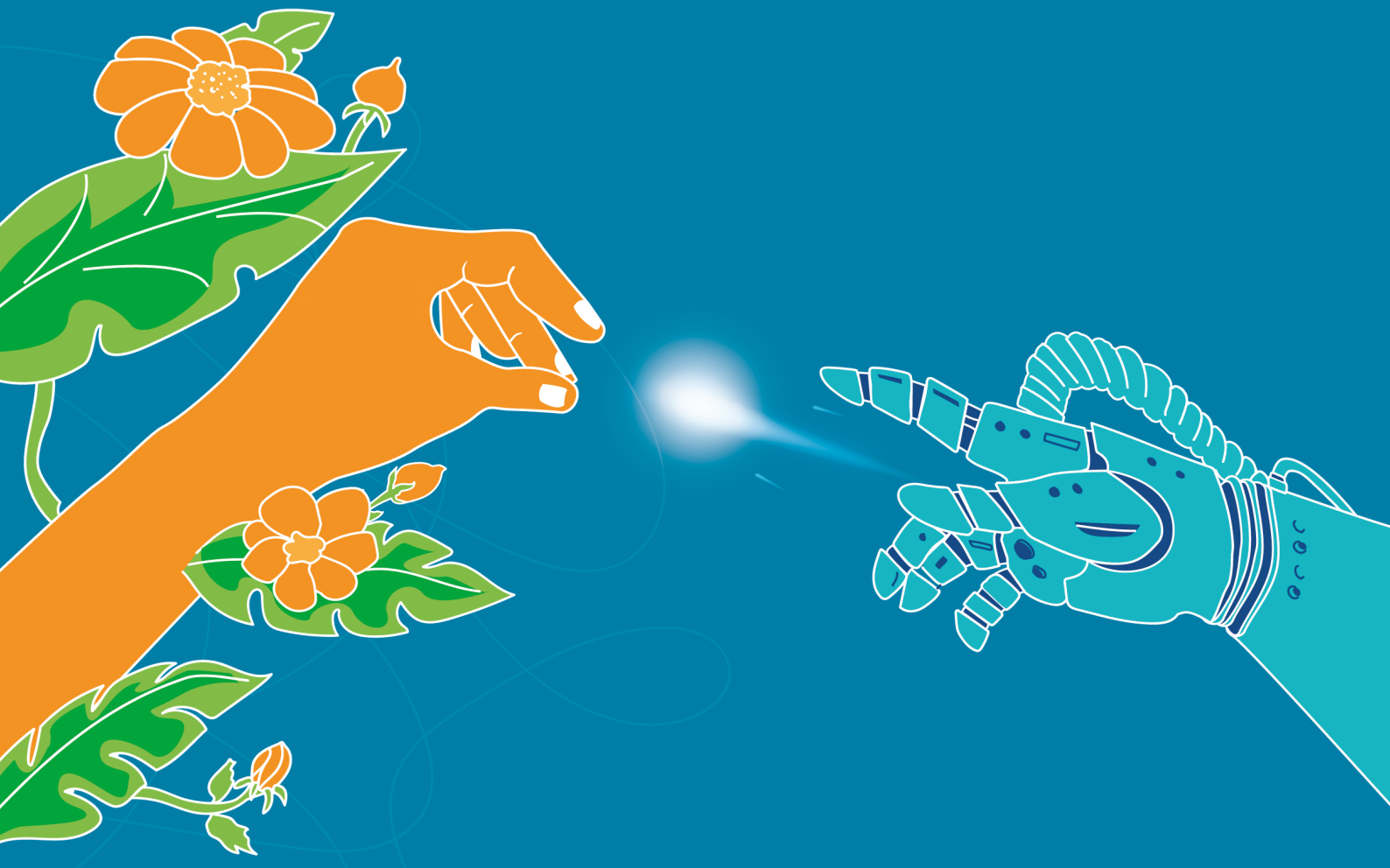
The Future of Work We Seek

A philanthropic agenda for workers and the digital economy

Executive summary



IT for Change

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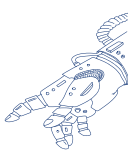


Introduction

Technological affordances have vast potential to enhance workers' equity and well-being. However, as it currently stands, the gains from the digital restructuring of global value chains is largely bypassing workers, while older hard-won labor rights are being reversed. An aggressive winner-take-all logic of platformization instrumentalizes labor into cogs for the proverbial algorithmic wheel, furthering disenfranchisement, atomization and precarization. Opaque and inscrutable algorithmic regimes of management chip away at decent work conditions, while automation poses wicked conundrums for the coming future of economic policy in the Global North and South alike.

