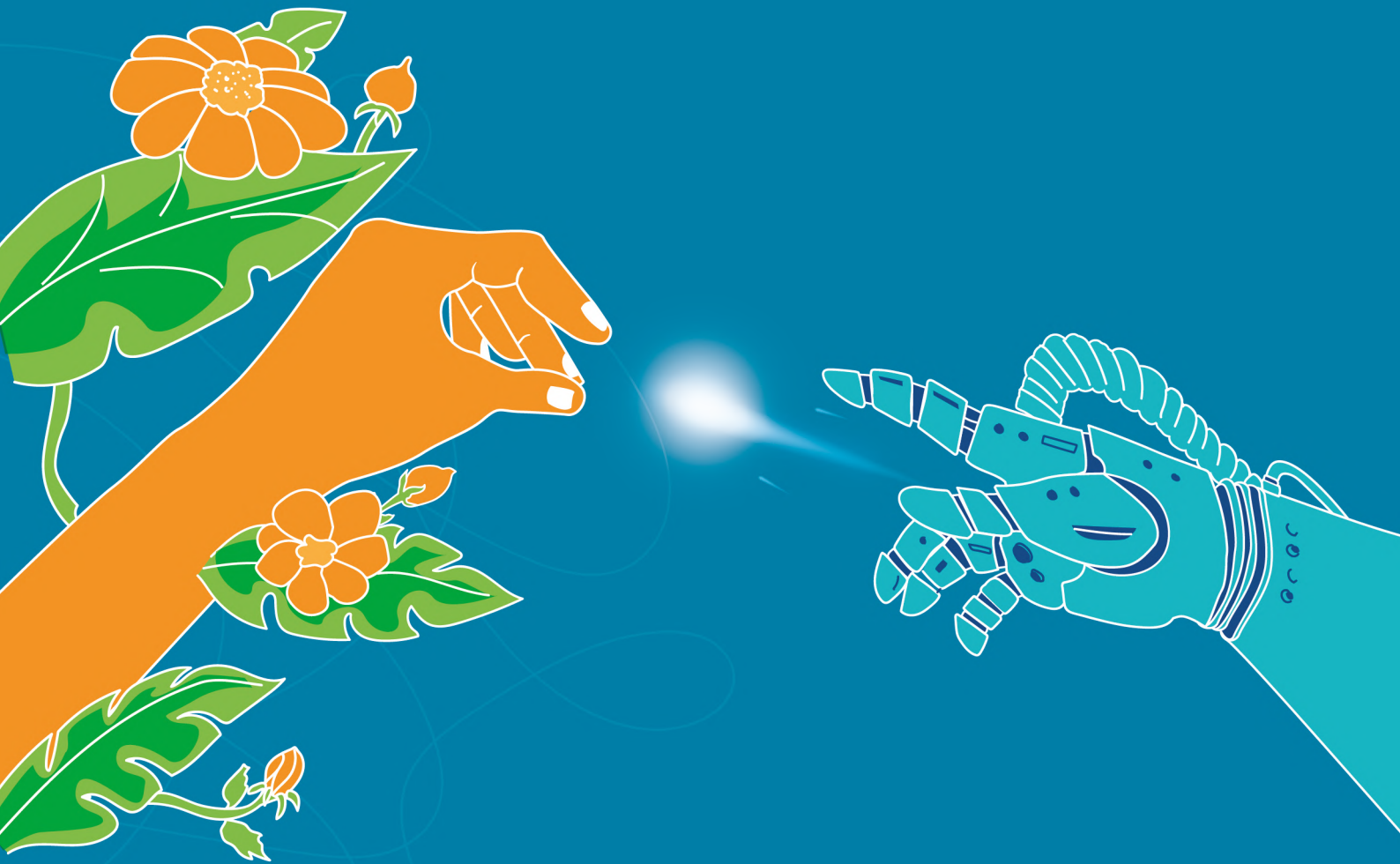




# The Future of Work We Seek

A philanthropic agenda for workers and the digital economy

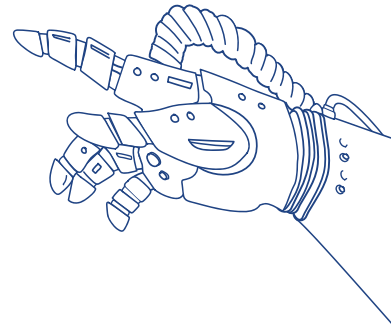






# The Future of Work We Seek

A philanthropic agenda for workers and the digital economy





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# CONTENTS

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.1 Work and the digital economy</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1.1 The persistent data divide	7
1.1.2 Old labor inequities against new challenges	7
1.1.3 The pandemic as a turning point	9
1.1.4 Legal and legislative developments	10
<b>1.2 A rationale for the study</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Mapping the shifting terrain of work and workers' rights</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.1 Regional snapshots</b>	<b>16</b>
2.1.1 Africa	16
2.1.2 Asia-Pacific	19
2.1.3 Latin America	22
<b>2.2 Assessment of key issues by actors</b>	<b>26</b>
2.2.1 Aggregate findings on issues identified	26
2.2.2 Regional-level breakdown of issues	27
<b>2.3 Actors' perception of key issues</b>	<b>29</b>
2.3.1 Corporate capture of discourse distorts the rhetoric of digitalization	31
2.3.2 Deindustrialization paves the road to digital colonialism	33
2.3.3 An extractive, neoliberal global trade and financial regime is pitted against workers' rights	34
2.3.4 Digitalization heightens worker precarity and informalization	36
2.3.5 Algorithmic management normalizes lack of accountability in work arrangements	38
2.3.6 Data is an important site of workers' rights issues	40
2.3.7 Weakened labor institutions face new capacity challenges in the digital age	41
2.3.8 Access divide is a persisting issue for equal opportunities in the digital economy	42





- 2.3.9 Marginalized workers face additional challenges in the digital economy ..... 43
- 2.4 Emerging responses ..... 46**
  - 2.4.1 Trade unions, workers’ associations/organizations and cooperatives ..... 46
  - 2.4.2 Civil society organizations ..... 53
  - 2.4.3 Academia and researchers ..... 54
- Spotlight 1: A feminist agenda for worker equity in the digital economy ..... 55**
- Spotlight 2: Technological frontiers in workers’ rights..... 59**
  
- Chapter 3: A compass for social justice philanthropy on the future of work 64**
- 3.1 The original sin: The neoliberal turn in funding for development ..... 65**
- 3.2 Philanthrocapitalism and ‘impact-driven’ funding ..... 67**
- 3.3 The fallouts of current funding for development ..... 70**
  - 3.3.1 Shrinking room for civil society voice ..... 70
  - 3.3.2 An economic paradigm that disincentivizes solidarity ..... 71
  - 3.3.3 Widening knowledge asymmetries and capacity gaps for civil society..... 71
- 3.4 Normative foundations for social justice funding towards a better future for all..... 72**
- 3.5 Strategic directions for philanthropy ..... 72**
  - 3.5.1 Expanding voice and participation of marginalized actors in shaping the contours of the digital ecosystem..... 73
  - 3.5.2 Building enduring local-translocal solidarities and synergies ..... 74
  - 3.5.3 Strengthening worker knowledge, capacity and organization..... 76
- 3.6 Stepping up: General do’s and don’ts for philanthropy..... 79**
  
- Chapter 4: A decisive philanthropic agenda for workers’ rights in the digital economy 84**
- 4.1 Domains of intervention for philanthropy ..... 85**
  - 4.1.1 Workers’ rights with an emphasis on the Global South..... 86





4.1.2 Equitable platformization.....	87
4.1.3 New work futures.....	87
<b>4.2 Entry points for philanthropic intervention.....</b>	<b>88</b>
4.2.1 Pathways for workers' rights with an emphasis on the Global South.....	89
4.2.2 Pathways for equitable platformization.....	93
4.2.3 Pathways for new work futures .....	97
<b>References</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>Annexure 1: Methodology</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>Annexure 2: Details of informants</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>Annexure 3: List of interview informants</b>	<b>116</b>
<b>Annexure 4: Research instrument: Interview guide</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>Annexure 5: Research instrument: Survey questionnaire</b>	<b>122</b>
<b>Annexure 6: Research instrument: Consent Form</b>	<b>128</b>



CHAPTER

1

# INTRODUCTION





# 1.1 Work and the digital economy

Digital is not just a sector but a phenomenon that has profoundly altered value addition and distribution across sectors, and consequently, the structures of choice in the economy. Indeed, digitality also redefines the substance of people's rights. Big Tech digital monopolies, situated mostly in the Global North, have risen through a disruptive market logic and disproportionately cornered the gains accruing from the digital economy, short changing smaller economic actors in the ecosystem. More importantly, a steady capture of data – the dominant factor of production in the global value chain today – has been facilitated to the advantage of these corporations and their parent countries, a trend that has brought about cascading questions for development justice and global equity.

## 1.1.1 The persistent data divide

As the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) notes in its Digital Economy Report 2021, a data divide between countries of the Global South and North is visible in the ability to own, control and harness data resources into valuable intelligence, and translate the same into opportunities for development. Similarly, high levels of concentration are observed in the control and production of advanced digital production technologies – Artificial Intelligence (AI), big data analytics, cloud computing, internet of things (IoT), advanced robotics and additive manufacturing – with 10 economies accounting for 90 percent of all global patents, and 70 percent of all exports directly associated with these technologies (UNIDO, 2020). Inequity in the digital economy is not just at the level of nations but also applies to their populations (World Bank, 2021).

Data and its infrastructure are, thus, the key drivers of development in the digital economy. Locked up in the value creation process is the individual and collective data of workers and their work that fuels the intelligence of platforms. “Laboring data” may be understood as the unremunerated contribution of workers to the platform economy, a key means through which lead firms orchestrate monopolistic power and build their “network-data advantage” (Gurumurthy et al, 2019).



Locked up in the value creation process is the individual and collective data of workers and their work that fuels the intelligence of platforms.

## 1.1.2 Old labor inequities against new challenges

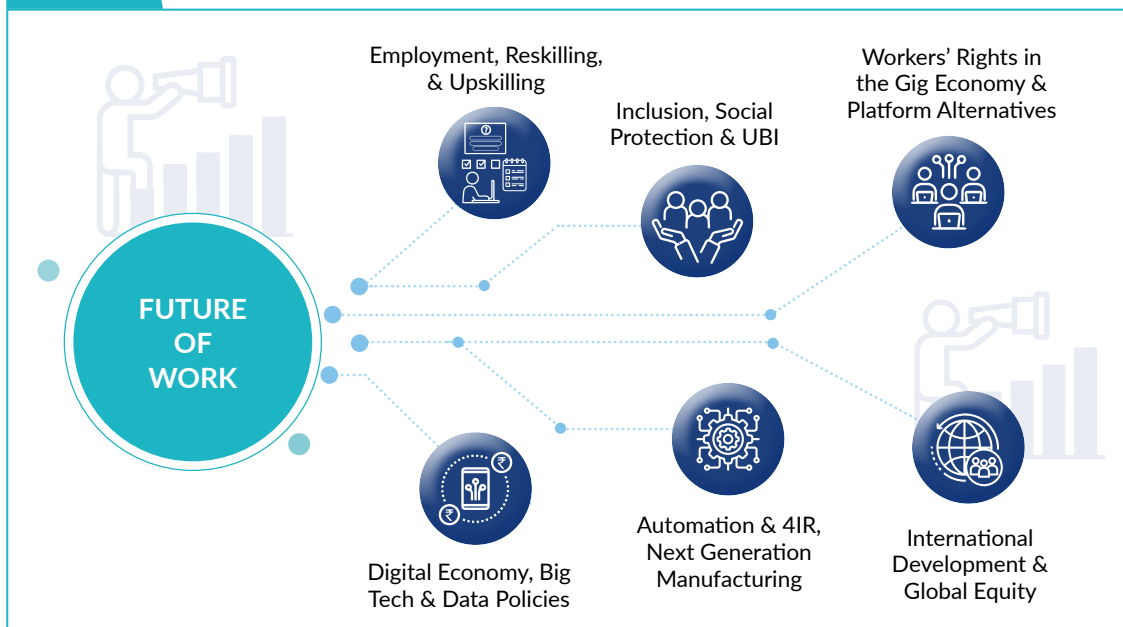
The global economic outlook and value distribution has been consistently skewed against labor for many years now, with digitalization a key contributing factor in the current downside (Picketty, 2013; UNCTAD, 2019). If the early twentieth century gave rise to a variety of labor laws to improve the quality of work and worker well-being (Sundarajan, 2017), neoliberal globalization in the past decades has changed the narrative around decent



The global economic outlook and value distribution has been consistently skewed against labor for many years now, with digitalization a key contributing factor in the current downside.

work and livelihood justice. It has destabilized the standard employment framework and significantly rolled back gains made by workers' rights movements (Harvey, 2007; EPW Engage, 2019). These key trends have been carried over into the platformization era, and compounded by the big push for non-standard forms of employment such as gig work and servicification (see Figure 1).

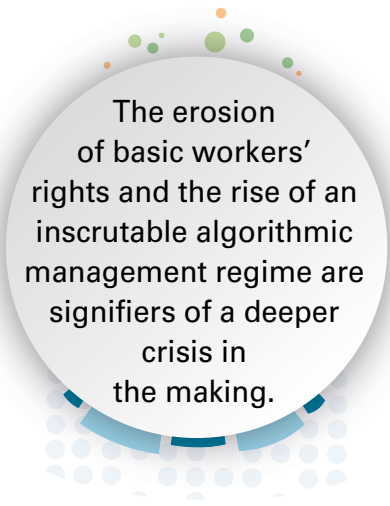
**Figure 1: Future of work - Capturing the discourse**



Developments in AI and the rise of platformization have restructured value chains across sectors, transforming the very paradigm of work. Steady automation of manufacturing value chains is leading to the elimination of many remunerative job segments (WEF, 2020a). In the Global South, technology-induced shifts in agriculture are already decreasing the room for livelihood opportunities and non-marketized economic activity vital to local food sovereignty (The Guardian, 2016). With breakthroughs such as driverless vehicles, sensor-based sorting of minerals, and a greater integration of data analytics in mining projects, it is estimated that 330,000 jobs, or nearly 5 percent of the workforce, will be lost by 2030 (Choi et al, 2020). Moreover, the pandemic has further accelerated the digitalization of global value chains (Mckinsey, 2020).

Developments in AI and the rise of platformization have restructured value chains across sectors, transforming the paradigm of work.





The erosion of basic workers' rights and the rise of an inscrutable algorithmic management regime are signifiers of a deeper crisis in the making.

The initial promises of flexibility and greater economic gains from such arrangements have soured quickly. Instead, workers are confronted with further informalization and precarization. The erosion of basic workers' rights and the rise of an inscrutable algorithmic management regime are but key signifiers of a deeper crisis in the making. Reflected in macro global trends, they point to "significant distributive failures", stating, "Wealth is increasingly concentrated; the gap between the richest and the poorest is widening within countries, the labor share of income is declining; gender inequalities in earnings are persistent; inter-generational inequalities are accumulating; entire regions of the world are falling behind; and large portions of the world's workforce (in high- and low-income countries) have experienced real wage stagnation (Rani & Damian, 2019).

### 1.1.3 The pandemic as a turning point

The Covid-19 pandemic, which created extraordinary short-term upheavals in people's livelihoods, has made it impossible to dismiss long-standing structural inequities and injustices that prop up the current labor-capital imbalance. It has served as an important catalyst for a reckoning that has been some time coming. Buoyed by mainstream media attention and a growing body of scholarship, issues such as the changing nature of work, workers' rights and, more specifically, the conditions of labor in the gig economy, have broken into the wider public consciousness. Moreover, emerging instances of local-to-global organizing amongst workers and outcomes of certain juridical contestations have both brought hope to platform workers on the legal front.

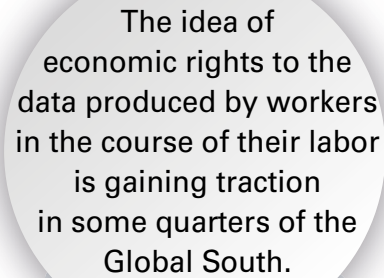
The changing landscape of work has also prompted changes to the grammar of worker-led organization. In addition to traditional strategies such as industrial strike action and legal challenges, new forms of worker organization, strategies and innovative thinking have emerged. Platform workers are collectivizing and unionizing across sectors through formations such as Gresea in Europe and the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT) in India, marking new forms of political solidarity and organization. Social intermediaries such as Société Mutuelle Pour Artistes (SMART) in Belgium and LabourNet in India offer services to workers for financial inclusion and skilling (Gurumurthy et al, 2021). Workers have also begun to recognize the data opportunity and embrace it for collective benefit and solidarity, experimenting with platform cooperatives, prominent examples of which include Up & Go, a New-York based federation of domestic work coops, and Stocksy, a cooperatively-run platform for sharing stock images. Exploitative data-based surveillance practices are becoming an important agenda for unions and worker groups. What is also gaining traction in some quarters of the Global South is the idea of economic rights to the data produced by workers in the course of their labor (Singh, 2020). Such developments



mark an important silver lining in a scenario that is highly stacked against workers.

## 1.1.4 Legal and legislative developments

Prompted by workers' organizing, courts in the United Kingdom (UK), Netherlands, and Germany have looked beyond the on-paper classification of platform workers and endorsed an employment relationship between workers and platforms (Gurumurthy et al, 2020). A landmark UK Supreme Court ruling against Uber, in which drivers were recognized as employees, has also affirmed the rights of workers over the data generated by them in the course of work, marking an important first.<sup>1</sup> In July 2021, Proposition 22, the legislative initiative to disenfranchise gig workers from protections, behind which platform companies spent billions, was deemed unconstitutional by the court system in California (Chricton, 2021).



The idea of economic rights to the data produced by workers in the course of their labor is gaining traction in some quarters of the Global South.

In parallel, and partly in response to the above developments, governments have also been moving on the policy front. Spain's "Ley Riders" (Rider Law) legislation has recognized riders for food delivery and e-commerce platforms as employees (Perez, 2021). At a broader level, the European Commission's proposed directive on improving working conditions in platform work has addressed misclassification of worker status; fairness, transparency and accountability in algorithmic management; and enforcement of applicable rules (European Commission, 2021). The El Khomri law in France has allowed for appropriate classification of non-standard employment and expansion of social security protection to new categories of workers (Lally, 2019). In Uruguay, Uber has been directed to provide mandatory social protection to all drivers. India has attempted to alleviate some of the distress of platform work through its Code on Social Security (Behrendt & Quynh, 2018). In Malaysia, the state's Social Security Organisation (SOCSO) has partnered with platform companies to provide social security protections to their workers (Lee, 2021). In Singapore, the Ministry of Manpower has constituted an Advisory Committee on Platform Workers to review ways to strengthen employment protections in the platform economy (Ministry of Manpower, 2022). A slew of digital economy regulations undertaken by China in 2021 have included significant measures to regulate labor standards for platform workers (Popov, 2022). The future of work and workers has also emerged as an important area of concern for global intergovernmental organizations, including the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), and regional blocks such as the European Union (EU) and the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN).

While a growing body of regulations and regulatory interest – most of which are currently concentrated in the Global North – does signal a positive trend, it is still limited in scope.

<sup>1</sup> See Uber BV and others (Appellants) v Aslam and others <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2019-0029.html>



Besides, not all legal measures have benefited workers. For instance, the Omnibus law enacted by Indonesia in 2020 significantly benefits platform companies and undermines the position of workers and their rights and entitlements (Gurumurthy et al, 2020). In the United States (US), Spain, France, and the UK, efforts to strengthen the position of gig workers through laws have sometimes led to platform companies pushing back through abrupt market exits, causing unintended job losses for those self-employed by choice (Gozzer, 2021).

At a broader level, policies aimed at countering macro issues, such as automation-induced job losses, deskilling, industrial policy correctives for economic stagnation and downturns, are still few in comparison. Such policies are especially lacking and underdeveloped in the Global South where these trends are poised to hit workforces the hardest.

This crucial gap is illustrated in evaluations of post-pandemic recovery which point to differential impacts for workforces across developed and developing nations. For instance, jobs data released by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics across sectors for 2021 indicate a trend of en masse exits, totalling up to 3 percent of the workforce (Washington Post, 2021). Touted as the “Great Resignation”, this exodus has been particularly visible in low-paying service segments where workers have taken advantage of Covid stimulus measures and reassessed poor pay and conditions of work to leverage the situation and wait for better opportunities. A churn in the workforce at the scale currently being witnessed, increased confidence in the economy, and a labor shortage on account of global supply chain issues may be factors that ultimately lead to improved labor conditions for the American workforce. In the EU, the €100-billion European instrument for Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE), aimed at expanding the social safety net and mitigating mass unemployment risks, has ensured continued economic security for much of the workforce and dovetailed with an employment recovery pathway (Look et al, 2021).

