforms can achieve sustainability and scalability, both of which are needed to battle the hegemony of Big Tech.

In this age of austerity and the continued privatization of essential service delivery by the state, there needs to be a concerted push for the government to support digital innovation cross-sectorally, both in the form of offering critical physical and digital infrastructures as well as monetary support.

2. The need for a multi-pronged macroeconomic approach that enables both sector-specific support as well as support from a larger digital policy on cooperative digital policy

The policy community recognized that for the success of digital tools and platforms, cooperatives and enterprises must also address the question of agriculture steeped in its context: in this case, Indian agriculture is very much still within caste-class hegemony, where the failure of agrarian policy ensures that no digital policy will enable a system-wide transformation of agriculture, despite best efforts. Prapti asked the panel how open they are to understanding the failures of agriculture in India outside of digital tools, and how more often than not, digital interventions fail on the field not only due to a variety of accessibility inequalities, but also because of the historical context of agriculture in India.

Recognizing this issue against the unique need of gig workers and gig worker unions, there was an overall agreement for the need for a multi-pronged approach to push for policy advocacy: there needs to be significant changes to how agricultural workers and gig workers negotiate with the state and Big Tech through sectoral specific policy and advocacy. Gig workers, for example, still face the issue of not being able to access social security benefits across countries, some even fighting for the classification of being workers. An overall digital policy in the form of offering scaffolding to worker-led platforms is currently useful for digital-born cooperatives, but is not enough to address historical and labor-related inequities embedded particularly in the Global South. As Alessandra noted, the challenges of informal gig workers are extremely different from the material realities of agricultural workers in India; hence, a more suitable advocacy strategy, she said, may be to approach this sectorally.

Emma provided additional context to Equal Care Coop: in her bid to find more public monetary support, she discovered the insufficient nature of the UK coop policy. She hopes to work with the UK government to expand its outdated policy to incorporate the needs of digital cooperatives, especially in the care sector.

3. Regulating data while also ensuring digital innovation is a challenge: how do we ensure cooperatives are able to gain from data benefit-sharing?

While addressing macroeconomic policy, the panelists and the policy community also addressed the double-edged sword of regulating data in the hands of Big Tech, as well as enabling innovation for cooperatives and worker-led initiatives. Most data protection/regulation laws are blanket and general; this is often considered a positive by the law and policy community, making it easier to enforce the law. However, such a policy must also address the needs of worker-led and owned alternative platforms. Recognizing that Big Tech already has a significant advantage over smaller experiments, can we use

regulatory and competition laws on Big Tech to reduce their monopoly power, while at the same time, ensure innovation can be achieved by cooperatives?

Some suggestions included mandatory API/algorithm sharing through open-source code and insights that allow feminist platforms to gain data insights gained from the enclosure of their data by Big Tech. Others suggested the need for a digital public infrastructure backbone – such as open protocols and APIs – that solely benefit worker-led initiatives, in addition to improved funding and monetary support.

Providing the context of pushback from right-wing governments, Ambika also highlighted the need to understand what innovation means in the current political economy and right-wing regimes. Highlighting the pushback from many governments across the world against gig workers organizing, she noted that successful alternative experiments are less likely to get support from the state; rather, they're likely to be subject to stricter regulation and pushback due to the alignment of interests between current governments and Big Tech. Innovation itself, the panel noted, must require both a theoretical and legal rescuing from the hands of Big Tech and data capitalism, in order for us to form actionable laws that recognize and support worker-led initiatives.