Covid-19 brought to the fore the systemic deficits impinging on opportunities in the digital paradigm. The unprecedented adversity of the pandemic also gave impetus to new discourses and actions challenging the status quo. Workers have led the way, petitioning the courts, organizing flash strikes and building broad-based membership. They have challenged the fiction of the gig, and unmasked the brutal conditions of work underlying platform capitalism. Regulators have stepped in to restrain Big Tech's control over vast terrains of the platform economy. Decisive victories for labor have emerged from these initiatives, notably a vote for unionization at Amazon's New York warehouse (Vox, 2022), court rulings against Uber in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (Tech Crunch, 2022) that have ended employee misclassification and recognized the data rights of workers, and a wave of new legislation that has tightened regulations around platform-mediated work in countries such as Spain and China (Perez, 2021; Gurmurthy & Chami, 2021). Workers are also capitalizing on technological affordances to experiment with alternative models for making the tools of the digital economy work in their favor (Krishnakumar & Korjan, 2021).

However, the road to structural reform is uphill. Political energies and financial resources need to be directed towards a reimagined future of work agenda, one that not only counters current trends that leave workers with a raw deal, but also effects a systemic shift to harness technological gains for global equity and local livelihood autonomy. This report attempts to steer the conversation in this direction. Setting out to understand and assess how the philanthropic sector needs to orient its decision making and programmatic agenda in this domain, the report offers a landscape analysis of key issues at the intersections of work, workers' rights and digital economy, and identifies opportunities for interventions. Combining global level mapping with regional deep dives into the African, Asia-Pacific and Latin American contexts, the study is based on a methodology that included a survey (with 81 informants), informant interviews (with 48 informants) and a series of roundtables (comprising 12 to 17 experts in each session)[1] to access a wide range of voices and perspectives from trade unions and workers' organizations, civil society groups, cooperatives, academics and scholars, social intermediary organizations, small private firms, government agencies, multi-lateral organizations as well as the philanthropic community.

[1] A 100 informants were approached for this study, either for an interview or to participate in a roundtable. Of them, 81 informants filled out the questionnaire from across constituencies. The survey respondents include 21 informants from the Africa region, 23 from the Asia-Pacific region, 18 from the Latin American region, and 19 from North America and the EU regions.