The same period, however, has witnessed bleaker prospects for labor in other parts of the world. India reported a high 8.32 percent national unemployment rate in August 2021 with a continued outlook for a weak job market (India Today, 2021). 20 percent of Nigeria’s workforce has been left unemployed on account of the pandemic (Eboh, 2021). In the ASEAN region, ILO (2021) has pointed to how deep cuts in working hours have hit workers hard, particularly young workers and women workers. Informal workers and micro enterprises in the Global South have been left vulnerable to the ongoing economic and social costs of the pandemic (Sabatini, 2020). Additionally, Covid-led rollback of social sector investments and the escalation of debt in developing countries have further impacted the labor force negatively, with heightened care burdens that are predominantly borne by women (ILO, 2020).

Thus, the current trajectory of the digital economy is marked by deep-seated global imbalances and inequities that disproportionately impact labor forces located in the Global South. Gains from the digital restructuring of global value chains have largely bypassed workers in the South, and the outlook for workers’ rights as well as the future of work in this region stands highly compromised. In this race to the bottom, where forces of





Forces of platformization and digitalization mobilize and control endless reserves of cheap labor, turning them into atomized cogs for the “algorithmic wheel.”

platformization and digitalization can continue to mobilize and control endless reserves of cheap labor, turning them into atomized cogs for the “algorithmic wheel”, a lack of structural course correctives will only lead to further disenfranchisement, atomization, and precarization.

Political energies and financial resources are urgently needed for a quantum change; a reimagined future of work agenda is not only about mitigating damages, but also about effecting a systemic shift to harness technological gains for global equity and local livelihood autonomy.


## 1.2 A rationale for the study

A range of efforts, including research and field building, organizing and networking, policy intervention, capacity building and experimentation with alternatives is already visible globally on issues concerning workers’ rights in the digital economy. These initiatives have arisen from workers’ groups, the digital rights community, civil society actors working on economic justice, the academic community and more. Furthermore, bilateral and other development aid and philanthropic foundation-based funding has, in the recent past, been directed to the future of work domain. Yet, as the rapid pace of change in the digital economy reveals ever so starkly, ground-level reality needs an action frame that eschews business-as-usual approaches in favor of a systemic transformation that questions the neoliberal economic dogma and addresses the erosion of distributive justice. Philanthropy needs to rescope ground realities, revisit assumptions and revamp strategies in light of a wider systemic crisis.



A reimagined future of work agenda is not only about mitigating damages, but also about effecting a systemic shift to harness technological gains for global equity and local livelihood autonomy.

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),<sup>2</sup> 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, multilateral organizations as well as the philanthropic community between July to October 2021 (See Annexures 1-5 for more on methodology, details of informants, and instruments used for data collection).

The study aims to understand how various actors in the development space assess the issues they identify as critical within the larger economic context and policy history of their respective locations, the strategies they have pursued, the success and drawbacks of the same, their assessment of gaps in resources and efforts, and the agendas for further action.

This report is divided into five sections. Section 2, the next section of this report, maps key issues playing out in the digitalizing economy with respect to workers' rights, as identified by the various informant constituencies, followed by an analysis of the emerging responses to these issues. Section 3 assesses the state of funding in the domain, while section 4 discusses the broad entry points for structuring philanthropic intervention and outlines the thematic pegs and cross-cutting modalities within which a set of medium- to long-term strategies are offered for twenty-first century philanthropic action.

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<sup>2</sup> 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 African region, 23 from the Asia-Pacific region, 18 from the Latin American region, and 19 from North America and the EU regions.



CHAPTER

2

**MAPPING  
THE SHIFTING  
TERRAIN OF  
WORK AND  
WORKERS'  
RIGHTS**

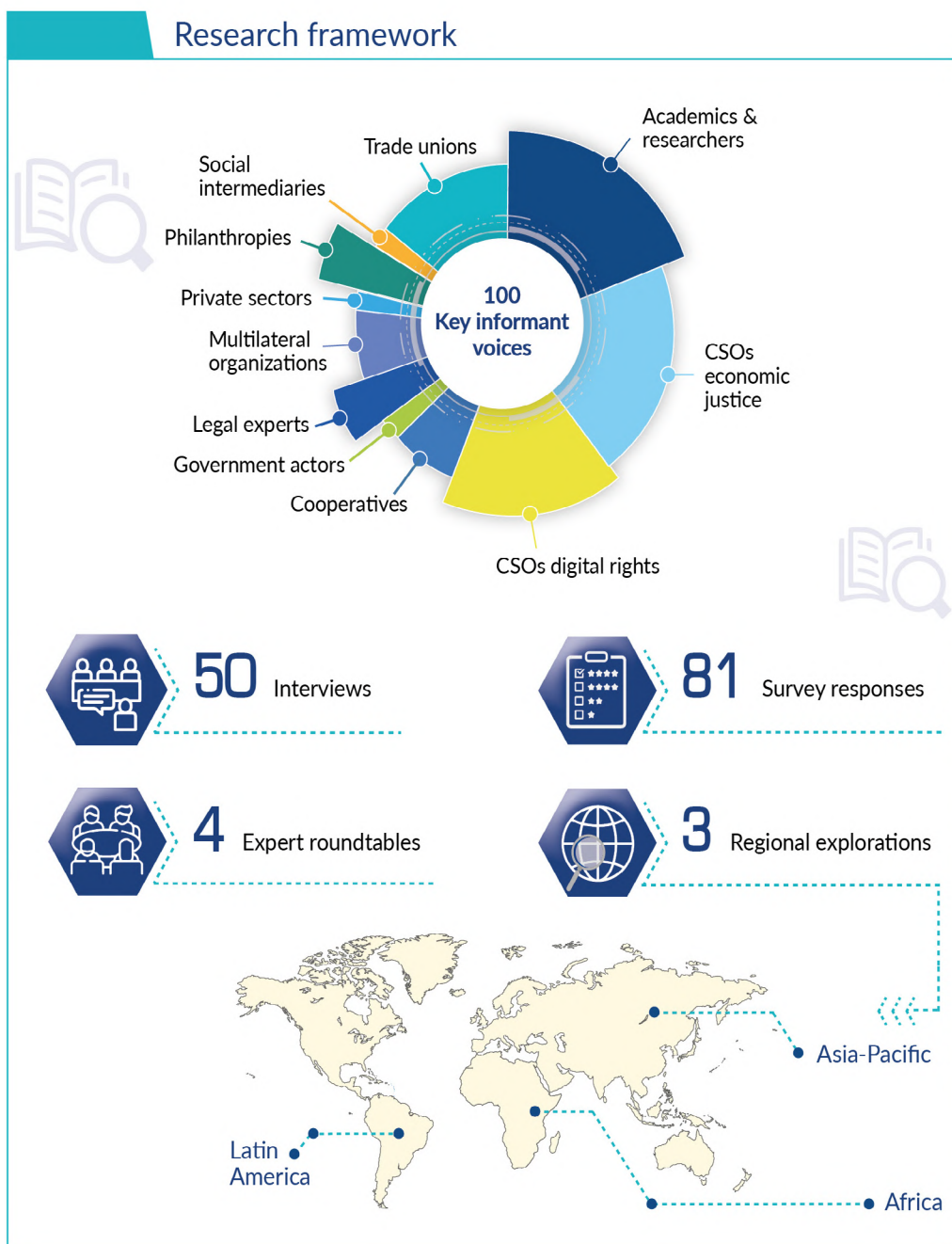
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The region-wise mapping of issues undertaken for the study sheds light on the shifting terrain of work and workers' rights in the digital economy. Reflecting on global trends and questions that have emerged in the recent past with respect to the issues at stake, informants were able to bring unique insights from the regional context and local conditions, adding nuance and specificity to the broader study.

This section begins by presenting regional snapshots derived from secondary and primary data. It highlights the key issues that emerged from the survey data, followed by an in-depth discussion of the issues identified in the interviews and roundtables (see Figure 2, Annexures 1-5 for more details). Lastly, informants' perceptions of emerging responses and interventions, and their successes and challenges are also discussed.



## 2.1 Regional snapshots

### 2.1.1 Africa

**Digital economy landscape:** The digital economy landscape across the African continent is nascent, with many aspects of innovation, policy thinking, and market maturity still evolving. Key areas where digital innovations are emerging include financial services, small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) and e-commerce (Alfreds, 2018; Melia, 2020). Other primary sectors critical to the region's economy which are seeing gradual digitalization include mining, and oil and gas exploration in countries such as South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo (ILO, 2018).

**Table 1: Labor indicators: Africa**

Labor indicators	2010 (%)	Year - latest (%)
Rate of labor force participation (total)	64.4	62 (for 2021)
Rate of labor force participation (female)	54.6	52.8 (for 2021)
Rate of unemployment	6.5	7.5 (for 2021)
Manufacturing employment as a proportion of total employment	6.7	6.6 (for 2020)
Rate of social protection coverage	N/A	17.4 (for 2020)
Labor income share as a percentage of GDP	45.7	47.9 (for 2015)
Growth rate of labor productivity	2.9	0 (for 2019)
Working poverty rate (% of population earning less than \$1.90 per day)	38.6	31.8 (for 2019)

Source: ILO statistics database<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See ILO Data explorer at <https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer9/>





## Key trends

- Decades of deindustrialization have led to national economies that largely depend on raw commodity exports, thus exposing growth rates to the volatility of commodity prices (African Development Bank, 2018).
- The region's high population, and its large youth demographic in particular, is not serviced through commensurate macro-level job growth (Gaus, 2015). With an oversupply of cheap labor, there are few incentives to attempt large-scale automation in manufacturing (Van Belle & Mudavanhu, 2018).
- Current labor market conditions have resulted in a loss of bargaining power for workers, with companies being able to drive down wages and deny workers collective bargaining avenues (African Development Bank, 2018).
- Infrastructure deficits are a major barrier in access to digital economy opportunities, with a less than 30 percent average internet penetration rate in the region across most countries (Mothobi, 2021). From prohibitive costs of internet and technology devices to issues of undependable connectivity and power supply, workers struggle to optimize work opportunities in digitally-mediated jobs (African Development Bank, 2018).
- There is a persistent gender-based divide when it comes to digital technologies, with women workers disadvantaged by lower levels of digital literacy and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education. Gender stereotypes prevail in work allocation as well (WEF, 2020b).
- The telecommunications sector accounts for a significant share of digital economy employment in the region, with medium-to-high-skill jobs concentrated in technology hubs in countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya and Egypt (Van Belle & Mudavanhu, 2018).
- E-commerce platforms are a growing source of employment, with key platforms such as Jumia providing work to 3,500 direct employees, 100,000 commission-based sales agents, and over 50,000 micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) across Africa (MasterCard Foundation, 2019).





## Policy developments

- Regulatory and policy frameworks for the digital economy as well as the associated labor issues are still evolving in the region. South Africa leads the way in policy. In 2021, the country adopted the Protection of Personal Information Act, in a big step for data rights in the country, for both workers and consumers. South Africa has also issued the National ICT White Paper and the 4IR White Paper which address issues such as labor rights, the digital divide and skilling (Research ICT Africa, 2021).
- Knowledge gaps among policy makers with respect to the digital economy make it difficult to balance the competing priorities of driving local innovation and devising appropriate digital economy governance policies. This gap is exacerbated by the lack of policy research in these areas (Van Belle & Mudavanhu, 2018).
- A point of concern in Africa's digital transformations has been the fairly rapid pace with which digital ID systems have been developed and rolled out across the continent (Toesland, 2021). There is an increasing preference for such critical infrastructure efforts to be helmed by largely opaque public-private partnerships, even though important safeguards such as privacy and robust data-protection authorities are generally not yet in place (van der Spuy, 2021).



## Box 1: Workers' resistance in the African region

The transformations occurring through digitalization are creating imperatives to update labor regulations, and unions in the region have been active in trying to influence this process. The Nigeria Labour Congress, for instance, is undertaking a policy review of current labor laws and conducting workshops on harmonization programs for labor laws across West Africa. Similarly, the East African Trade Union Congress has been engaging in regional-level policy debates at the African Union on governing labor in the digital economy.

## 2.1.2 Asia-Pacific

**Digital economy landscape:** The digital economy in the Asia-Pacific outpaces Latin America and Africa by a wide margin. The region, owing in no small part to China, accounts for 25 percent of the total market capitalization of platforms valued at more than \$1 billion. This is second only to the US. In 2019, platform-based businesses netted \$3.8 trillion in revenue, of which the Asia-Pacific region accounted for 48 percent (\$1.8 trillion), equivalent to 6 percent of its GDP (Asian Development Bank, 2021). In the same year, the region also recorded the highest growth in exports of digitally-deliverable services. Globally, seven of the top ten exporters of information and communication technology (ICT) goods are from East and Southeast Asia respectively (UNCTAD, 2019). Several countries within the region, including Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and India, have also seen the growth and development of domestic platform ecosystems. In recent times, the region has witnessed the rapid rise of “super apps” and high-value unicorns such as Grab in Malaysia, Gojek in Indonesia and Swiggy in India.

Table 2: Labor indicators: Asia-Pacific

Labor indicators	2010 (%)	Year - latest (%)
Labor force participation (total)	63.3	59.4 (for 2021)
Labor force participation (female)	47.1	43 (for 2021)
Unemployment rate	4.6	5 (for 2021)
Manufacturing employment as a proportion of total employment	16.7	15 (for 2020)
Social protection	N/A	44.1 (for 2020)
Labor income share as a percentage of GDP	49.1	49 (for 2017)
Growth rate of labor productivity	6.9	3.5 (for 2019)
Working poverty rate (% of population earning less than \$1.90 per day)	14.9	3 (for 2019)

Source: ILO statistics database<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid





## Key trends

- Despite severe pandemic-induced disruptions, the Asia-Pacific region remains the fastest growing in the world, with some of the world's most robust manufacturing sectors as well as an increasing share of high-value commodities and services (Asian Development Bank, 2021). That said, the region is also marked by extreme inequality, with the pandemic deepening the gap between advanced and developing economies (IMF, 2021).
- With many countries in the region unable to translate economic growth to inclusive growth, high dependency on informal work continues to be the norm. Asia-Pacific is already home to two-thirds of the world's informal workforce who continue to struggle for decent wages and working conditions as well as social protections (Asian Development Bank, 2018).
- Given the region's extensive socio-economic differences, digitalization pathways and prospects show significant variations within and between countries in rates of adoption of digital technologies, market maturity as well as citizens' access to opportunities (ITU, 2021). For instance, internet usage rates vary between 90 percent in the digitally-advanced economies to less than 15 percent in the least advanced.
- Platformization is a dominant economic phenomenon in the region, and is projected to add close to 327 million jobs between 2020-2025 (Asian Development Bank, 2018). Countries in South Asia (such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka) and in Southeast Asia (such as Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam) are major hubs of online medium-to-high-skill crowd work (Online Labour Observatory, 2020).
- Despite growth in platform jobs, the piecemeal nature of work, the associated lack of entitlements and harsh working conditions raise questions about how these jobs can actually result in long-term worker well-being and economic security (Asian Development Bank, 2021). This concern exists in sharp tension with the sobering reality that local, state, and national governments are struggling to address the issue of large-scale employment generation and are, thus, wary of heavy-handed regulation of platforms, given that they are currently a critical avenue of mass employment for low-skilled workers.
- Servicification and proliferation of gig work has further exacerbated labor informalization and precarity. The measures used to contain the pandemic, coupled with the down-scaling of economic activities, have left many informal workers unemployed and in a worse predicament than before.



- Widespread automation, re-shoring and phasing out of traditional manufacturing processes in the region are likely to precipitate a regional employment crisis in key sectors, such as textiles, which predominantly employ women workers. While routine jobs may not immediately disappear, the gradual technology-led shift in the nature of jobs attainable by workers with basic skills point to a growing skill deficit.
- States and corporations routinely violate workers' rights, specifically, the right to collective bargaining. The region ranked second-worst for workers' rights in 2021 (ITUC, 2021).

## Policy developments

- Asian countries and stakeholder communities have attempted to respond to the issues of the digital economy with significant agility, but the lack of political consensus has stalled some of these efforts, leading to persistent gaps between policy attention and implementation. For instance, India's 2018 draft e-commerce policy, with its unique formulation of community data as well as its pioneering work on non-personal data regulation, has been a promising development. However, the national government has failed to follow through on these initiatives, with e-commerce and personal data protection bills currently being redrafted (Suneja, 2020; Agarwal, 2022), and the non-personal data bill still to be passed (Singh, 2019).
- In Australia, strong competition regulation is being used to mitigate the monopolistic behavior of Big Tech platforms (Davidson, 2021), and the country's recent tax reforms have also been beneficial, with the "Amazon Tax" requiring that retailers (based anywhere in the world) using Amazon to sell in Australia pay their due (Koehn, 2019). China, which already has a strong national strategy in place for AI, also introduced a range of policy measures for the digital economy in 2021, covering algorithmic governance, fintech services and labor conditions (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2021).
- Given Asia-Pacific's large informal workforce, the employment status dilemma continues to be a pressing issue in the region along with the extension of the social safety net for those who lie outside the standard job definition. Changes are underway in some countries with respect to worker classification and entitlements. India's Code on Social Security 2020, recognizes platform and gig workers as those operating outside the traditional employer-employee arrangement, and delinks social protection from employment status. In Singapore, the Ministry of Manpower has made attempts to understand and regulate the platform economy's working conditions. Despite these national level victories however, systemic under-representation of workers' voices in the gig economy continues to be the norm even as the big platforms retain their lobbying powers and secure their interests.



## Box 2: Workers' resistance in the Asia-Pacific region

New experiments in developing alternative ways to use digital technologies are starting to take root in the region. In South India, the Kerala government has piloted a cooperatively-organized taxi-aggregator app called Yatri that aims to serve as an alternative to Big Tech platforms like Uber. In Indonesia, the Koperasi Digital Indonesia Mandiri (KDIM) cooperative is developing its own low-cost smartphone to overcome the country's digital divide and create a digital space for the cooperative ecosystem.

Social intermediaries, such as Homenet in Thailand, have supported the organization of workers and workers' groups, channeling their voices into policies and helping them utilize digital platforms to access new markets. Organized gig workers have also become increasingly assertive in fighting for their rights. Relevant examples include a recent petition filed by 35,000 gig workers in India's top court seeking employment reclassification and social security from platform companies, and protracted protests by gig workers in Singapore that have prompted top government officials to pay attention.

### 2.1.3 Latin America

**Digital economy landscape:** While platforms such as Mercado Libre, Ualá, dLocal and Nubank have been among the early platforms to attain regional presence, the fledgling digital economy in Latin America has struggled with low technical capacities, regulatory vacuum and significant connectivity gaps (Grigera, 2020). Platformization has received a fillip during the pandemic, with sectors such as retail, food delivery, online groceries and logistics seeing a big push in recent years (Latin America Digital Transformation Report, 2021). E-commerce penetration has been at an all-time high since the pandemic, and public technology companies in the region have registered a market capitalization growth that is currently higher than the region's GDP. The value of regional unicorns reached \$105 billion in 2021 (CB Insights, 2021). Fintech is the largest sector of growth in the digital economy, having drawn close to 40 percent of the region's venture capital investments (Business Insider, 2022).

Significantly, China has been increasing its presence in Latin America, competing with the US for relevance through investments, trade, and rollout of its platforms in various markets of the region. In 2021, Chinese tech companies made up for \$18.6 billion investment activity in the region (Latin America Digital Transformation Report, 2021).





**Table 3: Labor indicators: Latin America**

Labor indicators	Year - 2010 (%)	Year - latest (%)
Labor force participation rate (total)	64	61.5 (for 2021)
Labor force participation rate (female)	50.8	49.5 (for 2021)
Unemployment rate	6.9	11.1 (for 2021)
Manufacturing employment as a proportion of total employment	N/A	N/A
Social protection	N/A	56.3 (for 2020)
Labor income share as a percentage of GDP	49	50.5 (for 2017)
Growth rate of labor productivity	3.9	-2.6 (2019)
Working poverty rate (% of population earning less than \$1.90 per day)	N/A	N/A

Source: ILO statistics database<sup>5</sup>

## Key trends

- Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced considerable economic stagnation over the last two decades. Between 2000 and 2017, countries in the region grew 2.7 percent per year on average, significantly lagging behind other developing regions (African Development Bank, 2018). The economic fallout of the pandemic has also been particularly severe. According to one estimate, Latin America's GDP fell by 7.5 percent, more than double the 3.5 percent contraction in global growth in the same period (FastMarkets, 2021).
- The composition of the region's demographics is poised to add to its economic difficulties. As a recent report points out, "an increasingly older population poses challenges to social security systems. Accordingly, the region's old-age dependency ratio will more than double, from 15.4 to 37.7 percent by 2050. Moreover, the picture for pension savings in Latin America and the Caribbean is grim: less than half of the region's population saves for retirement through a contributory pension system. Households do not compensate through non-pension saving instruments, either. For many countries, which also have high rates of informal employment, ensuring provision of social security and pensions is an urgent and complex issue" (African Development Bank, 2018).
- Latin America and the Caribbean still face challenges regarding female labor force participation (LFP). The region's female LFP was 54 percent in 2014, and the gap is still wider than in Asia-Pacific and in the advanced economies as a whole (Novta et al, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid



- While the region has boosted its internet connectivity, over 200 million people still lack access to basic digital infrastructure (Celis & Mendes, 2021). Although 68 percent of the region's population uses the internet on a regular basis, few workers in the region have the skills required to work with digital tools. A large share of adults have little or no digital skills, ranging from 43.6 percent in Peru to 25.2 percent in Chile (OECD, 2020).
- In a labor market characterized by informality and fragility, gig work has arisen as a small but steadily growing segment of work, operating out of key urban hubs such as Mexico City, Bogota, São Paulo, and Buenos Aires. With the pandemic providing a big boost to the expansion of platform companies, platform-based work is likely to become a significant source of employment in the years to come, contributing to the growth of the informal sector and a further shrinking of formal sector jobs.