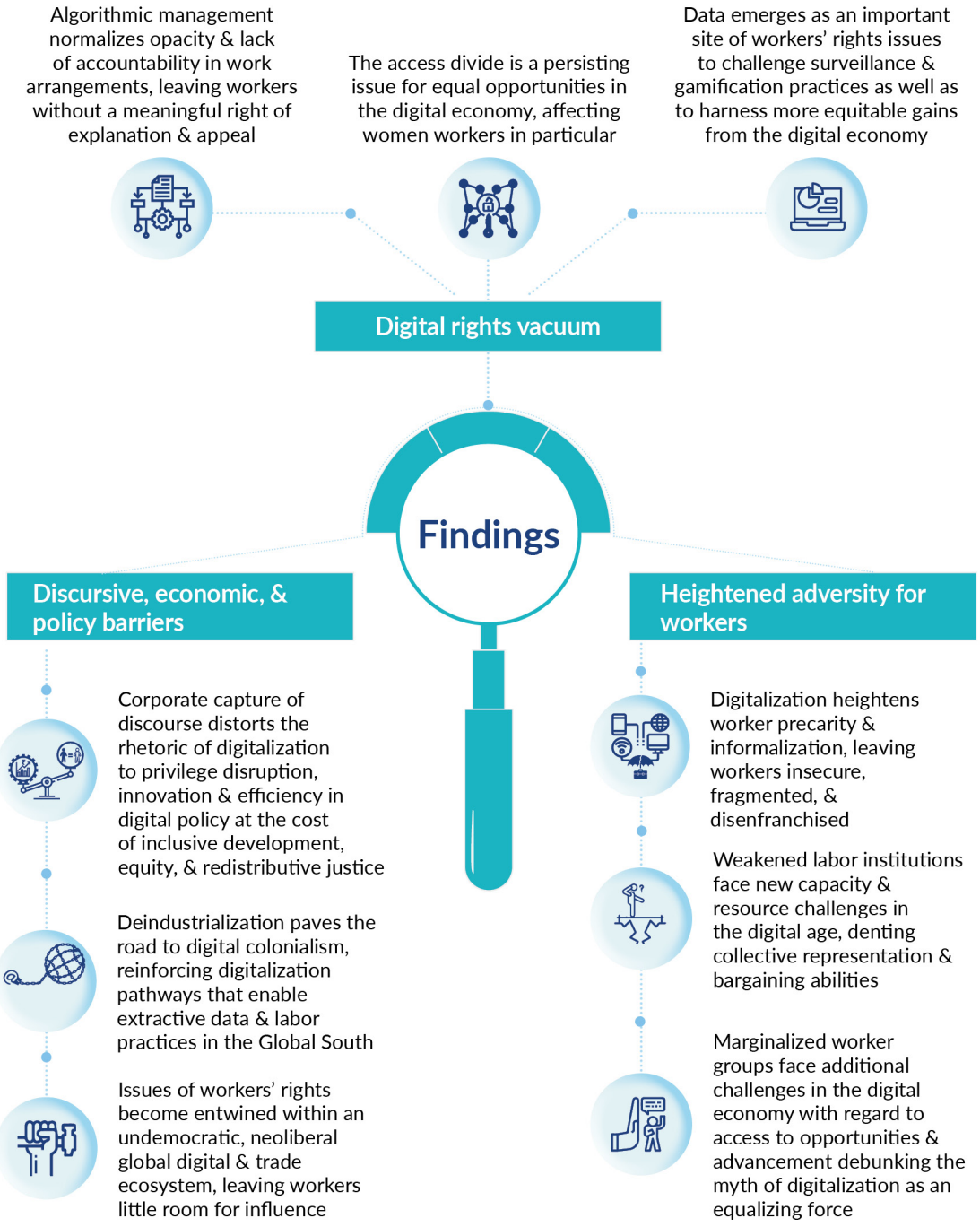
Key findings

This study synthesized insights from informants across various constituencies on the digitalization of the economy and the impact on workers and workers' rights to assess the shifting terrain of work. Key issues that emerged from this process can be categorized along three major axes (see Figure 1):

- **Discursive, economic and policy barriers to equity-oriented digitalization.** Informants to the study highlighted the inequities arising from overarching discursive, economic and policy barriers – corporate capture of the digitalization narrative, Big Tech-led digitalization pathways rife with extractive data and labor practices, and the reduced capacity for worker representation within undemocratic, neoliberal digital and trade ecosystems that are writing the rules for the digital economy.
- **Digital rights vacuum for workers.** Informants emphasized the absence of a range of digital rights for workers, including persistent digital divides and newer challenges in the form of unaccountable algorithmic management regimes, underscoring the emergence of data as an important site of workers' rights.
- **Heightened adversity for workers.** Informants highlighted the ways in which digitalization, in its current avatar, was heightening worker precarity and informalization, even as already weakened labor institutions were confronted with new capacity and resource challenges. They also largely debunked the myth of digitalization as an equalizing force, pointing to the additional barriers faced by workers from marginalized groups and locations.