## Policy developments

- Lack of data governance policies remains a persistent regulatory gap in the region. A national data protection law introduced by Brazil in 2021 (IAPP, 2020) is ill-equipped to ensure privacy and personal data protection as it continues to enable the expropriation of personal data as a driver of growth (Kira & Tambelli, 2017). Other countries in the region have not moved on this issue in any significant way. Uruguay is a notable outlier, with a decade-old and fairly robust law on the Protection of Personal Data, and ongoing efforts towards developing new laws on data portability (ITechlaw, 2018).
- On the labor law and regulation front, close to 30 legislative efforts recently passed in the region have weakened workers' rights and intensified worker precarity. During the pandemic, Peru implemented a decree allowing companies to suspend workers without compensation (KPMG, 2020). Labor reforms passed by Brazil in 2017 made it easier for platform work to be classified as self-employment, thereby denying workers the right to social protection.
- Currently, there is a significant legal vacuum in the region with respect to regulation of platform-based work. But organized campaigns pushing for legal reform have been active in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Mexico, among others. These efforts mainly respond to three issues: 1) employment misclassification (proposed in Argentina, Chile, Mexico and Colombia), 2) structuring platform-based work into salaried work by expanding the scope of general labor laws (in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay), and 3) the incorporation of newer digital economy labor rights such as the right to disconnect, the guarantee of minimum hours, sovereignty of working time, and the transparency of algorithmic management (Argentina, Chile, Colombia). Apart from these, Mexico recently approved a legislation that prohibits outsourcing (GTlaw, 2021), and Uruguay passed a Telework Law, which regulates work mediated by technology.



### Box 3: Workers' resistance in Latin America

The loss of workers' rights and the reversal of gains made by strong labor movements in the region have been crucial concerns among Latin American workers. The loss of traditional jobs and the delocalization of work arrangements in the digital economy point to a long-term erosion of the organizational base for workers, limiting opportunities to collectivize. Against this backdrop, Latin America has been the site of innovative forms of digital unionization. In 2020, e-commerce and delivery platform workers have organized protests across Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and Ecuador using social networks to articulate demands for improved working conditions, recognition of employment status and greater autonomy.

National parliaments, local administrations and the judiciary have been critical sites of intervention. In Uruguay, a labor court recognized the employment relationship between drivers and the ride-hailing company. In other countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, similar legal proceedings are ongoing. Local administrations of large cities in the region have also been facilitating dialogue between workers and platforms with an aim to develop urban regulations (fleet quotas, municipal registers, traffic rules) around ride-hailing services.



## 2.2 Assessment of key issues by actors

Given the wide array of issues and differing circumstances observed in these snapshots, it was crucial for this research to be both strategic and well-rounded in conducting its primary research. To this end, efforts were made to use predominantly qualitative research to obtain a richer account of on-the-ground realities. However, a small quantitative component was also employed to get a quick synoptic view of how our informants viewed the field.

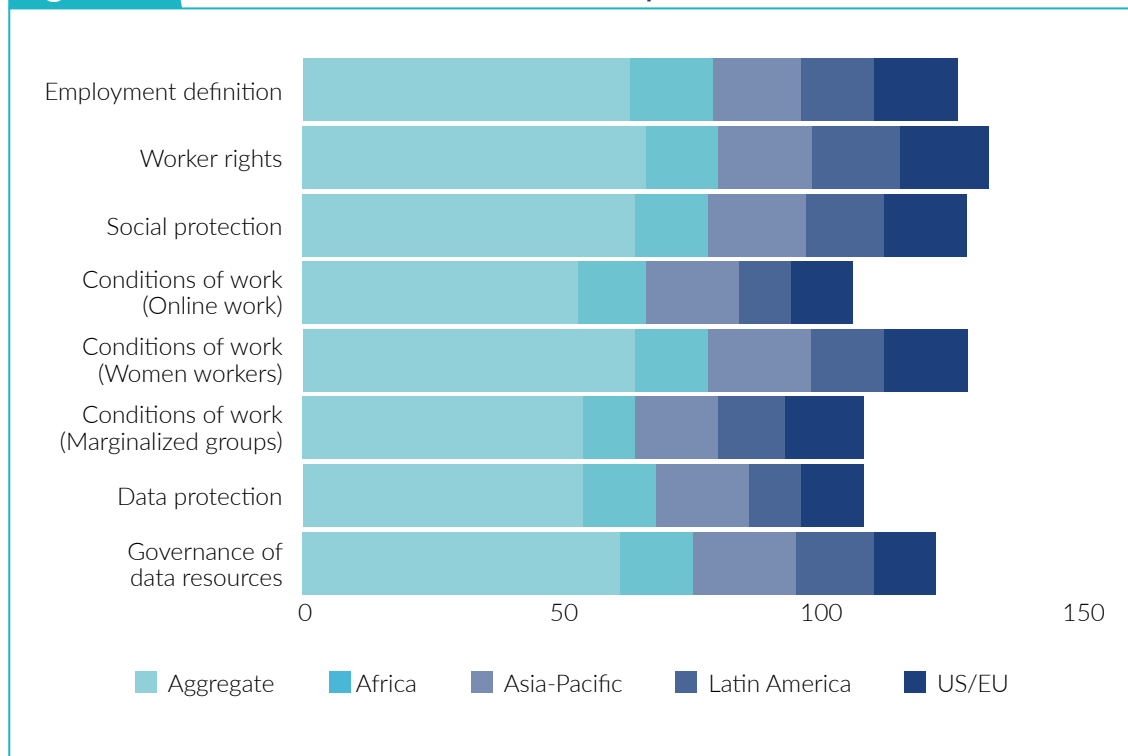
Data for the study was gathered through a self-administered questionnaire shared with informants who participated in interviews and roundtables. The questionnaire asked informants to rank 23 commonly identified issues with respect to the impact of digitalization on work and workers' rights, identify barriers to successful strategizing, and assess the nature of funding available for resource mobilization and coordination. Of the 100 informants who were approached for this study, either for an interview or to participate in a roundtable, 81 filled out the questionnaire. Of these 81 survey respondents, 21 were from the African region, 23 from the Asia-Pacific region, 18 from the Latin American region, and 19 from North America and the EU regions.


### 2.2.1 Aggregate findings on issues identified

Issues identified by informants (at the aggregate level) as the most important are provided in Figure 3 (the full list of options can be found in Annexure 4).

The highest-ranking issues, each of which were rated as the most important by close to 75

**Figure 3:** Issues identified as most important





percent of informants, concerned the growing deterioration of labor conditions and associated institutional frameworks as a result of digitalization. These included erosion of standard employment and labor policies, dilution of workers' rights/working conditions, weakening of collective bargaining mechanisms, and deterioration of social protection for workers.

The second set of issues, which over 60 percent of informants highlighted, concerned the conditions of workers in e-commerce supply chains and web-based platforms, and the disproportionate impact of digitalization on women workers (identified as an issue of highest importance by close to 80 percent informants) and on marginalized social groups, including workers of color (identified by 67 percent informants as an issue of highest importance).

Seventy-five percent of informants identified policies for the governance of data resources, and 67 percent ranked the need for robust data protection laws as issues of highest importance, thus underscoring the centrality of data to the issue of workers' rights in the digital economy.

## 2.2.2 Regional-level breakdown of issues

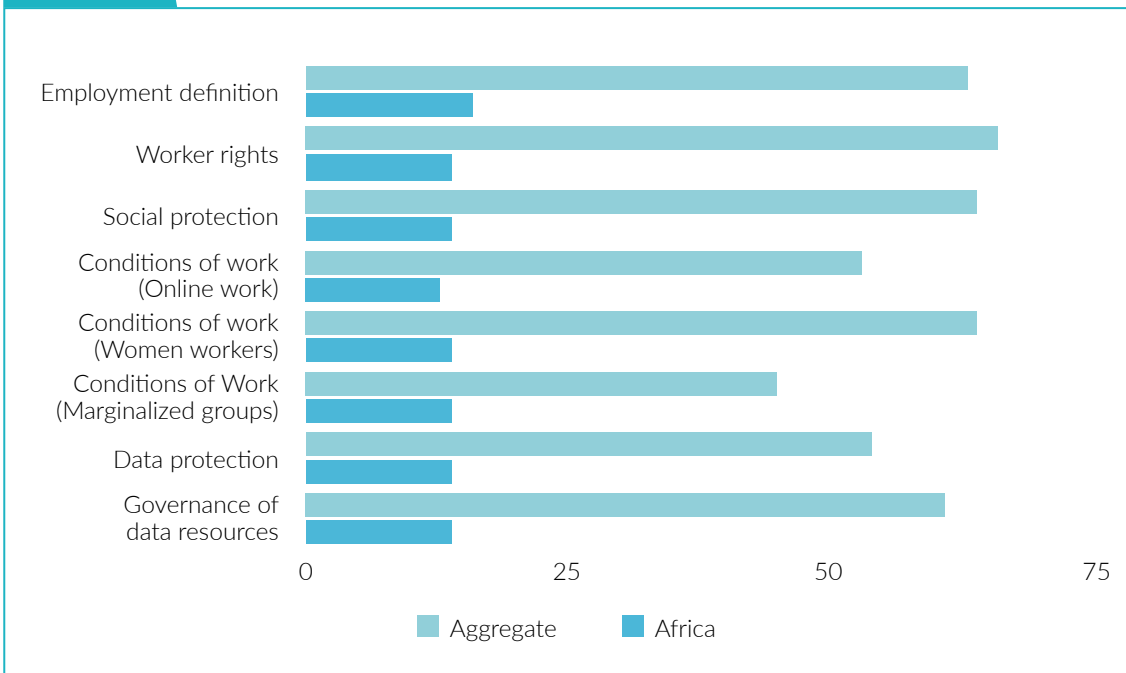
In the regional breakdown of this data, as is visible in Figure 3, most points of emphasis and general trends were the same across regions, although some assumed regional-level particularities, reflecting the orientation of actors working in those locations. Issues of highest importance that were common across regions included:

1. Dilution of workers' rights/working conditions and weakening of collective bargaining rights
2. Deterioration of social protections for workers
3. Policies for governance of data resources
4. Need for data protection laws
5. Disproportionate impact of digitalization on women workers

In the African region, alongside issues identified at the aggregate level, informants highlighted the lack of access to digital capabilities as an issue of highest importance,



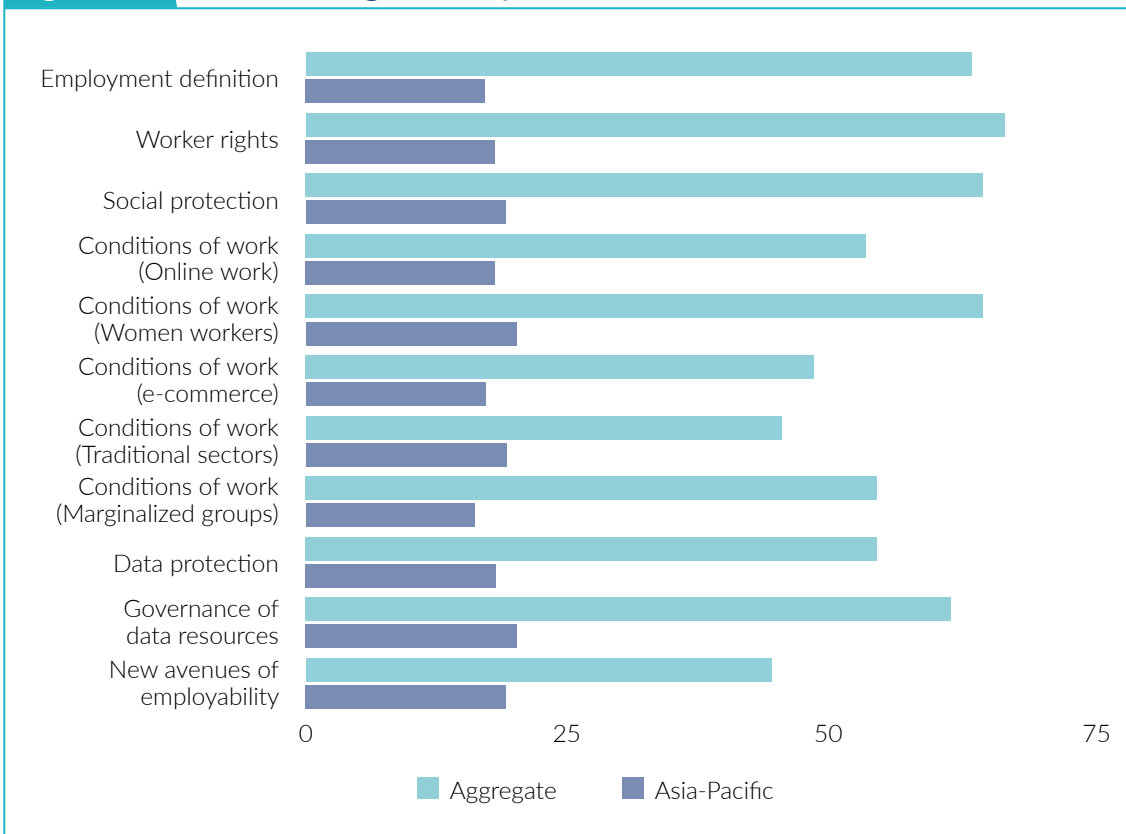
**Figure 4: Issues of highest importance- Africa**



reflecting the region's digital capability divide (see Figure 4).

Within the Asia-Pacific region, alongside issues identified at the aggregate level, informants

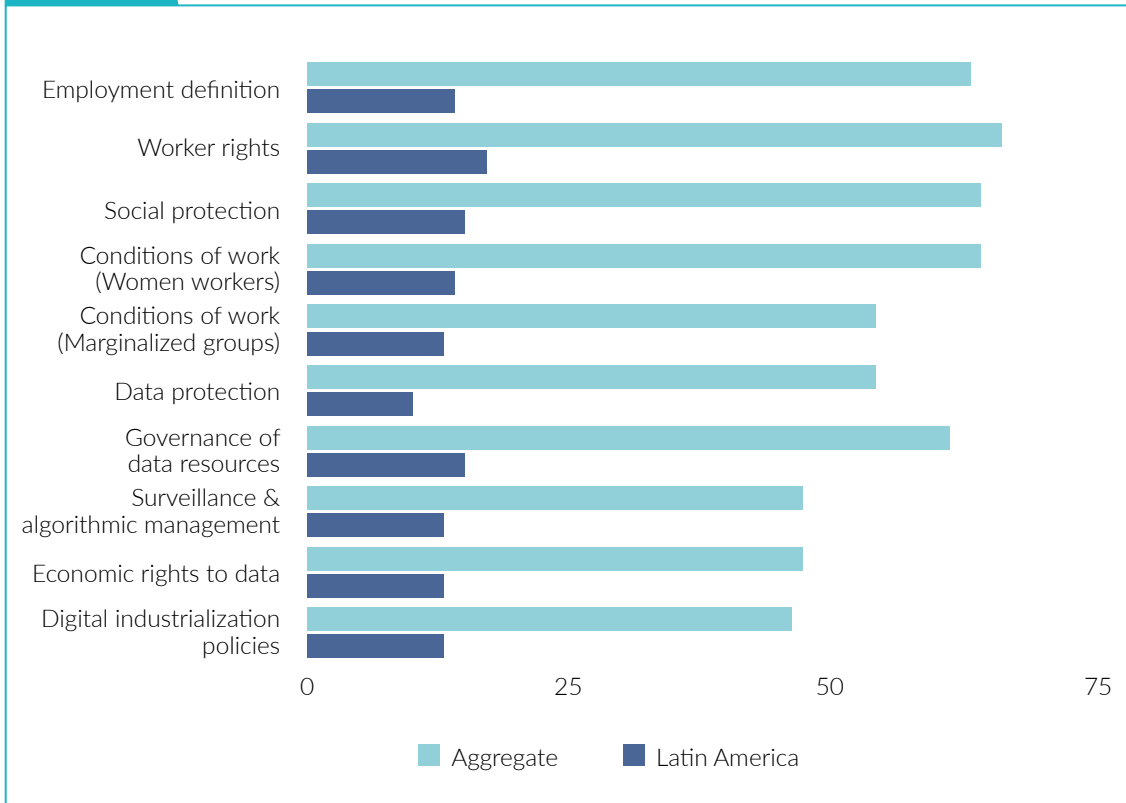
**Figure 5: Issues of highest importance- Asia-Pacific**



ranked the conditions of workers in traditional sectors (for example, manufacturing and agriculture) that have been transformed/disrupted by digitization, as well as new avenues of employability for the hitherto disadvantaged, as issues of highest importance (see Figure 5).

In Latin America, alongside issues identified at the aggregate level, informants ranked

**Figure 6: Issues of highest importance- Latin America**



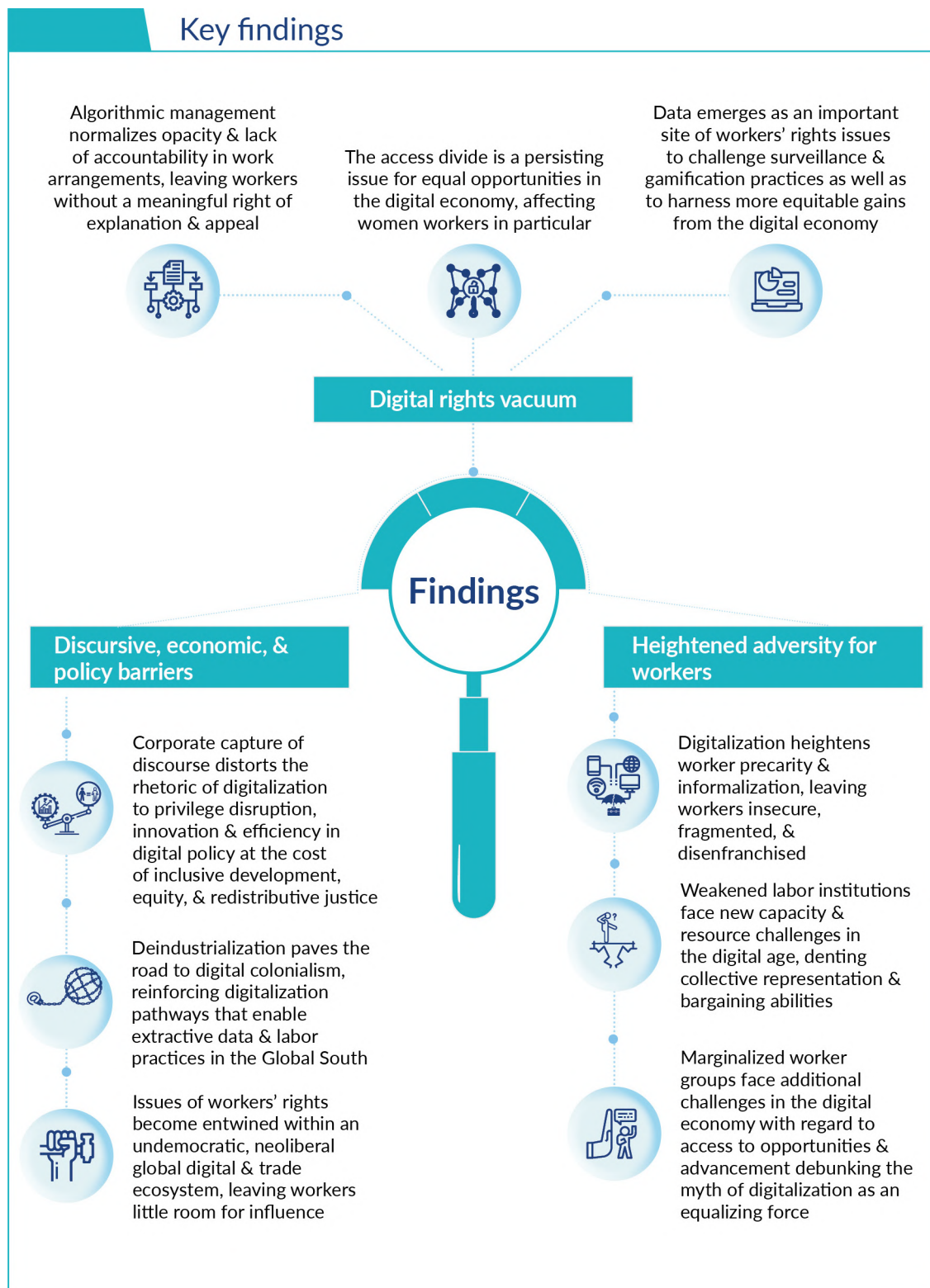
policies on digital industrialization and digital sovereignty as issues of highest importance (see Figure 6).

It should be noted that the questionnaire was limited in scope and application, covering only a small numerical sample. The data collected serves primarily to consolidate a snapshot of commonly identified issues which have been subsequently probed and elucidated through interviews and roundtables. The questionnaire data, thus, does not lend itself to a deeper analysis but rather complements the findings from qualitative research that are discussed in the following section.



## 2.3 Actors' perception of key issues

Through structured interviews and roundtables, insights from over 100 informants across various constituencies were captured for this study. Informants' perceptions of key issues and responses are synthesized here (see Figure 7).





## 2.3.1 Corporate capture of discourse distorts the rhetoric of digitalization

A fundamental problem that informants – trade unions, civil society organizations (CSOs), representatives of government, and multilateral agencies – noted was the sway that neoliberal discourse held in molding the digital economy, especially amongst institutions of governance and development.

The significant discursive power of the narrative that constructs digitalization as a disruptive pathway for innovation and growth has obscured more balanced and critical perspectives. Informants highlighted how the rhetoric of digitalization and efficiency has gained currency and is actively promoted by market interests, state actors as well as international financial and development institutions. In many countries of the Global South, policy making around the digital economy and workers' rights is influenced by this narrative.

This thinking, inspired by the success story of Silicon Valley and the powerful draw of techno-solutionism, often does not take into account the ground realities in these countries. Valorizing deregulated, business-friendly environments, it endorses a singular view of entrepreneurialism. As one informant put it:



There is the idea of entrepreneurship as the great engine of innovation. This is an innovation mediated by a technological and economic imaginary which is imported from Silicon Valley. With very little incentive for anything different in that sense, we have local platforms and local innovation that reproduce the same logic.

– Paola Ricaurte, Universidad de Monterrey



The entrepreneurial narrative operates at different levels. As an expert from a multilateral organization pointed out, globally, significant investments are made towards pushing a pro-market/de-regulation frame of engagement with emerging issues, accompanied by a lobbying apparatus advocating for legislative agreements that consolidate the power of Big Tech firms. Further, the co-option of national business elites through mergers, acquisitions, and lucrative partnerships, particularly in the technology sector, creates a bulwark against their participation in industrial policy agendas to build local capacities and improve digital



The significant discursive power of the narrative that constructs digitalization as a disruptive pathway for innovation and growth has obscured more balanced and critical perspectives.



sovereignty.

Not wishing to lose out on the ability to attract Big Tech investments from the Global North and in a bid to prop up their domestic success stories, developing countries engage in a race to the bottom to offer incentives such as tax breaks, business-friendly operational environments and exemptions from labor laws. In a context where compliance with labor standards is already underenforced, such approaches to digitalization further disadvantage workers. As was pointed out by one informant:



There is a lot of funding going into the type of narrative that promotes the interests of digital powers like the “free flow of data”, “no data localization”, “no need for local presence of TNCs”. This strengthens the position of the lobby group.

– Representative of Multilateral Organization



Beyond active blocking or circumvention of labor laws in developing nations, the dominant digitalization narrative works against the interests of workers at other levels as well. Informants highlighted the nature of discourses around automation, quality jobs and job



Discursive obfuscation runs the risk of uprooting workers’ rights issues from their structural antecedents, spinning job creation as a problem for the global technocracy to ‘solve’ or ‘hack’ innovatively.

creation, increasingly being defined by tech CEOs and the global managerial class through multi-stakeholder fora, and often in ways that have no resonance with the lived experience of those whose livelihoods are at stake. Much talk within policy circles, therefore, becomes about skilling and other lower-order agendas, without an adequate appreciation of the structural economic forces that merit attention when considering job creation and workers’ well-being. Such discursive obfuscation runs the risk of uprooting workers’ rights issues from their structural antecedents, spinning job creation as a problem for the global technocracy to solve or hack innovatively. It also circumscribes the types of problems that become salient in public

discourse and diverts resources away from more significant avenues of change.


The narrative capture of digital economy issues by corporate interests was something that almost all informants universally bore testament to. Any attempt at a long-term transformation of the status quo vis-a-vis digital technologies and the state of labor, informants asserted, would have to find ways of overcoming this discursive gridlock and redefining the ways in which we frame the digital economy.



## 2.3.2 Deindustrialization paves the road to digital colonialism

As the regional snapshots illustrate (see Figures 4, 5, and 6), digitalization has played out differently and has had varying impacts across regions. In tracing the structural antecedents of workers' rights issues in the digital economy, many informants, particularly from Africa and Latin America, pointed to the need to place current development trajectories within the historic continuities of globalization that have shaped Global South economies.

These regions have historically been imbricated in the value chains of older economic paradigms through colonial patterns of resource extraction, both human and natural. Early globalization and neoliberal reordering have further perpetuated patterns of dependency by ushering in widespread deindustrialization in African and Latin American economies. This has weakened nascent regulatory regimes and evacuated these regions of their domestic industrial capabilities in manufacturing, thus eliminating jobs and thwarting skill development in the process. This has also relegated these regions to the peripheries of the service economy and reshaped them into consumption markets for transnational corporations. Under these conditions, a digitalization pathway that enables extractive data and labor practices, and allows for a high degree of corporate capture of the undergirding infrastructure becomes the norm.



A digitalization pathway that enables extractive data and labor practices, and allows for a high degree of corporate capture of infrastructure is becoming the norm in the Global South.

Informants across constituencies highlighted these historical antecedents as foundational to the development issues at play in these regions, including a burgeoning informalized labor force, vast unevenness in economic growth, disinvestment in public infrastructure and high dependence on foreign economies and institutions. In determining policy and programmatic priorities on the future of work, informants therefore stressed the need to take into account this economic context to avoid the pitfall of ahistoricized course correctives. To this end, the failures of past proposals and frameworks for economic reform, pushed by international institutions to supplant homegrown development approaches, were also pointed out as a contributing factor. As one informant observed, "For 30 years, organizations like the World Bank and the OECD dismissed industrial policy as a problem, not a solution to the problem. They spent a lot of time dismantling institutions that had emerged in developing countries."

The continued reliance on privately-funded infrastructure, coupled with declining manufacturing capacity vulnerable to automation, will further heighten the dependence of African and Latin American economies on foreign corporations. Unless digital industrialization is taken up as a policy priority in developing nations, another cycle of deindustrialization is likely to follow, warned an informant from Latin America:

With older networks of production supplanted and value chains becoming digitized, work will





We see that in the most modern factories (nearly or fully automated), only some will be here for the local market. But the vast majority will not come here. We foresee a major deindustrialization and a loss of competitiveness, because we are going to be left with a backward industry. There are no states and governments thinking about this process. On the other hand, companies are concentrating their industry – or the best or most modern industry – in their parent countries.

– **Marino Vani**, IndustriALL Global Union (LATAM)




only become more fragmented, casualized and informalized in ways that perpetually disadvantage workers while extracting maximum value and efficiency for capital. A future which points to the endless digital colony of the Global South, mined for data and cheap labor by Big Tech platforms, spells further immiseration for workers.

### 2.3.3 An extractive, neoliberal global trade and financial regime is pitted against workers' rights

Informants pointed to the fact that issues of workers' rights and labor policy cannot be seen in isolation from each other, entwined as they are in the neoliberal global policy ecosystem that is setting the rules for the digital economy.

Sweeping digital trade rules are being pushed by tech corporations of the Global North and their parent countries to foreclose the policy space available to developing countries and thwart their bargaining powers on a number of fronts such as the ability to: 1) define appropriate data governance policy, 2) develop rules for business and mandate compliance with local laws, 3) ensure technology transfer to enrich local innovation, and 4) demand fair revenue shares from business operations. Most importantly, rules for work and workers' rights within the global value chain on very critical issues, such as algorithmic management



With older networks of production supplanted and value chains becoming digitized, work becomes more fragmented, casualized, and informalized, disadvantaging workers while being optimized for capital.'



practices, are increasingly being determined within these spaces that are impervious to democratic oversight. To quote one informant:



Trade rules are not actually about trade. They are reshaping the global economy, and using trade as a tool. Corporations are forum shopping to get them the most undemocratic policy making pathway. They cannot get it through the ILO which has a tripartite structure that involves workers. They use trade because 1) it's enforceable, and 2) undemocratic, as workers don't have as much of a voice on trade. Workers also have more clout at the domestic level but they don't have the resources to pay attention to the international level. That's why corporations are using that venue because there's so little funding for workers to participate at that venue.

– **Deborah James**, Center for Economic and Policy Research



As this excerpt highlights, the ability of workers to resist powerful tech actors or intervene meaningfully in their national policy processes is greatly diminished when the avenues of asserting their voice as well as the mechanisms of exerting pressure available to them cannot extend to the space of digital trade.

Moreover, aggressive platformization in the Global South, propped up by limitless venture capital, accords tech corporations enormous financial power to shape these markets and set unfair terms for labor, without the minimum corresponding obligations to pay back into the system. Countering a common narrative of digital innovation as a driver of growth, informants pointed to how platforms operated by Global North actors in Global South markets contributed little to the revenue streams of these economies beyond workers' earnings. Tech corporations, often positioning themselves as (mere) intermediaries, are able to exploit current taxation regimes at national and global levels to avoid contributing their fair share of revenue to domestic economies. As the study's roundtable participants repeatedly observed, this has had the effect of impoverishing the public welfare apparatus in these states, particularly during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.



Aggressive platformization in the Global South, propped up by limitless venture capital, accords tech corporations enormous financial power to shape these markets and set unfair terms for labor.



Indeed, the current, (mostly Northern owned/controlled and financed) structures of the platform economy not only impact labor market conditions, but also the economic and developmental outlook of countries in the Global South. As one informant stressed, “What we are witnessing is a new social contract where capital is let off the hook.”

## 2.3.4 Digitalization heightens worker precarity and informalization

Across regions and constituencies, informants highlighted heightened work precarity in the digital economy as a key issue. Precarious work – defined as unstable employment arrangements that are governed by disadvantageous contracts, marked by variant wage flow, lack job security, access to standard social protections, and collective bargaining rights – is certainly not unique to the digital context. To date, over half of the world’s workforce is employed in the informal economy and contends with precarity as a fact of livelihood (ILO, 2019). Decades of neoliberal economic policy have also reshaped global labor value chains in manufacturing sectors through offshoring, complex subcontracting practices and circumvention/dilution of labor laws to create deliberate informality in what is technically formal work. For instance, garment workers in Southeast Asia’s textile hubs who lost their full-time positions due to the pandemic did not get rehired when demand for labor bounced back. Instead, they were employed on a short-term contract basis or even as day workers.<sup>6</sup> As one informant summed it up:




The cheapening of labor in the Global South hasn’t really helped their development experience [...] You’ve got the massive rise of highly informalized urban economies, which essentially amounts to an industrial reserve army. So, in those parts of the business class that want to produce stuff, and a lot of them don’t, they have cheap labor on their doorstep. But this doesn’t diversify your economy; it doesn’t strengthen your domestic markets; it doesn’t build up skills and capacities at the workplace because you don’t have control in that, or you’re not interested in that. So, it’s a highly polarized, highly fragmented relationship in which labor gets the short end of the stick for sure.

– Richard Kozul-Wright, UNCTAD



<sup>6</sup> Input from informant at Asia-Pacific roundtable on Work and Workers in the Digital Economy: Defining Philanthropic Priorities: convened on 30 August 2021





The digitalization of economic activities is aggravating this trend, particularly in the Global South, on account of various structural factors. Platforms continue to exploit and benefit from ambiguity in regulatory frameworks that concern gig workers, including employment classification and the extension of standard rights and protections associated with the same. Interviews conducted as part of this study highlighted recurrent issues in gig work with respect to uncertain pay, opaque contracts and arbitrary policy changes by platforms. Despite some successful challenges by workers (see sections 1 and 2), by and large, platforms are able to abdicate their responsibility as employers. Informants also called out misplaced perceptions around the lucrateness of gig work that lead workers to make risky and imprudent investments in order to find an entry point into work that is, in reality, undependable and precarious. As one informant illustrated:

“

In countries like India, when somebody decides to lease a car or decides to even purchase a car just to be able to participate on some of these platforms, it is the riskiest kind of investment. We've seen it play out quite brutally. Workers' cars have been seized and they haven't been able to pay back debt. Many have committed suicide because of these factors.

– **Noopur Raval**, AI Now Institute

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It is not only the current precarity of workers in the digital economy that needs to be addressed. Informants also emphasized that with fewer jobs being created overall and an impending stagnation in employment, work, in large part, could become permanently ad hoc and prone to precarization:

“

One issue we are interested in is the long-term horizon of the gig economy. What is going to happen to these gig workers? Are there genuine prospects for growth and upskilling in these forms of work? Are there ways to generate this? Or can it only function as it is, and so it locks people into very particular income ranges/standards of living?

– **Poon King Wang**, Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities

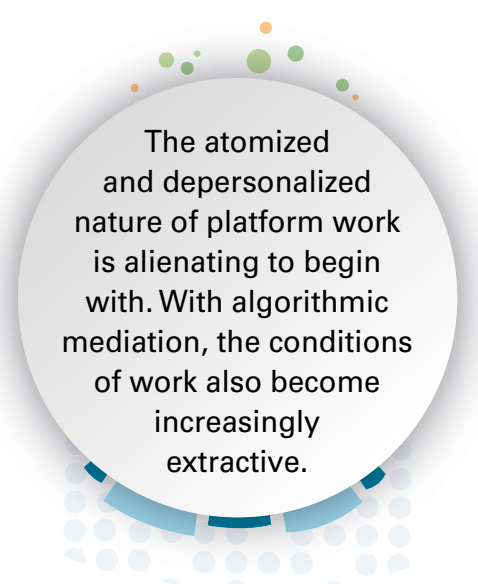
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## 2.3.5 Algorithmic management normalizes lack of accountability in work arrangements

One of the characteristic features of work within the digital economy is being subject to the authority of algorithms, as AI is increasingly used to manage, surveil, and discipline large workforces on various platforms and within supply chains. Informants highlighted this as an area of critical concern, with implications for workers' rights.

The atomized and depersonalized nature of platform work is alienating to begin with. With algorithmic mediation, the conditions of work also become increasingly extractive. The gamification of workers, pushed to work longer and harder, happens through targeted incentives and punitive ratings systems. This is buttressed by constant surveillance of workers' activities, and monitoring of their output, movements and rest times, thus creating a situation where the pressures to deliver and the expected rate of productivity are extremely high. Tweaks to the system are constantly made through this form of data surveillance. Informants likened the pace and arrangement of this work to older factory lines and a new form of Taylorism in which workers' data serves as a means to micromanage their time and extract as much out of them as possible.



The atomized and depersonalized nature of platform work is alienating to begin with. With algorithmic mediation, the conditions of work also become increasingly extractive.



Algorithmic data management of workers is akin to reproducing the first Industrial Revolution, where workers were bonded and locked up, worked for 20 hours or more in a day, and had no right to a family life.

– Dr Onoho'Omhen Ebhohimhen, Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC)



These problems are aggravated, informants point out, by the strong asymmetries of knowledge between workers and platforms. Owing to language barriers or a lack of legal understanding, workers in many parts of the world are often unaware of what they are signing up for when they join a platform. Consequently, they also remain ignorant of the rights they have, or the procedures they may take recourse to in case of any issues. More often than not, platforms lack genuine grievance redressal mechanisms, leaving workers at the mercy of algorithmic judgments that have near-total power over their work and remuneration. As one informant observed:





“

Traditionally, it is the human resource management department that we work closely with in ensuring that the rights and conditions of workers are being protected, but nowadays, there's a machine doing all these things that people used to do.

– **Khamati Mugalia**, East African Trade Union Federation (EATU)

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Further, the opacity of algorithms can potentially mask manipulative and unfair practices, as union representatives in particular pointed out. Provisional attempts by trade unions to document how algorithms determine pay rates seem to point to cases of wage theft, with inconsistencies in the way particular rules are implemented.

Prevalent algorithmic surveillance and management often has unanticipated and ambiguous consequences. Research undertaken by Caribou Digital, one of whose representatives was interviewed for this study, indicates that the surveillance aspects of algorithms were augmenting female labor participation in parts of Asia. Women workers in Caribou Digital's research showed a preference for platform work because of in-built surveillance they felt it added a layer of security to their work and male members of the household were more willing to let their wives and daughters hold jobs if they were able to track their movements (Caribou Digital, 2021). These outcomes, problematic as they are, point to the complex ways in which actors contend with the algorithmic management of work. Together, they have long-term social implications for the rights and liberties of women in the workforce.

Beyond data-based surveillance and gamification embedded within algorithmic regimes that govern work, civil society researchers also pointed to the dangers inherent in using AI to screen job applications and make decisions about who to hire and promote. As one informant from Latin America observed:


“

There needs to be a debate about how this complementarity between human reviewers and artificial intelligence can happen in the employment arena. It is really the first filter that artificial intelligence performs to determine whether or not a job application, that is, whether or not a CV goes to the second stage. Or perhaps, this type of technology can be used to finish validating a certain decision.

– **Eduardo Carrillo**, Tecnología y Comunidad (TEDIC)

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The use of machine learning protocols in such evaluative tasks have already demonstrated the potential to reproduce biases based on race, gender, income and other factors in the context of finance and education. Unless strongly regulated when deployed, these technologies are likely to further entrench existing social inequities.

When probed about the specter of AI-led automation, informants were fairly split on its implications. While some expressed concern about the potential ramifications of automation for jobs, others were more skeptical of the kind of projections currently being made, noting that such changes are an opportunity to restructure the economy and create new jobs. While differing on the future outlook for automation, informants were in consensus over its disruptive nature and acknowledged that it was likely to accelerate in industries which already house a deeply impoverished and precarious workforce. They emphasized the need for strong public oversight for these transitions, and significant investments to ensure that the livelihoods of workers were protected as new technologies were integrated into existing work arrangements.

### 2.3.6 Data is an important site of workers' rights issues

There was a general consensus among informants on the central role of data in the digital economy and, by extension, in work and workers' issues. One informant put it so:



What digitization has done, which is different from what we saw in an earlier era of globalization, is leading to the extraction of data as a resource, and to the use of that data to manipulate, optimize and further extract labor [...] We need to democratize the decision making around that data, and that needs to involve governments, workers and their representatives.

– **Researcher, North America**



On more specific issues around data, informants' responses displayed a considerable range of perspectives and points of emphasis.

Informants, particularly from the research community, pointed to data deficits in the developing world as an issue. They regarded inadequacies of state-led efforts in tracking recent real-time data on labor trends in the Global South, and the inability of actors in the space to “know” the full picture as hindrances to research and policy making.

Most representatives from digital rights organizations highlighted the dangers of using data for surveillance, and stressed the protection of workers' personal data as an important issue. They dwelt on the legislative vacuum in this area in many parts of the world, and the extent to which data mining is rapidly proliferating to every sector of the economy.

While union representatives also raised this issue, it was noteworthy that a number of them also emphasized the economic dimensions of data and data-based value creation and distribution. They stressed the importance of thinking through ways to make gains from data-led economic growth more equitable and leverage that to the benefit of workers, while acknowledging the tension of this objective with personal data protection concerns. One union representative said this was becoming an important agenda for workers:

“

Our collective bargaining will now be focused on data contributed by workers on the platform [...] Somebody has run 2,000 deliveries on your platform, you know how much data you have generated? What is the outcome of that data? What are the benefits that are dependent upon that kind of data for the platform?

– **Ayoade Ibrahim**, The International Alliance of App-Based Transport Workers (IAATW)

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While informants, in most cases, were seized of the need to recognize the economic value of data and take the conversation on data beyond the individual to the collective, they differed on the extent to which the state should be involved on this issue. While some were wary of the dangers posed by an economic rights-based regime, such as data being instrumentalized to further state power and the interests of domestic elites, others who recommended a policy and legal regime for the economic governance of data argued that the potential dangers could be offset through the checks and balances laid down by a commons-based framework.

These contesting viewpoints encapsulate the highly contentious debates surrounding the economic governance of data, ones that are currently evident in the nascent approaches being tested by the EU and a few other countries. While the need for workers to engage with questions of data ownership and governance and be active participants in shaping legislative debates was well-recognized, informants pointed out that this conversation was currently out of the reach of many workers and large sections of civil society. In order to bridge this gap, informants across constituencies unanimously highlighted the need to create awareness and build capacities on these issues in ways that would benefit citizens and workers.

### 2.3.7 Weakened labor institutions face new capacity challenges in the digital age

In assessing the diminished ability of workers to successfully challenge and resist current forms of exploitation and denial of rights, informants cited the gradual weakening of trade unions and the labor movement as an important contributing factor. Trade union representatives pointed to transformations in global supply chains, legal changes that have



proved detrimental to workers' organizing, and economic policies that have steadily eroded welfare institutions even in the developed world. As one informant observed:

“

I genuinely believe that, globally there has been a strategic mistake (in) social movements and (by) donors and others to not really address the fact that the attacks on unions are connected to everything else that we need as a prosperous and fair society.