[5] Ibid

Figure 1: Key findings



Key recommendations

This study on philanthropy's role in relation to equitable labor futures comes at a time when the digital economy requires urgent course correction. This study's findings suggest that outcomes for workers' rights and well-being are deeply tied to multiple sites of contestation in the wider economic arena. A local-to-global agenda for short- and long-term actions, spanning a mosaic of spaces and spheres, and encompassing approaches that not only target the digitalization of work arrangements but also address larger economic, social and political antecedents, is necessary. The study's explorations coalesce around three key domains that comprise vital focus areas for intervention (see Figure 2). These include:

- **Workers' rights with an emphasis on the Global South**. To ensure the restoration and enhancement of workers' rights in the digital economy, especially in the Global South, three pathways for intervention emerge as important. These include guaranteeing standards for decent work in the digital economy, worker mobilization and organization building, and establishing data rights for workers to end unaccountable algorithmic management (see Figure 3).

- **Equitable platformization.** Course correcting for extractive platform structures requires concerted efforts on many fronts. These include comprehensive economic regulation aimed at curbing Big Tech excess, innovation towards public interest and equity, and developing national and international data and artificial intelligence governance frameworks (see Figure 4).

- **New work futures.** Charting enabling pathways to alternative economic futures that put workers' rights at the center, and gives them control and agency over digital resources in sustainable, locally-responsive ways is an important priority. Areas which become important to target as part of this include national-level policies towards meaningful work futures, workforce preparedness and upskilling , solidarity economy models and sustainable local economies (see Figure 5).

The study also identifies three cross-cutting modalities within which strategies for philanthropic interventions may be anchored. These include:

- **Expanding voice and participation of marginalized actors in shaping the contours of the digital ecosystem.** Philanthropy must work to support the voice and participation of justice-oriented actors within the policy ecosystem of the digital economy. The continuities and discontinuities between older concerns about workers' rights in the globalization landscape

and newer challenges arising from digitalization and the emergence of algorithmic regimes underpinning work arrangements must find avenues for expression, appeal and resolution.

- **Building enduring local-translocal solidarities and synergies.** Philanthropy has an important role in fostering North-South and South-South solidarity at various levels towards the goal of workers' rights, from national to regional and global. Efforts in this direction must allow for collaboration, coordination and joint action amongst communities of action that span labor rights, digital rights as well as economic and social policies.

- **Strengthening worker knowledge, capacity and organization.** The need for knowledge creation and capacity building emerge as an important priority for funding. Here, the philanthropic sector must think in directions that do not stop with funding empirical and policy research. Support is needed for galvanizing action towards justice – from creating opportunities and knowledge resources for concerned actors to acquire a sophisticated understanding of digital economy and digital rights issues, to making available resources and spaces to conceptualize, develop and revamp agendas.

Bringing together the key domains with the attendant strategies of action, the study fleshes out concrete pathways for intervention by the philanthropic sector. In this context, the study prescribes a range of global and regional, time-bound (medium- and longer-term) strategies for programmatic action. Some medium-term strategies address immediacy of imperatives through, for instance, rapid windows of action for countering union busting. Others are geared towards enhancing momentum on already existing legislative, research and policy efforts such as overturning misclassification of gig work. Similarly, longer-term strategies target both emerging and nascent issues impacting worker equity, such as data rights for workers, as well as longer-standing organizing and coalition building efforts servicing the bottom line of labor rights, including decent work conditions.

While the study identifies several common issues that necessitate cross-regional and global action, including the need to invest in perspective building and collective action of workers, strengthen worker representation in digital economy regulation, and fortify unionization from state and corporate incursions, it also prescribes strategies that target the future of work contexts, the maturity of digital economy landscape, and regulation in Africa, Asia-Pacific and Latin America, respectively. Whereas research and national policy initiatives to address automation-related restructuring of job markets become highly relevant in Asia-Pacific, deindustrialization in the African region demands a renewed focus on digital industrialization. In contrast, Latin America's unique demographic challenge of an aging population may necessitate a (re)considered approach to skilling.

Digital is not just a sector, but a phenomenon that has and will continue to alter value addition and distribution, and consequently, determine the structures of choice in our society. The future of work is at the heart of this transformation. The path forward can either be one that centers workers' rights, leading us towards equity and sustainable development, or one that continues to fuel value extraction and massive global imbalances.