– Union federation representative, Asia Pacific Region

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Already struggling with declining memberships and an increasingly hostile political and legal environment, trade unions now also have to contend with fresh challenges emerging from the digital economy. Among other things, the atomization of workers, opaque algorithmic mediation of work and legal ambiguities in work status call for a rethink of organizing and mobilizing strategies.

The fact that unions are only able to work towards capacity building and fight for the reinstatement of basic social protections – as the older, more ambitious goals of collective bargaining agreements seem increasingly out of reach – is an indication of the scale of the problem, union representatives claimed.

## 2.3.8 Access divide is a persisting issue for equal opportunities in the digital economy

While its prominence seems to have receded in public policy discourses, informants from the developing world, particularly civil society and union representatives, highlighted differential access to the digital as an important issue. As one informant pointed out, simple factors, such as cost, continue to determine who has access and who does not:

“

On one hand, depending on how ubiquitous access to internet and data has become, there can be prolific growth. But in other places, particularly in southern Africa, where the cost of internet and data services is very high, you literally have to choose between buying groceries and paying for data bundles.


– Cynthia Antwi-Dodoo, RealFin Consulting

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Large segments of the population in Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America still lack access to the basic infrastructure to be able to participate in the digital economy in any meaningful sense. The absence of smartphones and laptops, inadequate internet access, lack of recourse to formal banking, and a lack of basic digital literacy continue to be problems that are exacerbated in rural and remote regions.

These barriers to access typically have a strong gendered component, informants explained. Across much of the developing world, it is common for household bank accounts and digital devices to be under the custody and control of the male member(s) of the household, thereby limiting women's independent access to finances or an online presence:



Absence of smartphones and laptops, inadequate internet access, lack of recourse to formal banking, and a lack of basic digital literacy continue to be problems that are exacerbated in rural and remote regions.



In our research during Covid-19, we found out that there is perhaps one smartphone in the household, but usually it is the husband or the son that owns the smartphone. Even when women do have access, it is for very limited hours in the day.

– **Salonie Muralidhara**, SEWA Cooperative Federation



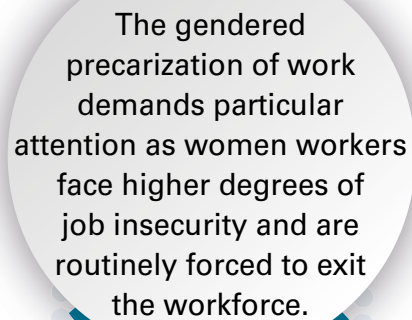
The digital divide that has become further entrenched during the pandemic, remains a major impediment to deploying digital technologies as a motor for economic growth and job creation. As informants repeatedly emphasized, it is crucial for policy makers and multilateral bodies to exercise caution in offering the digital economy as the next “fix” to development, without thinking about the deep-seated inequalities and problems of access. The access divide calls for a measured and enabling approach to adopting new technologies, informants contended.

### 2.3.9 Marginalized workers face additional challenges in the digital economy

While the outlook for workers' rights is bleak in general, it is particularly challenging for marginalized workers, including women workers, informal workers, workers in rural areas, workers with disabilities, immigrant workers, criminalized populations, workers of color and workers from sexual minority groups.



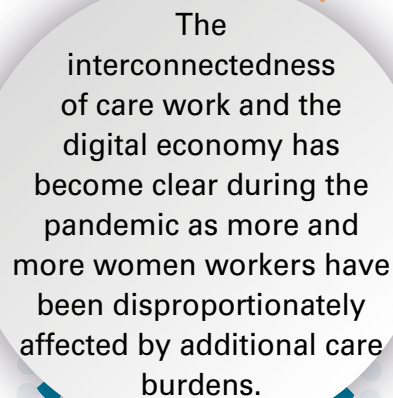
For marginalized groups, informants noted, skill and capacity gaps – as also the access gap discussed earlier – become starker, hampering opportunities for market participation. The gendered precarization of work demands particular attention as women workers face higher degrees of job insecurity and are routinely forced to exit the workforce. As one informant pointed out, middle-class women workers in Latin America have been seeing a gradual erosion in job security and heightened precarity over the years, an impact that is not only economic in nature but also has deep psychosocial ripple effects. Informants also pointed to the barriers that women workers face in organizing, with gender-related labor issues often ignored by mainstream union agendas. One such issue is the interconnectedness of care work and the digital economy, which has become very clear during the pandemic as more and more women workers have been disproportionately affected by additional care burdens.



The gendered precarization of work demands particular attention as women workers face higher degrees of job insecurity and are routinely forced to exit the workforce.


At the macro level, informants noted how the sectors that employ large numbers of women workers, workers of color and immigrant workers remain understudied and under-invested in. Moreover, policy and social programming continue to be silent on gendered labor markets such as domestic work and allied services, as well as grey market categories such as sex work, perpetuating the invisibilization of the most vulnerable sections of the workforce.

In fact, digitalization effects a double whammy in such sectors which have seen an unhelpful formalization creep due to an uptake in online location-based service preference, a phenomenon compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic. Under these conditions, the agency of the individual worker is diminished as the worker is swallowed up into the digital ecosystem, reversing the marginal gains that have been made along the way within the informal context that while imperfect acceded some agency to the worker.



The interconnectedness of care work and the digital economy has become clear during the pandemic as more and more women workers have been disproportionately affected by additional care burdens.

In reflecting upon these issues, informants acknowledged that most of the current organizing strategies, centered around the older paradigm of economic activity, may be letting down these groups of workers who are already at the margins of standard employment frameworks. Despite the modest successes that have been achieved on this front through legal battles over employee classification, informants admitted that more radical perspectives are needed for social care policies to reach the invisibilized and informal segments of the labor market.



As the digital economy has grown in size, a constant refrain has been the novel opportunities it could offer workers with disabilities (Datta & Singh, 2021; Rafi, 2021 ). Indeed, this seems like a fairly intuitive claim, given that in comparison to older economic paradigms rooted in industrial manufacturing, the digital economy lends itself better to including persons with disabilities in the workforce. Newer jobs opening up in the digitized service sector often do away with the need for long commutes, mobility-based tasks or serious physical exertion, which otherwise act as significant barriers for workers with disabilities.

Despite these potentially enabling factors, informants working in this area offered a perspective that was both nuanced and less optimistic. As the sociologist Richard Scotch, who has been closely following the discourse on this explained, the absence of persons with disabilities in the workforce is the result of structural factors. Workers with disabilities typically face significant hurdles in education, and often come from low-income backgrounds. Given the gradual erosion in social protections as well as educational infrastructure, they have become increasingly less able to transition into higher-skilled forms of work that are becoming available in the digital economy. Moreover, while workers with disabilities have the potential to, and often do, excel and deliver high-quality work in these positions, they may also require greater resources, longer training periods and more time to complete tasks. Extreme emphasis on productivity and time-bound output generation that characterizes tech jobs in general and platformized labor in particular – such as interfaces that track the time spent on each task and evaluate work accordingly – has made it harder for workers with disabilities to cope, Scotch noted.

“

The pace and standardization of work, which is driven to some extent by technological advances, may have negative consequences for people with disabilities because they can be less easily accommodated in work processes [...] If we look at physical workplaces, one example is Amazon's warehouses which operate at an extremely high pace. People cannot take breaks and they are timed and monitored till they're pushed to the very brink of their human capacity. People with disabilities may not work very well in those situations [...] There are similar demands placed in virtual environments in terms of time and productivity.

– Richard Scotch, University of Texas

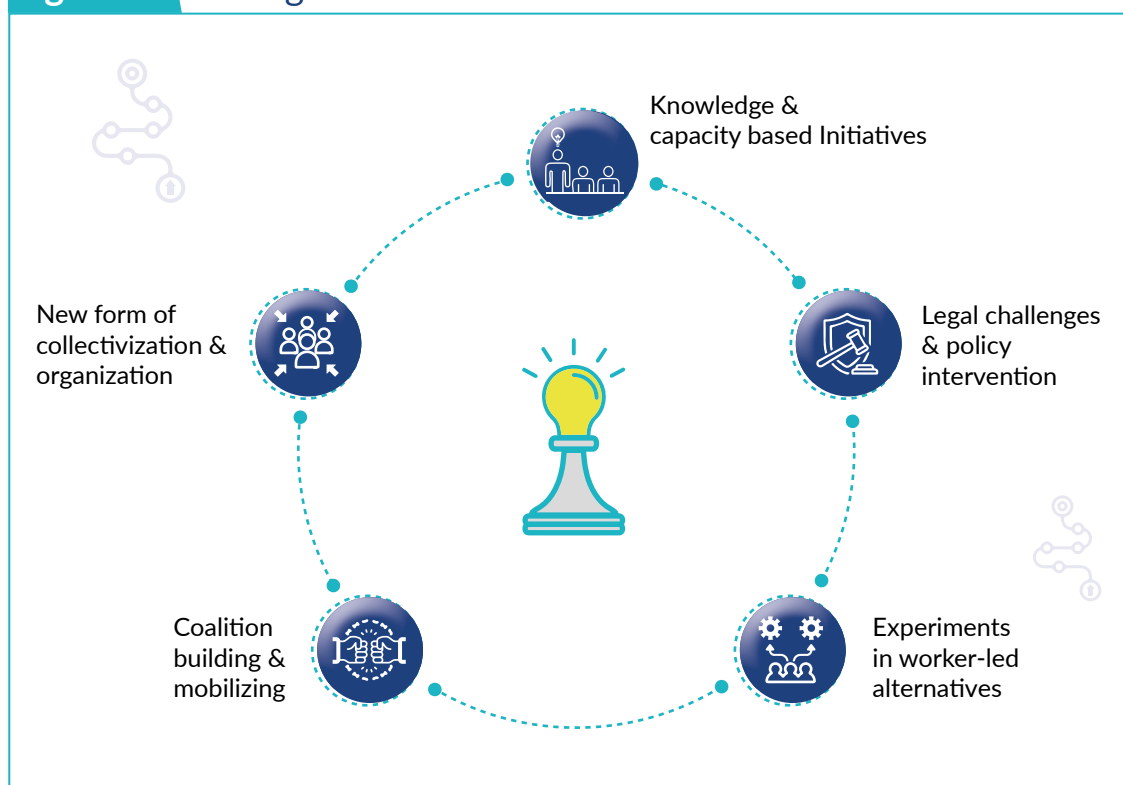
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## 2.4 Emerging responses

The constituencies affected by and/or engaging with the impact of digitalization on work and workers' rights are responding to the above-mapped trends and issues in various ways (see Figure 8).<sup>7</sup> These constituencies include trade unions and workers' associations/organizations, social enterprises and cooperatives, multilateral institutions, civil society actors working in digital rights and economic justice issues, and research and academic communities.

**Figure 8:** Strategies from the frontlines




In interviews and roundtables, while noting the positive trend of emerging responses and strategies and recognizing their potential for change, informants took a rather measured view of their larger impact and long-term viability, pointing to the limitations and challenges of these efforts.

### 2.4.1 Trade unions, workers' associations/organizations and cooperatives

A range of worker-led and worker-centered efforts, driven by actors such as trade unions, workers' associations/organizations and cooperatives, have been observed in the recent past. These include:

<sup>7</sup> This study has accessed a wide range of initiatives in the digital space as reported by informants. However, the study makes no claims to this being an exhaustive list. Nor should the inclusion of these initiatives in discussions be construed as any form of endorsement.





**Knowledge and capacity-based initiatives:** Through research and capacity-building initiatives on the digital economy, trade unions have been working to deepen an understanding of issues pertaining to the digital economy within their ranks. In Africa and Latin America, the global trade union federation PSI has been working to develop digital capacities and expertise of union members through a global project of workshops and trainings on the future of work. PSI has also set up a research organization that works on corporate tax evasion. Similarly, the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) has been attempting to increase awareness of data rights for platform workers among its constituencies. In Uruguay, the union federation Federación Uruguaya de Empleados de Comercio y Servicios (Uruguayan Federation of Trade and Services Employees – FUCEYS) collaborated with the Instituto Nacional de Empleo y Formación Profesional (National Institute of Employment and Vocational Training-INEFOP) and the Chamber of Commerce of Uruguay on a research project aimed at analyzing the impact of technology-mediated jobs across sectors.

These efforts, undertaken with a view to educating workers, raising awareness and building perspectives on digital economy issues, have met with limited success, especially in the Global South. In these countries, the implications and impacts of digitalization still remain largely unknowable on account of vast information and data asymmetries between worker constituencies and technology corporations. Efforts by unions and workers' organizations to plug these gaps via research and data-gathering exercises are currently limited in scope as these groups have no insight or access to the wealth of work- and worker-related digital intelligence resting with corporations. Even with data disclosure efforts brokered through tripartite agreements, such as those led by the Laudes Foundation (2020), data that workers can use, continues to be largely unavailable. Access to government or publicly-held data remains limited as well, with such efforts and capacities either lacking entirely or unavailable to worker constituencies. As one informant observed:

“


To try to solve a problem, you have to know what the problem is. And for that, you need to have access to data. When the University of Rosario, together with Red de activistas laborales (REDAL) and the Trade Union School, carried out a study with important field work, and they wanted to have official data from the Ministry of Technologies or Labor, they did not get an answer.

– Trade Union Representative, Latin America

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**New forms of collectivization and organization:** Informants pointed to several new methods and strategies by which workers in the digital economy are forging networks of solidarity and collective action. For traditional trade unions, this has meant going beyond standard recruitment channels, and reaching out to and building connections with an





increasingly dispersed, atomized workforce. For instance, in Latin America (in Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Colombia), UNIGlobal has been able to bring together workers in the business process outsourcing (BPO) sector through online outreach, virtual campaigns and internet advertising on platforms such as Facebook. The Indonesia Metal Workers Union has broadened its scope to include platform workers and has set up a branch to facilitate their formal representation. Similarly, in Uganda, the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU) has worked with Ola drivers to collectivize them.

New forms of unionization and collectivization by workers are also on the rise (IFAT is an example of this). In speaking about this initiative, Sangam Tripathy said:



A large part of our efforts – and indeed, the origin of our organization as IFAT – results from the aim of trying to rebuild the strength of unions and to try and instill a collective identity amongst platform workers. This is a huge task, and it has been the bulk of our work over the last few years.

– Sangam Tripathy, IFAT



FUECYS in Uruguay, which helped create a delivery workers' union, is working to open up negotiating channels with policy makers for the delivery workers' sector. The organization has also worked with INEFOP to develop a road safety course for delivery workers. Various innovative digital strike campaigns seen in Latin America over the past few years are worth noting. While informants conceded their limited impact, these campaigns are good starting points to think of new models of organizing. However, for each trade union that has kept up with the shifting goalposts of the labor movement on account of the digital paradigm, there are others that continue to lack the perspective and awareness that can motivate them to put these issues on their platform, informants noted.

Apart from unionization, informants highlighted the growing ecosystem of worker-focused organizations that are pursuing better outcomes for workers in different ways. For instance, older models of support for offline work are being refashioned to fit the digital economy context. The rise of self-help groups organized by women platform workers in Africa has created a supportive space for women to share and address their concerns, one informant observed. Informal scattered groups have emerged to provide mutual aid to workers who no longer have access to protections within standard employment. An example of this is the Rapid Response Team, an informal organization that provides mutual aid access to platform drivers in need of support. Social intermediary organizations such as SMART in Belgium have been providing training and services to workers on platform cooperativism principles.

Cross-class solidarity efforts have emerged in recent times in the Global North, with high-skill, high-income tech workers amplifying and participating in the struggles of platform workers and other low-wage workers in the value chains of Big Tech. For instance, in October 2020, as Uber and other platform companies' sought to circumvent the employee benefits of drivers and delivery workers in California with vague offers of "portable benefits" and "gratuities", a group of engineers in these companies joined workers in demanding that their benefits not be taken away.

Informants also pointed to technology-led strategies being used by workers and for worker well-being. These range from convening simple messaging groups that help workers coordinate and share grievances, to introducing blockchain technologies in supply chains to improve transparency for producers in China. Indonesia's IT *jalanan* (street programmers), a loose collective of workers with technological skills, has been experimenting with techno-hacks and algorithmic bugs that can manipulate platforms' algorithms.

While the proliferation of these efforts is indeed a welcome trend, informants, many of whom have been instrumental in leading these initiatives, took a rather somber view of the persistent barriers to collectivization on digital economy issues. The first group of barriers, informants pointed out, included incarceration of union leaders, banning of union activities and a general rollback of freedoms of association and organizing in many countries that impeded effective organizing.

Second, informants highlighted the inability of workers' organizations to expand current mandates and engage with digital economy issues on account of competing priorities. Third, unevenness in the strength and negotiating powers of different trade unions and workers' associations/organizations', informants said, barred some from effectively participating in decision making on issues related to workers' rights.

These infrastructure and access challenges have been worsened by the pandemic. Many actors are currently struggling not only with sustaining and scaling efforts outside their direct locus of action, but also with adapting their strategies and operations in a largely online environment. What adds to this bleak scenario is the increased push for deregulation in the Global South in the aftermath of Covid-19, leading to a race to the bottom to salvage economic downturn by undercutting labor. The immense economic and political power of digital corporations and platforms as well as the larger neoliberal environment, largely impervious to workers' interests, remain enduring roadblocks in asserting workers' rights, informants noted. As the representative of one workers' organization based in the Global North put it:

“


We do not yet have power in terms of playing a determinative role. We can play a more check-and-balance role and curb the most excessive ends of this [referring to the phenomenon of worker exploitation]. But it is not enough to stop the sector-wide conditions.

– **Andrea DehIndorf**, United4Respect

”



Even in cases where workers have attempted to challenge unfair terms of work through technological subversion, as is the case with IT jalandhar (discussed above), platforms have been quick to identify and stop these maneuvers. As one informant noted, “this is technology, and those who have [a] lot of resources will win.”



Instances of workers recognizing and embracing the data opportunity for collective benefit and solidarity have been a crucial response to platformization and data extractivism.

**Experiments in worker-led alternatives:** Instances of workers recognizing and embracing the data opportunity for collective benefit and solidarity have been a crucial response to platformization and data extractivism. For instance, Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), a women’s cooperative federation in India, is attempting to build a farm-to-fork platform for women farmer producer cooperatives. Similarly, fishermen in South Africa have developed a Software-as-a-Service (SAAS) platform to supply to restaurants directly, cutting out the middlemen. There have been many instances of drivers coming together to offer services similar to Ola and Uber using messaging networks. In these initiatives, drivers work to foster a trust-based network of peers as well as customers through referrals.

Workers’ collectives are also trying to promote data trusts and cooperatives. Worker Info Exchange is an opt-in data cooperative for workers, working to contest algorithmic decision-making processes. Driver’s Seat in the US is a gig worker-owned technology platform that empowers ride-share and delivery drivers to use their own data to take control of their work at both the individual and collective level.

#### Box 4: Worker-led alternatives in Argentina

In Argentina, the Federación Argentina de Cooperativas de Trabajo de Tecnología Innovación y Conocimiento (Argentine Federation of Technology, Innovation and Knowledge Worker Cooperatives-FACTTIC) is a network of cooperatives developing open source software solutions with an emphasis on data sovereignty for users. FACTTIC has developed applications for the union management of Asociación de Personal de Plataformas (APP), a platform workers’ organization. It has also partnered with the bike delivery cooperative federation CoopCycle to roll out platform operations for delivery in cities. CoopCycle, which is operational in two locations, is looking to scale to the national level through alliances with local businesses and expansion into new locations.




State support through the National Institute of Associativism and Social Economy (INAES) under Argentina's Ministry of Productive Development has allowed the initiative to benefit from public institutional resources. Further, through collaborations with the Cooperatives of the Americas (the Latin American chapter of the International Cooperative Association), there has been an effort to set up the CoopCycle y Gcoop to spearhead similar initiatives in Mexico, Chile and Peru.

FACTTIC's collaboration with CoopCycle amply demonstrates the need for local contextualizing when importing ideas of platform cooperativism from the Global North. In developing solutions for the Argentine context, CoopCycle had to rethink strategies for hyper-local delivery such as cashless transactions, zoning restrictions on movement of couriers and bicycle-use-only policies, which while amenable to the context of European cities, cannot be mapped onto the realities of Latin American cities.

Worker-led alternatives and cooperative modes allow for small-scale, locally-focused and experimental initiatives that can offer "a good testing ground for new models and new ways to leverage technology for workers," a representative from the International Cooperative Association (ICA) observed. They also present a crucial challenge to the dominant digital economy model characterized by monopolization and data extractivism. However, informants were also candid about the barriers they faced in getting alternative platform models off the ground and keeping them functioning and viable.

Workers who set up and run these alternative platforms often start from a point where they have limited or no access to smartphones and laptops, lack technical know-how, and struggle to obtain long term, sustainable financial support and resources. As such, alternative platform models do not have the wherewithal to compete against technological behemoths in a policy, business and technology environment designed to thwart their success. As one informant observed, "Alternatives are lovely in principle, but they cannot compete in a world where the platform giants are virtually ungoverned."

Rappi, a mainstream delivery platform in Argentina, has 300 programmers while CoopCycle has two, a member of a platform cooperative said, pointing to one instance of the uneven distribution of resources between mainstream platforms and cooperatives. Similar scarcities



Worker-led alternatives and cooperative models allow for small-scale, locally-focused and experimental initiatives



are experienced by cooperatives even in advanced economies such as Australia. As one informant noted, “it’s hard to find legal expertise, it’s hard to find social expertise, it’s hard to find cooperative expertise, and it’s hard to find cooperative startup expertise.”

Unable to rely on access to reliable finance or credit mechanisms, state support/incentives and other forms of institutional resources, alternatives have limited impact, are highly localized and often fizzle out after a pilot phase. These deficits make it an added challenge to foster such models amongst workforces that are already highly dispersed, atomized and gamified to compete with each other and, hence, often lack the trust necessary for a solidarity-based model.

Informants also pointed to the inherent dangers of fetishizing the role of technology-led alternatives and bypassing the salient aspects of older forms of solidarity and organizing. As an ICA member put it:



Looking at platform cooperatives as a magic solution puts other types of cooperatives at risk. If certain elaborate platform cooperative ideas are trialed and they fail, the conclusion reached is that cooperatives are not suitable. However, this is not the case. There are already existing, realistic and practical ways that cooperatives can support workers. We do not necessarily need to look at the entire problem and fix it with a single new idea. Instead, we can break the problem up and use existing methods to solve it.

– Hyungsik Eum, ICA



**Legal challenges and policy intervention:** For platform workers, the litigation route seems to have yielded some victories as previously discussed in section 1.1.4. In all these cases, workers have shown great innovation by pooling together access requests of individual data subjects in order to create evidence and documentation. Yet, for the most part, corporations are able to counter such legal challenges. With labor arbitrage still a constant feature of neoliberal globalization, tech companies are always able to reconfigure value chains to take advantage of regimes with weak labor regulations.

Unions and workers’ organizations have also sought to input and intervene in policy processes at local/city, region/state and national levels. These interventions have included raising awareness among government bodies on issues faced by workers in the new work arrangements – as one platform workers’ union in Latin America has done – and advocating for inclusion of platform workers’ concerns and rights in labor regulations – as in the case of India’s Social Security Code.



## 2.4.2 Civil society organizations

Civil society organizations (CSOs) working on economic justice and digital rights issues have complemented the efforts of worker-led constituencies through several initiatives. These include:


**Knowledge- and capacity-based initiatives:** CSOs in the economic justice space have attempted to bridge critical knowledge gaps for workers' organizations, and helped them connect their struggles with larger digital economy issues. For instance, Our World is Not for Sale Network (OWINFS) has been educating trade unions and worker advocacy organizations on the implications of digital trade rules through webinars and trainings as well as by expanding analysis in the field.

Other organizations have attempted to address data gaps in the public domain in the interest of advocacy for workers. The Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) has been gathering publicly-available information on supply chains through mapping and documentation tools to help workers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) intervene more effectively. A similar initiative is run by the Wage Indicator Foundation that has been working to develop a global database of minimum wages and working conditions, alongside creating benchmarks for living wages.

The Fairwork Foundation engages with platforms and their workers through a ratings and rankings system to assess factors such as wages, social protections, working conditions, and due process and appeal. Direct engagement with platforms through this initiative has led to some success. While larger platforms have refused to engage with this initiative, efforts to reach other players in the field who may be more socially oriented but face competitive pressures, have yielded better results.


**Coalition-building and mobilizing:** Beyond knowledge expansion activities, civil society actors are also working to jointly strategize with trade unions and workers' groups and create opportunities for coordinated advocacy and action at the level of national governments as well as at regional and global governance fora such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and EU institutions. CSOs in the digital rights space, such as Privacy International, have begun to explore workplace surveillance as part of their broader digital rights work. In Africa, the Kenya ICT Action Network (KICTANET) has been leading advocacy campaigns on data rights legislation. Organizations such as European Digital Rights (EDRi) are expanding their work on digital rights and looking at the intersections with workers' rights. As a representative from the organization noted, "We have been trying to get out of our comfort zone, and instead of talking to just digital rights and privacy activists, we are trying to engage with new communities [of workers]...We are trying to bridge these gaps between labor activism and digital rights."

These are important, if nascent, efforts at cross-constituency dialogue and political action that seek to counter silos across unions, workers' rights groups,



Nascent efforts at cross-constituency dialogue and political action seek to counter silos across unions, workers' rights groups, digital rights groups and CSOs.





digital rights groups and CSOs working on economic justice issues. Informants underscored the importance of workers and other constitutions being able to engage with questions of data and digital rights in informed and agentic ways, but also cautioned that these conversations continue to be out of the reach of most CSOs and workers' organizations.

### 2.4.3 Academia and researchers

Research on various aspects of the digital economy, labor issues, and the future of work discourse has been on the rise in recent years. Broadly, these efforts are oriented towards two purposes:

**Research for informing policy and field-building efforts:** Informants noted that an important imperative with respect to the digital economy and workers' rights issues is the creation of a knowledge base that maps country-level and regional contexts against macro-level issues. An example of this is ongoing research by the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, where large-scale surveys to recode and update datasets to enable better country-level trend mapping and forecasting of labor trends are being deployed. Researchers are also making an active effort to inform policy efforts. The Platform Cooperativism Consortium has led substantial research and policy work on enabling alternative models in the digital economy, and developed principles which have seen adoption by political actors such as the Social Democratic Party of Germany.

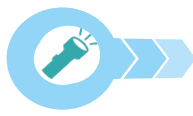
While research work has seen uptake, informants pointed to the uneven spread and focus of these efforts, which are more concentrated in the Global North than in the South. The import of dominant epistemological frameworks, vocabulary and framing of workers' rights issues as they appear in the digital economy, from the Global North academy to the South was also highlighted as a limitation, as it disregarded local context and historical continuities of labor issues. As one academic from Latin America stated, "It seems to me that even the great intellectuals of our region are highlighting disputes of narratives about the digital economy, not the real problems of the digital economy."

**Research for, and with workers and CSO actors:** Other efforts at research have been oriented towards enabling further action by worker-led constituencies. For instance, the NYC Media Lab, a collective of AI practitioners within NYU, collaborated with workers to disprove a case wherein a platform's claims of fairness in its wage disbursement algorithm were challenged by analyzing the machine learning code and demonstrating unexplained wage loss for 40 percent of the platform's workers.

The Centre for Internet and Society in India co-designed a research project on domestic work with the Domestic Workers Union in the state of Karnataka in a bid to have research reflect more accurately the vocabulary, location, and standpoints of workers. Highlighting the gulf in sense-making, a representative of the organization explained how, for the workers, "the word platform was not at all in their vocabularies".

Even when the research community makes the effort to build the field and produce knowledge on these issues, most of this work continues to be inaccessible to workers at the grassroots on account of language and literacy barriers, informants emphasized.






## Spotlight 1: A feminist agenda for worker equity in the digital economy

Workers in a digitalizing economy face specific challenges based on social markers of gender, geography, race, caste, sexuality, etc.. A pathway to worker equality calls for responses and strategies that can accommodate the experiences and perspectives of groups and communities in the margins. In particular, investments in policy, research, and program initiatives must privilege a feminist vision of the platform economy, with an emphasis on care infrastructure and community-based services and support.

➤ **Exacerbated access barriers:** Our research notes starker divides in digital literacy and access to digital technologies and resources, especially in the Global South, when it comes to gender-based marginalization, with women being much less likely to be able to avail the opportunities of the digital economy. Platformization in the Global South can also negatively impact certain informal and gendered livelihood segments, by effecting formalization in specific ways that do not favor low-skilled women workers and migrant workers. Domestic work and other forms of care services, once organized around informal networks in many geographies, are increasingly being displaced by digitally-mediated models that erect novel barriers to entry for workers. Such barriers include mandatory documentation to navigate the trust infrastructure of platforms, (in)ability to use smartphones, and the necessary integration into banking and financial services. In the Global North, a flip side of this phenomenon is seen, with the gig economy exacerbating the racialization of low-paying service work, historically performed by workers of color. Workers are also subject to new regimes of monitoring, control, and discipline, with those from marginalized locations facing poorer ratings and a higher likelihood of harassment. With increasing deployment of algorithms for evaluation, profiling biases





based on class, gender, and race are becoming digitally entrenched, leading to added difficulties in obtaining jobs and accessing credit.

➤ **Compounding burdens:** Platformization has intensified precarity by not only disrupting older informal networks, but also increasing the casualization of labor, thus eliminating job security even for middle-class workers in the developing world. Moreover, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the burden of care work has fallen disproportionately on women workers, causing many of them to exit the workforce altogether. In fact, accelerated digitalization and the shift towards online work also affect many women workers and workers from other marginalized groups who earlier subsisted through forms of ‘grey’ employment such as sex work, or informal labor in the case of undocumented immigrants.

➤ **Fractured resistance:** To date, worker resistance to the injustices of platform-mediated work has been observed predominantly in the largely male-dominated sectors of work such as ride-hailing and food delivery. Other modes of gig work – domestic labor, care and beauty services, microwork, etc. – that tend to have more women workers, have seen only incipient levels of mobilization. There are several reasons for this. For one, current unions and labor movements remain embedded in a masculine culture and ethos, alienating female workers and affording little opportunities for female leadership. Moreover, current resistance struggles are tied to particular sectors of the gig economy, with cross-sectoral solidarity still an emerging concept that movements need to cultivate. It is also significant that the forms of labor that women workers are often engaged in are disproportionately performed in private spaces, leading to 1) an invisibilization of the issues that may be playing out in such work, and 2) greater atomization and reduced opportunities for connection and solidarity.

Finally, a persistent problem in addressing the specific intersections of gender, labor and digitalization through policy is that these aspects are under-studied and, therefore, under-surfaced in discourse, leading to a lack of reliable data and comprehensive research on the particular conditions, challenges, and pathways to resistance.

## Recommendations: Towards a feminist digital economy

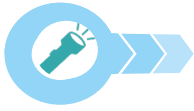
What can be done	Who can drive change
Invest in implementing trainings and awareness programs around platform work, especially to empower women workers and workers from marginalized locations	Trade unions, CSOs working on economic justice, workers' rights organizations
Create programs to address the needs of women workers and workers from marginalized locations who are affected differently and need dedicated platforms to articulate their concerns	CSOs working on economic justice, workers' rights organizations
Build coalitions to negotiate measures for protection from gender-based violence at the workplace through bipartite agreements with employers	Trade union federations, mutual aid societies, women's self-help groups, CSOs working on economic justice
Promote rights-based policy frameworks on social security adequate to platformized work, including through mandatory employer obligations and portable benefit mechanisms	Trade union federations, mutual aid societies, women's self-help groups, CSOs working on economic justice
Build partnerships with social intermediary organizations providing workers training, capacity building, services and linkages to financial, credit, and other services	Trade unions, civil society, social intermediary organizations
Institute an enabling environment for women- and minority workers-led business models, technology initiatives and social political collectives that need non-financial/social capital	Governments
Enable workers' rights organizations and trade unions to facilitate access to broadband/data connectivity, smart devices, etc., especially for women workers	Workers' rights organizations, trade unions
Experiment with and invest in cooperative models of care services through mutual aid societies, women's self-help groups, solidarity unions, especially for informal, feminized work sectors such as agriculture, care services, and domestic work	Trade union federations, mutual aid societies, women's self-help groups, CSOs working on economic justice
Frame upskilling and capacity-development policies that specifically target women workers and workers from marginalized locations who are often at most risk of automation-led job losses	Academia, research institutions, CSOs working on economic justice, relevant government agencies
Develop innovative approaches to digital citizenship programs at national and local levels, and meaningful financial inclusion and literacy initiatives targeted at women workers	Governments, CSOs working on digital rights





What can be done	Who can drive change
<p>Expand research on the impact of digitalization, opportunities and challenges for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ informal economy workers</li><li>➤ gendered occupation categories such as domestic work</li><li>➤ migrant worker populations</li><li>➤ long-term outlooks for automation and skilling challenges with an emphasis on prospects of women workers</li></ul>	<p>Academia, research institutions, CSOs working on economic justice</p>
<p>Engage in the research and development of techno-design and platform architecture for safer and more inclusive work experiences for workers from marginalized communities, including women workers, workers of color, workers with disabilities, etc. This includes using the affordances of technology to center worker equity and well-being rather than profits and efficiency by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ utilizing data-based tools to ensure transparency and worker safety, instead of surveillance, and</li><li>➤ enhancing potential for voice and agency within technical systems of management for workers who have been historically silenced or have to engage in more affective labor to be heard, rather than unilateral algorithmic management</li></ul>	<p>Academia, cooperatives, trade unions, CSOs working on digital rights</p>






## Spotlight 2: Technological frontiers in workers' rights

**Issues:** The promised affordances of digitalization in work arrangements, such as increased efficiency and optimization for task management, higher-order skilling, elimination of labor intensive tasks, cost reduction, and temporal flexibility, have not panned out in a way that has benefited workers. Instead, as our research shows, multiple technological incursions have led to a further worsening of working conditions, from the most immediate to the deeply structural.

➤ **Inscrutable algorithmic management:** By deploying technological interfaces and data-based tactics, platforms create layers of opacity, surveillance, and gamification, thereby effecting an unaccountable and non-transparent algorithmic regime of disciplinary worker management. These maneuvers have aggravated exploitation of workers, subjecting them to heightened degrees of control and punitive action. Opacity also creates vast and unbridgeable information asymmetries that disempower workers. Without adequate mechanisms to peer back into the system, the capacity of labor – whether at the level of the individual or the collective – is greatly diminished. A significant issue, in this context, has been the lack of consistency in how algorithms calculate remuneration, allocate tasks and initiate disciplinary measures. Such opacity can mask various types of discrimination, wage theft and other unfair practices. What is worse, through a few lines of code, platforms can update *and* implement changes to policies on short notice, with virtually no scope for workers to push back, thus stifling their agency. Without recourse to human contact for the purposes of grievance redressal, workers have no way to genuinely appeal wrongful outcomes on the platform. Finally, the use of algorithms towards ever greater levels of “gamification” has led to an intensification of work and a greater competition amongst workers, thus dampening opportunities for collective solidarity.

➤ **Unchecked data extractivism:** The widespread collection and use of workers' data allow platforms to: 1) appropriate immense value from workers, for which they are not compensated, and 2) hijack potentially





sensitive data about workers for uses over which they have no say. Such data serves as the basis for a new form of Taylorism in which knowledge (for instance, drivers' intricate knowledge of city roads) is transferred from workers to algorithms, which allows a regimentation of work and consequent deskilling that erodes the knowledge capital and bargaining power of workers in the long run. Indeed, drawn to its conclusion, such a process can lead to the automation of various tasks, leading to complete obsolescence of entire segments of the current platform workforce. Critical legislative vacuum around personal data protection in many parts of the world allow data mining to go unchecked and leave workers vulnerable to workplace surveillance and other harms of data extractivism. Especially informal workers are turned into data subjects, much too easily, through their inclusion into national and/or multi-stakeholder “data for development” initiatives such as digital ID projects and fintech systems. These practices of the market and state are often in nexus. Without due data protection safeguards, and purpose and use limitations, such trends are likely to leave workers vulnerable to a range of harms, including predatory lending and ad-based targeting, dubious profiling and credit scoring, redlining, denial of welfare benefits, etc.

➤ **Dislocation/erasure of workers' social capital:** Especially in the developing world, work arrangements in the digital economy have destabilized older networks of livelihoods, social capital and solidarities, without necessarily creating new skills, capital and resources. Low-skill informal workers and workers from marginalized groups face new barriers to finding work opportunities that were once organized offline and are now increasingly mediated through digital interfaces. Hiring algorithms, for instance, are riddled with problems of bias and profiling, thus reproducing the structural oppression of marginalized communities. The datafication of value chains is also exacerbating job polarization, with automation poised to significantly restructure job markets and render the most

precarious and informalized segments of the workforce worse off. Lack of access, literacies and/or the added burdens of investments in technology and digital literacy have even pushed many out of work.

➤ **Emerging responses:** Workers and other actors are experimenting with new data models that attempt to shift the structural and knowledge imbalances between labor and Big Tech. Worker Info Exchange is an opt-in data cooperative for workers that aims to contest algorithmic decision-making processes. Drivers Seat in the United States is a worker cooperative engaged in a data collection and processing effort that is aimed at reverse engineering the algorithms of ride-hailing platforms. The Fairwork Foundation engages with platforms and their workers through a ratings and rankings system to assess factors such as wages, social protection, working conditions, and due process and appeal.

### Recommendations Building labor-centric digital futures

For those seeking to challenge the status quo, and build a more equitable digital economy that provides the conditions for workers to flourish, there is much to be done. Some prescribed actions that ought to be taken include:

What can be done	Who can drive change
Enable workers to access/develop shared technological tools for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ documenting algorithmic disciplining and abuse,</li> <li>➤ facilitating data pooling, and</li> <li>➤ nimbly coordinating collective action</li> </ul>	CSO working with platform workers
Push towards perspective building and collective action of workers on data rights, especially on issues of workplace surveillance, algorithmic management, digital ID programs, data protection, data sovereignty, etc.	Trade unions, CSOs working on economic justice, workers' rights organizations
Set up rapid response funds to challenge issues of algorithmic discrimination/profiling, invasive surveillance, incursion on privacy and other civil rights, wage theft, and unpaid severances and arbitrary terminations in courts of law	Workers' rights organizations, trade union federations, trade unions





What can be done	Who can drive change
Foster partnerships between worker-led organizations, technology communities (UI/UX experts, digital rights, and open-source communities), and other experts (policy researchers) to develop cooperative platform architectures	Workers' rights organizations, university centers, CSOs working on economic justice, open-source communities/technology collectives
Organize multi-actor hubs for experimenting and developing alternative worker-owned platform prototypes. These can include traditional cooperatives that are looking to integrate digital modalities, worker-led platform cooperatives, technology infrastructure projects, and worker data trusts	Partnerships among academia, workers' rights organizations, local government bodies, CSOs working on economic justice
Create a Global South AI observatory to study impact of AI-driven transformations on developing economies	Academia, research institutions
Expand research on the economic governance of data, including workers' data rights.	Civil society, academia
Build cross-national coalitions to critically engage with emerging policy frameworks, and bolster advocacy efforts on these issues	Civil society, trade union federations
Bolster networking activities and efforts to influence international rule of law on the data and AI economy	Trade union federations, research institutions, CSOs working on economic justice workers' rights organizations







CHAPTER

3

**A COMPASS  
FOR SOCIAL  
JUSTICE  
PHILANTHROPY  
ON THE FUTURE  
OF WORK**

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What emerges from the analysis so far is the severity of losses that labor has faced and continues to face globally amid the onslaught of the digital, geared as it is towards profit maximization, data extraction, and monopolistic market behavior.

Considering the ongoing and future implications of these shifts for people and communities across the world, the framing of the “future of work”, as popularized in the mainstream rhetoric, is an inadequate label at best and an insidious obfuscation at worst.

Workers’ rights are a critical point of inflection in the path towards development equity and the continued preservation of human rights. Without structural correctives to guarantee the rights of laboring people, the health of our present and future democracies is at risk. This study recognizes, at the outset, the need for systemic changes and redressal, including global-to-local policies that can counter the monopolistic and extractivist nature of the digital economy, engineer meaningful economic redistribution, and reorient development to achieve the goals of justice and equity.


As a key factor in the ever-shifting power structures represented by the financial-digital nexus and the geopolitical global order, philanthropy plays a crucial role in mediating who gains and who loses. Given that the issues discussed represent continuities with older questions of social power and its distribution, and at the same time, encapsulate the discontinuities of a new present, grasping this moment in history, and its contemporary particularities is vital for responsible, accountable and visionary philanthropy.

Understanding the present funding flows and dynamics for the future of work and development can provide a useful starting point in assessing the future directions that philanthropy should take to steer better outcomes for labor in the digital economy. Two points deserve attention. The first is the discernible shift in the past couple of decades towards private funding that, in a neoliberal order, has discouraged initiatives geared towards systemic and structural change. The second is the worrying role of digital capitalism in normalizing a depoliticized vision of international development financing. We discuss these trends below.

### 3.1 The original sin: The neoliberal turn in funding for development

The dominance of the neoliberal ideology in development discourse has significantly changed how financing for social change takes place. With a gradual and unilateral reduction in Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) commitments by Global North





countries, and inadequate financing by member states into the United Nations system, a noticeable vacuum has opened up in public financing for global development. These gaps have increasingly been filled by private sector funding, philanthropy foundations, UN trust funds, blended finance arrangements and public-private partnerships. These funding structures do not abide by the aid effectiveness principles recognized within development cooperation,<sup>8</sup> and leave room for the influence of market actors (Bissio, 2017; Adams, 2019). For instance, UN trust funds, which have proliferated in the past decade and seen contributions triple, allow donor countries in the Global North and corporations to steer UN funding outside the accountability of the “one country, one vote” UN policy processes. Even landmark agreements on global development, such as the 2030 Agenda, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA), and the Paris Agreement, outline a prominent role for private financing (CIVICUS, 2018).