It is vital that justice-oriented actors coalesce their efforts around the former. In this regard, philanthropy's role as an agent of change must be situated within a larger systemic-level redress encompassing global-to-local actions and policies that can counter the monopolistic and extractivist nature of the digital economy, engineer meaningful economic redistribution, and reorient development to meet the goals of justice and equity. It is hoped that this report can serve as a guiding light to support such a transformation.

Figure 2 : A schema for philanthropic action

Figure 3: Workers' rights with an emphasis on the Global South

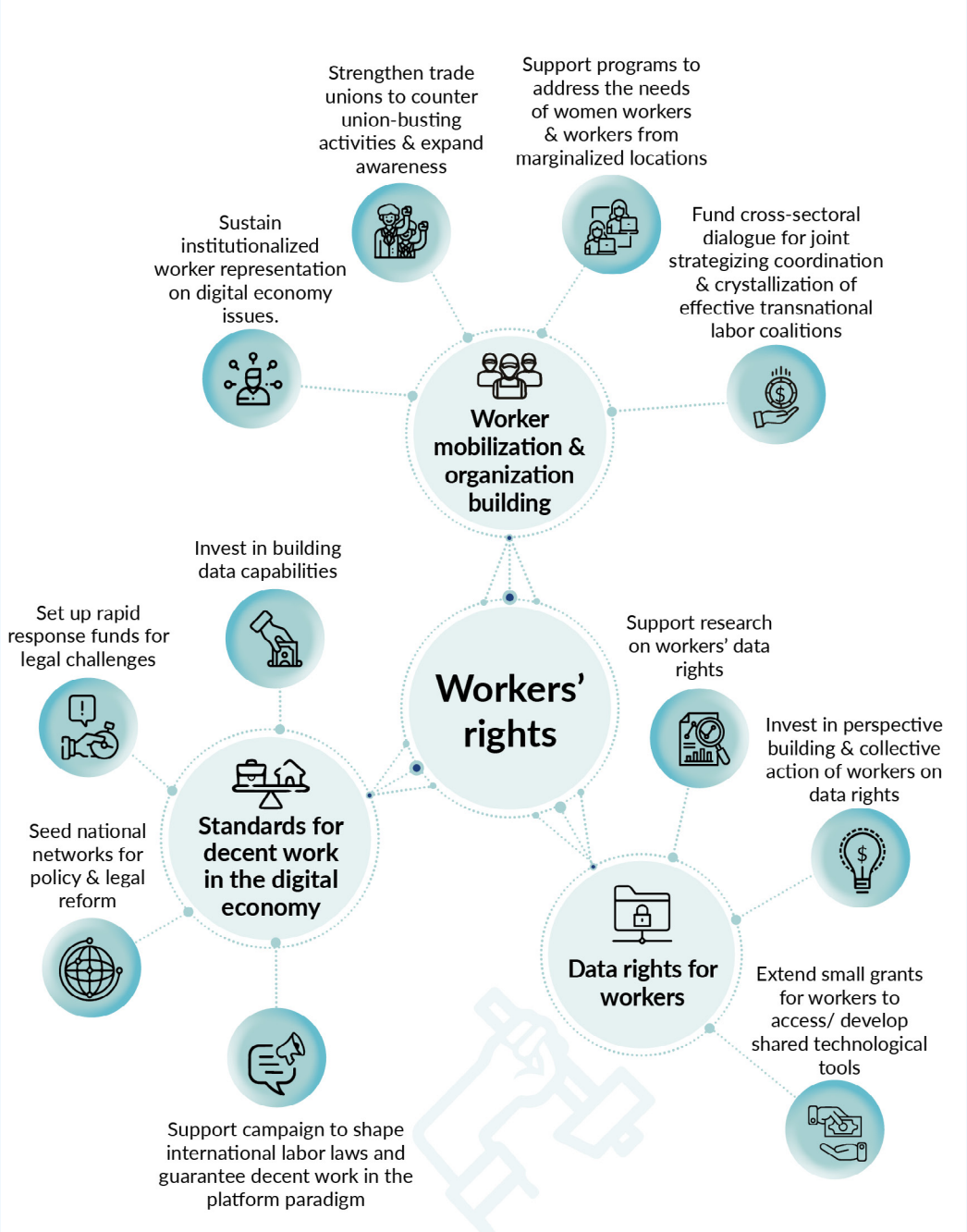


Figure 4: Model pathway: Equitable platformization

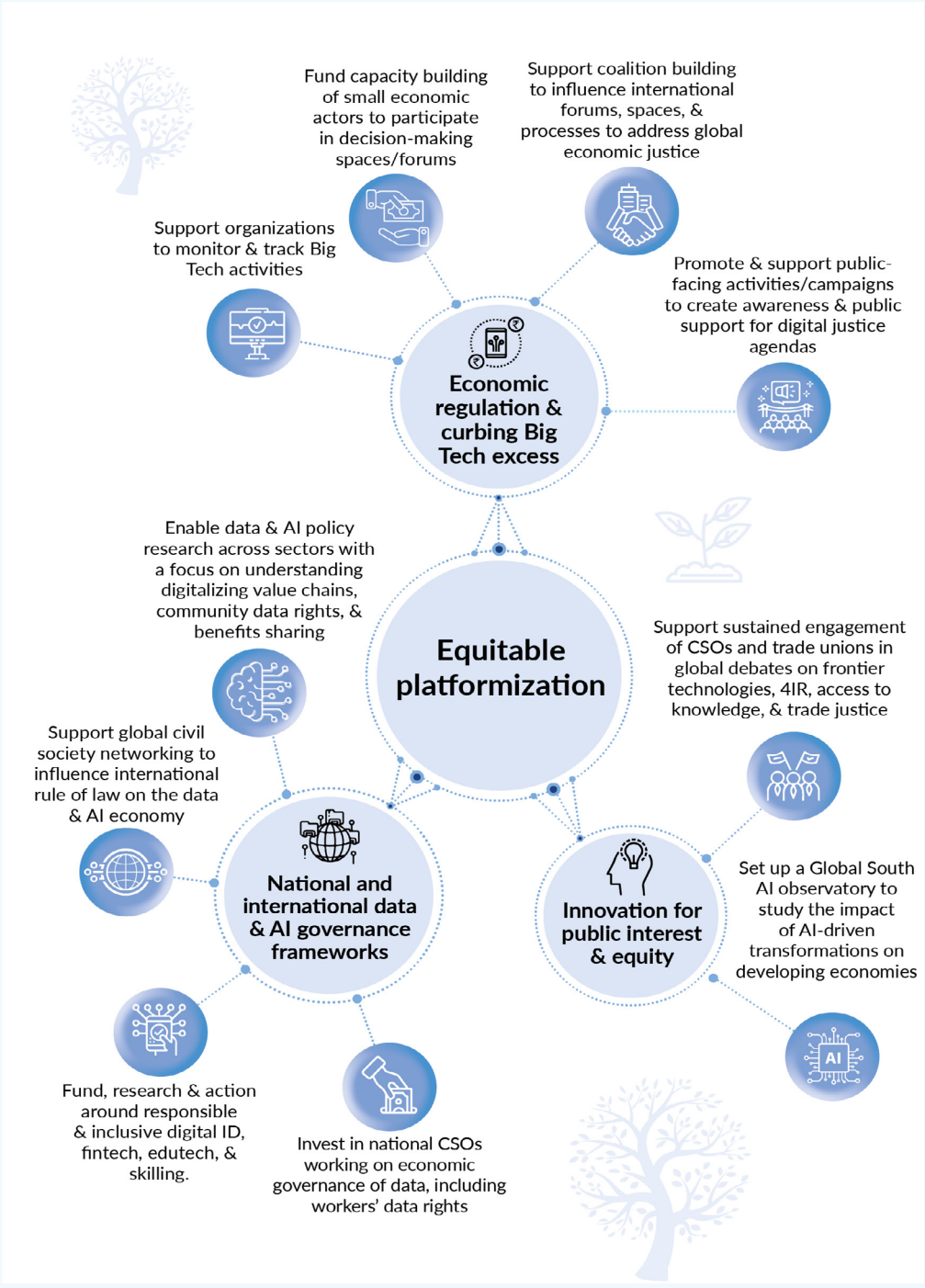
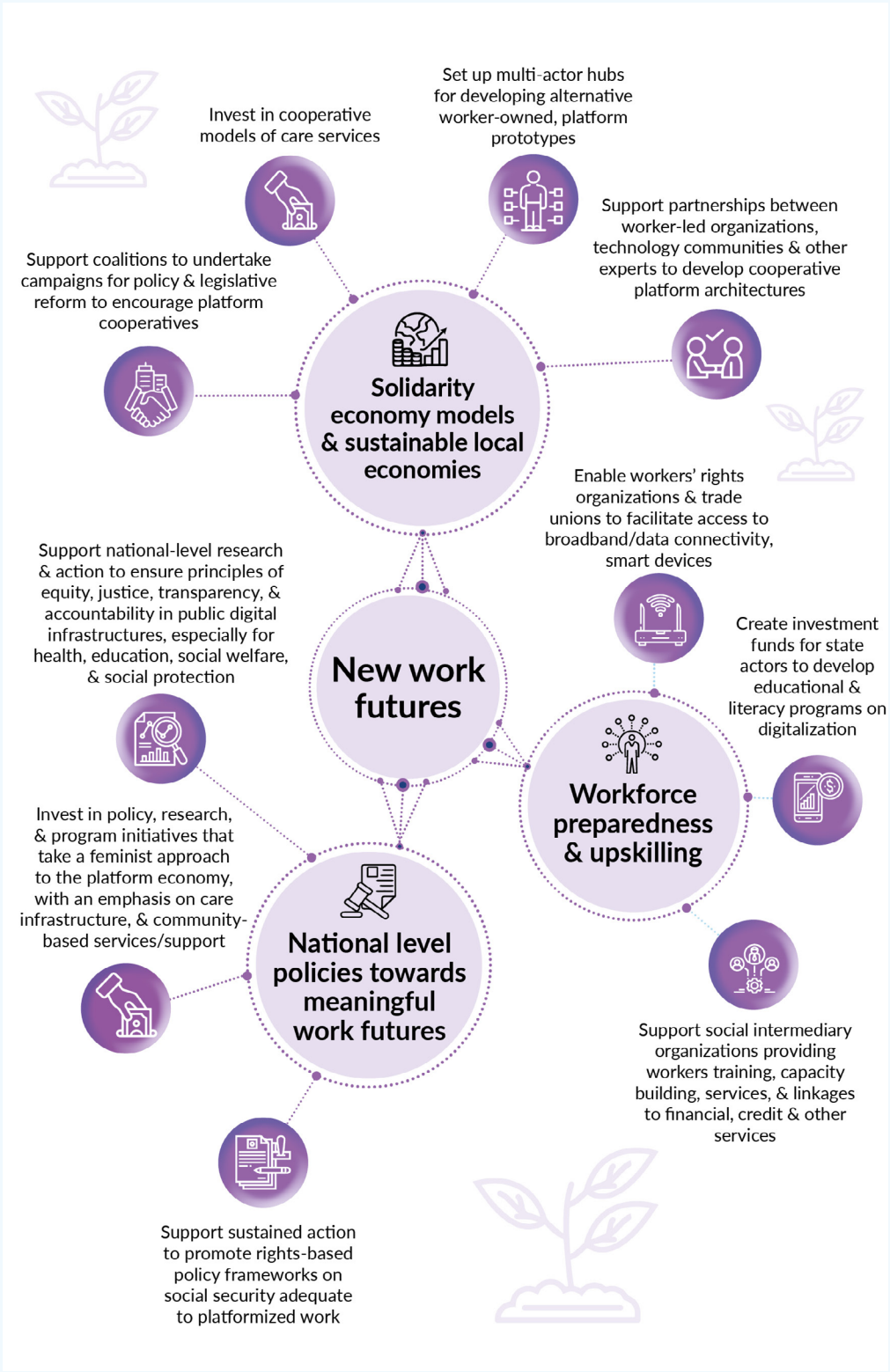


Figure 5: Model pathway: New work futures



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