Given these funding patterns, the complex objective of addressing inequity and enhancing justice has, over the years, transformed into the contemporary form of international development delivery one is familiar with today: a technical, managerial, and depoliticized discourse structured by international financing and aid, and helmed by a professional global NGO class. The sources and nature of funding are directly antithetical to any destabilization of the status quo, leading to a development trajectory divorced from the goals of redistributive justice. Within the current frames of funding, grassroots organizing and mobilization that seek to challenge the structures of the economy for transformative and agentic change simply cannot be accommodated.

Development scholars have pointed to the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a case in point, highlighting their lack of critical engagement with structural issues of power and inequity. With progress on global goals in health and education (sectors which are, in effect, the largest recipients of aid) widely off-target in achieving completion by 2030, the fundamental frames and assumptions driving current global development pathways that have resulted in unaccountable, incoherent, unequal, and depoliticized aid-driven policies are called into question (McCloskey, 2019).

Viewed against this larger context, data available on funding in the domain of future of work provides some obvious but key takeaways. Data on human rights funding, captured between 2015 and 2018, shows that the portion of funds, both foundation-based as well as bilateral and government-based, available for labor rights has been relatively small. Of the \$2.4-billion funding provided by foundations for human rights-related causes in 2015, only 6 percent (\$140.4 million) was directed into economic and labor rights issues (Human Rights Funding, 2015).<sup>9</sup> This number has since declined, with only 3 percent of the human rights funding by foundations (\$114.2 million out of a total of \$3.7 billion) going to economic and labor rights issues in 2018 (Human Rights Funding, 2018). Of the total funding provided by foundations for labor rights work, over 50 percent currently flows into North America.

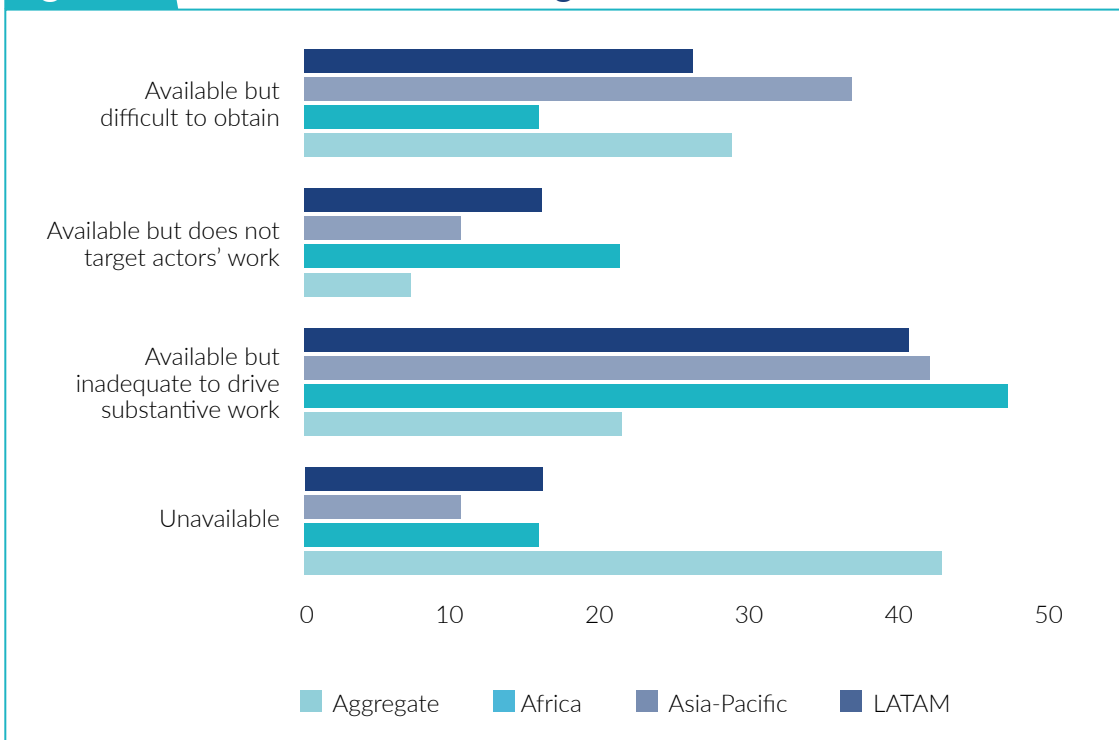
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<sup>8</sup> As highlighted by the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation, these principles are: 1) ownership of development priorities by developing countries – countries should define the development model that they want to implement; 2) a focus on results – having a sustainable impact should be the driving force behind investments and efforts in development policy making; 3) partnerships for development – development depends on the participation of all actors, and recognizes the diversity and complementarity of their functions; 4) transparency and shared responsibility – development cooperation must be transparent and accountable to all citizens. See OECD. (2012). Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation. <https://www.oecd.org/development/effectiveness/busanpartnership.htm>

<sup>9</sup> See Human Rights Funding: <https://humanrightsfunding.org/>

Data collected by this study via the survey questionnaire, in which informants were asked to assess the state of current funding for effective work in the domain, indicates similar trends. Informants at both the aggregate and regional levels observed that access to funding is mostly unavailable, difficult to obtain or inadequate in driving substantive work (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9:** State of current funding



## 3.2 Philanthrocapitalism and ‘impact-driven’ funding

The digital epoch has been shaped by, and in turn, has fueled, the larger neoliberal trends in the global economic arena (Pasquale, 2016; Starr, 2019). Never before in history have wealth differentials been as high as in the contemporary moment.

The owners of lead digital firms wield considerable heft in the world of development funding. Philanthropy in the social justice arena needs to grasp the agenda-setting power of digital capitalism and, correspondingly, the techno-optimistic and depoliticized inflection to the narrative of change.

Firstly, the paradigm of innovation, aggressively evangelized by Silicon Valley’s ideological, and institutional apparatus (including think tanks and foundations) worldwide has had enduring resonance. “Disruptive technology” has gained considerable credibility as the most effective solution to the world’s most wicked problems (Hussain et al, 2020).

Philanthropy in the social justice arena needs to grasp the agenda-setting power of digital capitalism



The deliberately-engineered fuzziness between the profit motives of the Big Tech ecosystem and its purported ideological mission to unleash opportunity, freedom, and empowerment has created in the public eye the myth of tech corporations as the legitimate and primary purveyors of social value. Riding the wave of this social credibility, these corporations position what are essentially business offerings as proof of new thinking and munificence that can change the world, and argue that they be immune from the “barriers” of public accountability. Scholarly work has demonstrated the persuasive power of this posturing in legal and judicial processes (Cohen, 2017).

The linkages between Big Tech funding for think tanks and lobbying by the latter to shape the political-legal environment in favor of Big Tech are well established, and have borne out in recent experiences in the US (Pereze & Zelina, 2020) and the EU (Corporate Europe, 2021). As evident from Proposition 22’s initial successful passage in California, where Uber and Lyft swayed public opinion against workers with a multi-million dollar campaign, Big Tech companies are adept at creating perceptual schisms between the interests of workers and consumers. Often, this can be an impediment to a larger buy-in for social change efforts.

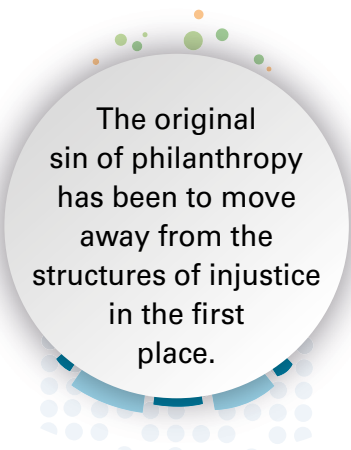
Secondly, not only do tech corporations sell their ostensibly “social” outlook through their business propositions, they have also successfully done the converse, that is, normalized business-minded thinking in social change efforts, seeking to maximize “returns on investment” in the social sector. As new but decisive players in this space, Big Tech-funded foundations have surpassed the world’s oldest and largest philanthropies with billions of dollars in assets and immense agenda-setting powers in global-to-national policy processes (Stanley, 2015).

Philanthrocapitalism in the tech sector works with a funding approach that is “measurable”, “impactful”, “scalable”, and efficiency oriented. It extols privately-managed wealth as the key driver of change in the world, without acknowledging the systemic structures that prop up both private wealth and the problem of inequity that it attempts to solve (Ramdas, 2011). It promotes the virtues of “frugal” innovation and people-led hacks for resource-scarce contexts, ignoring the underlying causes of social exclusion and dismissing the necessary structural shifts for a fair and just economy, including long-term digital infrastructural and institutional development.

Thirdly, Big Tech’s success in rhetoric capture also derives from the fact that philanthropic support for digital rights work has so far focused on first generation rights in




While new to the philanthropy space, Big Tech-funded foundations have emerged as decisive players, surpassing the world’s oldest and largest philanthropies with billions of dollars in assets and immense agenda-setting powers.



The original sin of philanthropy has been to move away from the structures of injustice in the first place.





the civil-political space, crystallizing the contours of the digital rights field without explicit interconnections with issues of economic justice and development rights. The original sin of philanthropy has been to move away from the structures of injustice in the first place. Philanthropy would do well to remember that “justice today requires both redistribution and recognition” (Fraser, 1995). While movement building around the politics of recognition has become a dominant funding priority, this has not found its mirror in mobilization around the politics of redistribution, an insight that scholarship over the past decade has identified as a stumbling block to transformative change (Durian, 2015).

Informants to this study testified to the shift in the underlying philosophy of development initiatives towards a market-oriented logic. They also pointed to how the conceptual contours and guiding assumptions of philanthropic efforts are getting reconfigured.

**An efficiency-centered philanthropic ecosystem is limited in its impact:** Informants observed that funding in the domain tended to be fragmented, short term, and more tipped in favor of Global North actors. A rationale of “efficiency” and “viability” guiding funding for 2-5-year project cycles limits flexibility and dissuades actors from responding with agility. Such a rationale also shapes global organizing around a logic of “quantity over quality”, leading to a situation in which “lots of organizing is taking place but there isn’t enduring institution building”, as one development expert explained. With big consortiums predominantly led by Northern actors in the development space seen as credible sources of funding and programming, smaller initiatives that ideally should have independent access to resources become coopted within such umbrella initiatives, their agendas becoming diluted along the way.

**Externally-driven funding agendas are determining local priorities for action:** In discussing issues and emergent strategies, informants highlighted instances of disconnect between agendas of the donor community and local ground realities. Research and action agendas are often imported from Global North discourses on the future of work, which can lead to situations where the issues focused on, as well as their framing, do not resonate with the regional context. In a similar vein, funding is often directed at issues considered trendy, informants observed, shifting attention away from longer-standing issues in mitigating inequity. For instance, the lack of access to digital technologies continues to be a critical barrier for workers in the Global South, and should, ideally, be a matter of intervention. Yet, it no longer figures in prominent digital rights debates and, in that sense, is unlikely to fit into the future of work discourse.

The lack of agenda-setting power for local actors with respect to priorities and knowledge production processes can also take other forms. As one informant observed, “Research agendas are not set by Africans but by funding institutions, and knowledge is often proprietary and not open.”

**Funding sidesteps worker organizing and worker-led organizations:** Informants across constituencies shared the view that direct funding and support for workers and workers’ organizations was rare or absent from the future of work discourse. Philanthropy, as also the ecosystem it sets up, focuses heavily on policy-oriented work that does not always result in concrete outcomes for workers, informants contended. They also highlighted



the tendency of philanthropic funding to push for technological solutions for workers, without creating lines of support for labor organizing. As one informant summed it up, “the problem with funders and bilateral donors is that they are looking for technological solutions as opposed to human solutions. The single biggest magic wand we could wave is in worker organizing, in face-to-face, old-fashioned connecting of people. This has to happen on a global scale.”

Representatives of trade unions highlighted a reluctance among funders to collaborate with unions and workers directly. Doing so “would open up new horizons for us. But so far, this is really not happening”, one representative said.

Informants attributed this omission to the perception among philanthropic actors that funding workers directly involves higher risk. This further disadvantages informal workers who, as one informant noted, “are atomized and unable to express collective power and need to organize themselves”.



“The single biggest magic wand we could wave is in worker organizing, in face-to-face, old-fashioned connecting of people. This has to happen on a global scale.”

## 3.3 The fallouts of current funding for development

The impact of neoliberal dogma on the resource pipeline for development has been detrimental for justice-oriented actors in at least three critical ways:

### 3.3.1 Shrinking room for civil society voice

Despite the proliferation of digital tools and the ever-on buzz of social media chatter, the scope for civil society to intervene meaningfully, and have a sustained voice in structural change-oriented processes has narrowed significantly over the past many years.

With the ascent of corporate globalization, trade and intellectual property (IP) regimes have failed to deliver on global equity. They have also simultaneously weakened the ability of civil society actors, especially in the Global South, to organize, participate and be heard in national and global policy processes. Representative justice in the national and global arenas has sidestepped the voices of workers and those who stand to lose their livelihoods to neoliberal globalization.

The supplanting of participatory governance with digitalized systems that displace human mediation and systemic accountability, coupled with increasing state repression of civil society actors in many parts of the world has rendered hollow the right to be heard, a first-order requisite for claims making of individuals and citizens (Gurumurthy et al., 2017).

A weakening democratic multilateralism has further eroded a rights-based understanding of development, giving way to multi-stakeholderist modalities that undermine democratic rule making through the emergence of enclaves of elite policy making. An increasingly





disproportionate voice and decision making power for market interests in global governance processes is observed as a result. An illustration of this is the rise of the World Economic Forum (WEF) as an influential discursive arena that has promoted a neoliberal vision of the fourth industrial revolution and stakeholder capitalism (Korjan & Tewari, 2022).

### 3.3.2 An economic paradigm that disincentivizes solidarity

The continued resurgence of the Covid-19 pandemic amid stark disparities in vaccine access has demonstrated the failures of current international development policies that are structured to enable influential actors to leverage gains. Devoid of considerations of parity, global vaccine policies have enabled even low-risk segments of the population in the Global North to be fully vaccinated, while the most vulnerable populations in least developed countries continue to lack access.

The winner-takes-all logic that drives digital capitalism exhibits similar divisive tendencies. Global South nations seeking integration into the circuits of digital economic activity are forced to compete with each other to their own detriment as well as that of their citizens.

The nature of platformized work has also greatly atomized individual workers and forced them into a race to the bottom, not only foreclosing their ability to seek and nurture solidarity and collective agency, but also unleashing a regime of divide and rule, where a peer is always a competitor, someone to undercut and outperform in the fight for survival. While many recent illustrations of resistance across the world have shown that workers continue to persist despite all odds – notable among these was the recent organizing effort by women workers on on-demand service platform Urban Company in India (Mehrotra, 2021) – it is clear that resources and spaces for such actions are few and far between.

### 3.3.3 Widening knowledge asymmetries and capacity gaps for civil society

Knowledge and informational asymmetries as well as capacity gaps among critical actors in the domain, ranging from trade unions to CSOs, researchers and policy makers in the economic justice space, are crucial issues that have been raised repeatedly over the course of this study.

“

I think what may be lacking is perhaps getting an understanding of just how many people, both men and women, are employed by the gig economy on the continent. I don't think we have accurate data on that, because many of them are private arrangements, and they do not come into the public domain[...].It would need to be a very long-term project to get to even just be able to collect this data on how many people, what are they engaged in doing, what kind of tasks are they doing.

– Philanthropy Foundation Representative

”





The digital intelligence advantage cornered by Big Tech corporations, made possible by data extractivism, has created a vast and virtually unbridgeable knowledge asymmetry between lead firms and all other actors, including smaller economic players, workers, CSOs as well as policy makers. Even as mainstream global “data for good” partnerships abound, they seem only to serve as extraction points for large private interests, while civil society remains unable to access such data and innovate in public interest (Whittaker, 2021).

The issues highlighted in sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2 have greatly diminished the capacities of CSOs to intervene at national and sub-national levels, amid new challenges posed by the digital. Resource-starved civil society actors are increasingly struggling to access the capabilities to engage in a sustained manner on the issues brought forth by digitalization with regards to labor rights and economic justice.

## 3.4 Normative foundations for social justice funding towards a better future for all

The singular question that faces social justice philanthropy in the digital economy today is this: how do we move the needle from the unhinged, liberal idea of digital rights to an embedded and embodied, supra-liberal idea of digital justice with a focus on equity, structural transformation and rights for all in an interconnected digitalized global context?

This study identifies two strategic pillars as non-negotiable for a paradigm shift: 1) privileging the agentic power of people at the margins, including their local-to-global organizing, civic action, discursive intervention, and demands for institutional reordering; and 2) investing to lay the foundations for accessible knowledge, appropriate policies, and new people-centric institutions. Philanthropy must put its weight behind these two meta tracks.

Support for alternatives in the platform economy has gained currency, with pilots and community-based initiatives taking root. A movement towards platform cooperativism signals a valuable shift in the frame, but such initiatives are nascent in the Global South and lack a supportive legal-policy architecture. Whether and how they will be able to sustain in the face of the market power of big corporations remains an open question. As a starting point, it is vital that such alternatives are placed on a continuum of support that grapples with the structures of exclusion in economies of the South.

Reimagining the future of work agenda is about going beyond programming that supports a project here or a pilot there, to ignite a dynamic that can amplify the power of agentic actions towards distributive justice and institutional actions that can deepen democracy, both political and economic.

## 3.5 Strategic directions for philanthropy

Based on actors’ assessment of philanthropy in the digital space as well as their recommendations and insights, we identify three cross-cutting modalities within which appropriate strategies for philanthropic interventions driven by specific actors may be

**Figure 10:** Cross-cutting modalities for philanthropic intervention



anchored (see Figure 10). These are as follows:

### 3.5.1 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 rise of new regimes of algorithmic work arrangements, must find avenues for expression, appeal, and resolution. Strategies towards this include:

**Creating and strengthening spaces for worker organization and mobilization:** A first-order resource gap that philanthropic actors should address is the lack of support for direct organizing efforts. This includes both strengthening existing actors in the space, such as trade unions and workers' organizations, as well as supporting the creation of new collectives and forms of organization. Funding efforts must also go towards countering union-busting activities; challenging unfair corporate practices and rights violations; and facilitating legal aid for workers who face backlash. Lastly, organizing trainings and awareness programs around platform work, especially to empower women workers and workers from marginalized locations is important.

**Enabling workers to negotiate demands vis-a-vis government/market actors:** Workers need to be able to put forward their interests in the ongoing discourse on work in the digital economy and be part of the decision-making process at various levels. Funding must be made available to enable workers to participate in a sustained manner at the national and international levels in rule-making and norm-development processes on the digital economy, such as those being undertaken by national governments, the WTO, the OECD,



## Box 5: The Rana Plaza accord

In the wake of the collapse of the Rana Plaza in Bangladesh, the global advocacy campaign led by the Clean Clothes Campaigns and other CSOs to ensure adequate safety regulations culminated in a legally-binding agreement that garment brands were forced to sign. This went a long way in improving working conditions for hundreds of thousands workers in the garments sector. The agreement is now being expanded into an international treaty with significant compliance and enforcement mechanisms. This initiative holds important lessons for advocacy in the digital economy.

the EU, and UN institutions. In the same vein, catalyzing highly-trained leadership amongst workers to be part of local governance decision making around technology through trade associations and technology councils is important.


**Actors who can drive change:** Trade unions and trade union federations are well placed to drive these strategies given that they already have institutional infrastructures in place for representation and negotiation. Workers' rights organizations and new forms of solidarity unions that adopt more nimble methods and approaches can complement these efforts. Lastly, CSOs working on economic justice can serve critical bridging and amplification functions.

### 3.5.2 Building enduring local-translocal solidarities and synergies


The path dependency of technology for development requires grounding in an interconnected approach, one that sees countries, people, and ecological systems as mutually codependent. It must be recognized that the reshoring or digitalization of supply chains, with gains for the Global North at the cost of opportunities for workers of the Global South, will only impoverish the cause of labor justice overall.

A rising tide of scrutiny against Big Tech and a growing consciousness about the conditions of workers in platform value chains are key turning points for garnering a larger buy-in from consumers and users of Big Tech. The voices of discontent within the tech industry also point to possibilities for inter-class solidarities that are worth paying attention to (Lytvynenko, 2022).

Philanthropy has an important role in fostering North-South and South-South solidarities at various levels towards the goal of workers' rights, whether that be local-to-translocal, national-to-regional or global. Efforts in this



Philanthropy has an important role in fostering North-South and South-South solidarities towards the goal of workers' rights.



direction must allow for deep engagement and collaboration, coordination and joint action amongst communities of action that span labor rights, digital rights as well as economic and social policies. Strategies towards this can include:

**Supporting worker-led alternatives:** Worker-led alternative models for the digital economy are critical as they can demonstrate a different pathway for development. Funding should, therefore, be made available for experimenting and developing alternative, worker-owned platform prototypes. These can include traditional cooperatives looking to integrate digital modalities, worker-led platform cooperatives, technology infrastructure, and worker data trusts to allow workers to pool data for collectively determined goals. While skill building and infrastructure comprise an important part of this, philanthropy must also create other forms of support for worker-led alternatives and cooperative platform architectures to thrive, such as facilitating partnerships amongst worker-led organizations, technology communities, and other experts. In the same vein, investments in cooperative models of care services through mutual aid societies, women’s self-help groups, and solidarity unions can go a long way in strengthening care infrastructure for workers.<sup>10</sup> Lastly,



We need financing that creates space for experimentation, have the opportunity to build, fail, experiment, learn from failings and build again.

– Christina Colclough, Whynot Lab



coalitions must be supported to undertake campaigns for policy and legislative reform to encourage platform cooperatives, including removing undue burdens of registration, easing credit mechanisms and creating targeted financial instruments, incentivizing social entrepreneurship through tax breaks, and incentivizing women’s participation and leadership.

**Catalyzing opportunities and tools for workers to build solidarity:** Lending support for workers to connect with one another, develop a shared sense of their problems, articulate their interests and draw on collective support is a necessary investment towards equity and justice. To this end, philanthropic actors must facilitate cross-sectoral dialogue among stakeholders for joint strategizing and coordination, and the crystallization of effective trans-local and transnational labor coalitions. Additional efforts must be made towards creating spaces that specifically address the needs of women workers and workers from marginalized locations who, as discussed earlier, are affected differently and need dedicated

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<sup>10</sup> Solidarity unionism is a model of labor organizing in which the workers themselves formulate strategy and take action against the company directly without formal recognition by employer or mediation from government or paid union representatives.





Donors must understand that investment in women workers in the Global South, for instance, is something that takes longer to return investments, especially and not least because women have been systematically excluded for a long time. Looking at cooperatives as actual businesses and not just as projects is something that is lacking.

– **Salonie Muralidhara**, SEWA Cooperative Federation



platforms to articulate their concerns. Enabling workers' access to shared technological tools can strengthen such efforts. Funding can be made available to leverage the scope of digital technologies for documenting algorithmic disciplining and abuse, facilitating data pooling, and coordinating collective action. Enabling workers' rights organizations and trade unions to provide (especially women) workers access to broadband/data connectivity, smart devices, etc., can in turn, strengthen their ability to access online resources and networks.

**Seeding coalitions for civic power:** Funding must be made available for CSOs to undertake grassroots mobilization, alliance building, and public-facing activities that can create awareness and lasting global solidarities for enduring public support on digital justice agendas. Such efforts, when extended to media-based and communications campaigns, can prompt wider commitment among consumers and users of Big Tech. Make Amazon Pay, a coalition effort to hold the e-commerce giant accountable for tax evasion and demand that it increase workers' wages is an illustration of such an effort.<sup>11</sup> Such coalitions can also be supported to monitor and track: 1) activities of Big Tech companies, 2) linked investments and capital flows funding worker precarization, and 3) transparency initiatives around how corporations organize supply chains and comply with applicable labor regulations.

**Actors who can drive change:** Multi-actor hubs are best placed to drive such efforts. Trade unions, workers' rights organizations, traditional and new-age cooperatives, mutual aid societies, and social intermediaries can also serve as primary nodes of change, bringing in relevant expertise from technologists (data scientists, coders, UI/UX experts, digital rights and open source communities), policy researchers, universities, think tanks, etc.

### 3.5.3 Strengthening worker knowledge, capacity and organization

The need for knowledge creation and capacity building emerge as important priorities 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

<sup>11</sup> See at <https://makeamazonpay.com/>



sophisticated understanding of the digital economy and digital rights issues, to making available resources and spaces to conceptualize, develop and revamp agendas. Philanthropy can further this agenda in many ways:

**Facilitating knowledge initiatives that can bridge the growing data gap between corporations and public interest constituencies:** The generation of publicly usable data about the digital economy and trends in platformization, currently tracked mostly through proprietary market/industry research in the Global South, can go a long way in addressing data paucity for a range of actors. To this end, a critical priority is the generation and availability of macro-level data in the public domain that can track and assess ongoing trends and shifts in the labor market and feed into: 1) research efforts (for academics and researchers), 2) knowledge expansion and evidence gathering (for civil society and workers' organizations), 3) policy modeling and government action (for apex bodies, agencies and ministries), and 4) domestic innovation (for startups, social intermediaries and cooperatives). This can be done by funding statistical data-focused initiatives for knowledge creation at the country and regional levels around labor demographics, employment and labor trends, platform-based work and workers, impacts on women workers and workers from marginalized locations, skilling trends, social protection, etc. Supporting regional/global/international work on data as a public good through multi-actor configurations would also be a useful way to achieve this goal.



To be able to connect the dots between informal work and digital futures, both quantitative and qualitative data will be required. Data remains a big void in this space, if philanthropic bodies could aid in this area, it could be a very productive exercise. They can help fund data sharing initiatives and research and help bring platform companies to the table to encourage such initiatives.

– Noopur Rawal, AI Now institute



This recommendation comes with a caveat. Important concerns have arisen in recent years about Big Data initiatives, such as those popularized through multi-stakeholder arrangements, which funding should take into account. For instance, workers' data is now being collected through many national initiatives as well as digital ID projects, with critics noting the totalizing state control over such data without due data protection safeguards and use and purpose limitations.

**Giving a boost to evidence generation on conditions of labor in the digital economy:** Funding efforts must be channeled into several focus areas for systematic and empirical research into the conditions of workers within global digital value chains. At the regional levels, especially in the Global South, there is a need for research directed towards identifying regional/national and local priorities in new digitalizing value chains and



assessing the conditions of workers in various sectors. These efforts must be complemented by: 1) exploring the intersections of the digital with older informal labor markets and labor in traditional sectors; 2) tracking changing labor standards across countries and regions in



Generally, gender does not get enough credit it deserves. It needs to be more featured more in policy and other research work, especially those concerning care work.

– Gillian Dowie, IDRC



relation to the digital economy by benchmarking year-on-year efforts; 3) assessing access divides to opportunities in the digital economy and evaluating skilling efforts; 4) evaluating the disproportionate precarity faced by women workers and workers marginalized on account of race, caste, geography, etc. Lastly, long-term funding for research that enables the development of tools to measure and capture corporate transparency on worker surveillance and algorithmic management is also crucial.

**Investing in political economy research on fair and equitable digital economies:** Evidence-based policy shifts are needed to redirect the platform economy towards fair markets, workers' rights, equal opportunities in emerging value chains and continued inclusion of smaller economic actors in local economies. Funding support must, therefore, be made available to research on the international political economy of development in the digital economy in order to inform effective policy making. There is a need to capture the warp and weft of the digital economy by: 1) exploring changes in the sectoral value chains, and 2) identifying mechanisms for appropriating innovation and value in this space. In this regard, it is critical to examine issues of control over IP, global AI supply chains and the location of developing countries in AI development. Unless investments can prioritize research on the political economic issues at the intersection of digitalization and development – analyzing macroeconomic and structural factors and policies that connect national, regional and global trends – knowledge creation may not be able to support transformative changes. Funding support for research must, therefore, also prioritize care policies and social protection systems that address the gendered impact of digital technology on workers.

**Making resources available for capacity-building initiatives:** Funding is needed for workers to be educated about how new technologies are implemented and regulated, and how this intersects with issues of labor rights. With many workers still navigating the gaps in their understanding of how the digital impacts working conditions, rights, and entitlements at the individual level, making available resources in local languages would be a crucial step towards capacity building. Such resources can include gig workers' contracts in various geographies so that workers get a clearer sense of what they're signing up for; translations or explainers of important policy developments such as WTO policies on digital trade, or algorithmic governance and workers' rights; and non-textual content that can be distributed





on social media channels, including audio messages and videos.

At organizational levels, there is need for funding support to enable trade unions and workers' organizations to take cognizance of digital economy issues and build capacities of union leaders and organizers to engage and contribute to policy. This not only includes workers' rights and labor issues, but also digital trade, corporate governance, market competition, AI development, and digital industrialization. Towards this, funders can consider brokering learning partnerships between worker-led organizations and research organizations, academics, think tanks, etc. In addition, support for other forms of knowledge deepening, such as exchange of experiences and best practices among workers' organizations at country, regional, and global levels, will be beneficial.

At a macro level, fostering multidisciplinary thinking and expertise among civil society actors on issues of the digital economy should be an important funding priority. Equally crucial is to support state actors through investment funds to develop large-scale educational and literacy programs on digitalization at national and local levels.

**Actors who can drive change:** Academic institutions, CSOs working on economic justice, and organizations that undertake research and capacity building can collaborate with trade unions and workers' rights organizations to ensure that research produced by the former group can be used for meaningful capacity building by the latter. These efforts can be enhanced at the macro level by national government agencies and ministries as well as apex agencies that oversee labor and worker welfare, cooperative management, skilling and human resources, and statistical knowledge generation. At the local level, local governance institutions can perform similar roles.

## 3.6 Stepping up: General do's and don'ts for philanthropy

In addition to specific strategies, a set of general principles that can inform the overall efforts of philanthropy also emerged from this study (see Figure 11). Funders should:

### a. Prioritize long-term support for sustainable local change

- **Develop funding models that value longer-term stability over short-term viability.** Funding strategies must emphasize the creation and sustainability of stable organizations, rather than adopt a "project orientation" in framing the terms of support for initiatives such as worker mobilization and worker-led alternatives. While such an approach may not lead to immediate success, it will likely have a lasting impact on the ability of workers to persevere and create enduring leadership and work towards beneficial outcomes.
- **Interpret success differently.** Given that strategies for workers' rights and equity in the digital economy are rooted in an ethics of responsibility and democratic participation, funding models must support workers in determining their own paths to success, rather than hold them to problematic notions of "impact" as popularized in



developmental rhetoric.

- **Focus on localized outcomes.** In funding alternative ventures, funders must eschew goals of scaling up and profitability. Instead, alternative models must be encouraged to strengthen localized trajectories for sustainable growth, spur equitable value creation, engineer trans-local solidarity as well as demonstrate digital governance models for businesses that are horizontal/communal.
- **Alleviate the impact of the pandemic.** Mitigating the ongoing impact of the pandemic must be a guiding principle for all philanthropic efforts in the short to medium term. An expansion of funding mandates to include relief for workers to get back on their feet and protect the most vulnerable sections of the workforce is a necessary step.

## b. Keep funding experimental, agile, and responsive

- **Be attuned to site-specific contexts.** In any given region, on-ground priorities and issues must be the first guiding principle in determining programmatic agendas. Funders should not be reticent to address older issues such as access and connectivity, or, indeed, adopt older modalities if the context demands it. This should take precedence over pushing for newer lines of intervention that may be in “vogue” (for instance, setting up an AI hub where the situation demands basic digital literacy training).
- **Extend scope of work to underserved regions and countries.** Most philanthropic funding flows into middle-income countries (MICs), OECD data from 2021 points out. Least-developed countries (LDCs) receive little attention in the global development agenda and are also impacted by declining ODA contributions by Global North countries. Philanthropy must consider, as a long-term goal, extending programming into these countries.
- **Underwrite the space for experimentation, failure, and reinvention.** In investing funds and creating hubs for alternative prototypes, it is important to structure funding support that accommodates actors’ freedom to build and experiment with initiatives, but be reconciled to the possibility of failure. The mainstream digital economy is an exemplar of many bold initiatives and a few great successes, often propped up by venture capital. Alternatives in the local economy that seek to reinvent must, therefore, have the necessary backing to learn and regroup.

## c. Create the foundations for institutional and collaborative knowledge creation

- **Invest in hubs rather than projects.** Philanthropy must pursue the goal of enduring institution building. This is best done by facilitating hub-based initiatives through multi-actor arrangements across academia, civil society, and digital rights organizations, rather than standalone projects which have shorter shelf life and impact.



- **Foster cross-constituency dialogue.** The 1999 Seattle protests against the WTO and the Occupy movement in the wake of the 2008 recession illustrate the possibilities of global organizing through the alignment of sectoral interests and issues (climate justice, public health, labor rights, etc.) as well as the affordances offered by digital tools and internet-based organizing. We are once again at the precipice, given rising inequities in the digital economy. At the same time, the opportunity for actors invested in social, economic and digital justice to maximize this momentum has never been greater. Philanthropy can play a crucial role in supporting actors across domains to connect with one another and incorporate digital justice issues into social, political, and economic agendas.
- **Safeguard against unequal data practices.** In making funding decisions about data initiatives, philanthropic actors should exercise extreme caution and pay due attention to design principles and governance arrangements for access and usage, as well as privilege public interest imperatives, lest such arrangements devolve into extractivist and unequal gains for powerful actors.

#### d. Advance Southern leadership and epistemology

- **Fund smaller actors and their agendas.** It is vital that philanthropy nurture smaller CSOs and grassroots organizations from the Global South by allowing them to own and advance their agendas without nesting them within Northern-led consortiums. Funding models tuned to small actors' requirements, without exacting Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) requirements and with the space to actively support mobilization activities are critical.
- **Support local knowledge creation.** To counter and course correct for the predominance of Northern framing of issues, there must be lines of support for local perspective-building exercises on issues pertaining to the digital economy. Such efforts must channel localized knowledge, experience and narratives from the Global South; privilege the perspectives of marginalized groups such as women workers, workers of color, workers with disabilities and workers from sexual minorities; and make the vital connections for an intersectional articulation of rights, well-being, development, social protection, and care.



**Figure 11: General rules for philanthropy**





CHAPTER

4

**A DECISIVE  
PHILANTHROPIC  
AGENDA FOR  
WORKERS'  
RIGHTS IN  
THE DIGITAL  
ECONOMY**

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Historically, waves of technological progress have been closely correlated with stark inequalities between countries, co-constituting the key determinants of quality of life, including access to work opportunities, and public goods and services (UNCTAD, 2021). With frontier technologies of the digital age entering the picture, and the all-important resource of data becoming an object of privatized value capture, technological progress at the current juncture poses serious concerns for universal justice and equity.

UNCTAD's Tech and Innovation Report 2021 cautions that "inequality between countries may have been falling in relative terms, but in absolute terms it has never been higher and continues to increase". Oxfam's (2022) briefing paper, 'Inequality Kills', notes that the increase in billionaire wealth during the pandemic has overtaken their combined gains of the past 14 years. According to the report:

This is the biggest annual increase in billionaire wealth since records began. It is taking place on every continent. It is enabled by skyrocketing stock market prices, a boom in unregulated entities, a surge in monopoly power and privatization, alongside the erosion of individual corporate tax rates and regulations, and workers' rights and wages – all aided by the weaponization of racism. (ibid, p.10)

The year 2022 has also seen tumultuous crashes in the tech stock market, emanating from asset inflation and supply chain imbalances, wiping out wealth worth \$1 trillion in a few weeks' time (Reuters, 2022). These arbitrary surges and declines in the fortunes of Silicon Valley create unimaginable ripple effects for actors in the wider economy.

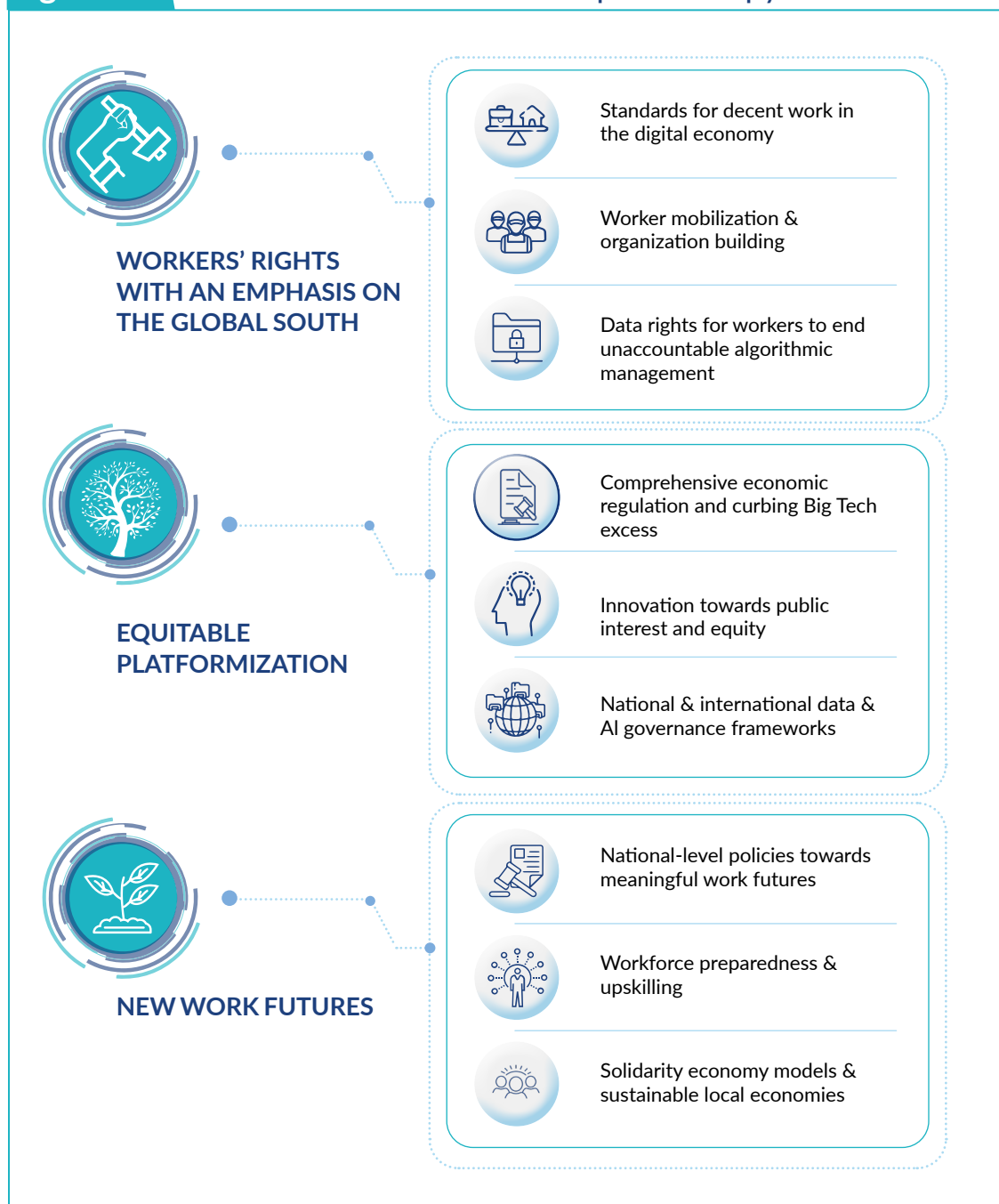
This study on philanthropy's role in relation to equitable labor futures comes at a time when the digital economy requires urgent course correction. The previous sections of this report have shed light on the unfolding phenomenon of digitalization and its impact on economic activity, work, and workers' rights. First, the study mapped global trends as well as regional particularities of the digital economy, and critically synthesized key issues as identified by actors in the thick of these transformative processes. Second, it unpacked and discussed emerging responses and strategies – from new forms of collectivization to efforts at knowledge creation and experimentation with alternatives – undertaken by workers' organizations and trade unions, civil society actors, and the academic community. Third, examining the philanthropic sector's role in light of these trends and emerging responses in the current global environment, the study assessed the current state of funding in the space and identified three key cross-cutting modalities within which relevant actors and strategies for intervention could be placed.

## 4.1 Domains of intervention for philanthropy

Our 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 where the digital intersects with economic, social, and political is, therefore, necessary. The study's explorations coalesce around three key domains of intervention (see Figure 12).



Figure 12: Domains of intervention for philanthropy



### 4.1.1 Workers' rights with an emphasis on the Global South

The previous sections of the study have outlined the ways in which digitalization and platformization have impacted decent work and workers' rights by heightening precarity and informalization of work, weakening the state of labor organizing, and erecting new barriers to equitable work opportunities. Persistent access divides faced by workers in developing economies and the issue of datafied surveillance have also been highlighted by the study, alongside newer concerns about how workers can enjoy a fairer share of data value. Distilled from these themes, the following emerge as key domains for philanthropy to target:



- Standards for decent work in the digital economy
- Worker mobilization and organization building
- Data rights for workers to end unaccountable algorithmic management

## 4.1.2 Equitable platformization

Findings from this study have revealed various instances of the enormous financial, political, and discursive power wielded by corporate actors in the digital economy, and the many ways in which this impacts workers' rights. The over-reliance on self-regulation and voluntary compliance frameworks,<sup>12</sup> to ensure that businesses respect human rights, domestic country compliance requirements, labor regulations and environmental considerations has not gone very far. Tech corporations have built on a pre-existing culture of corporate impunity to further exploit regulatory ambiguities around their operations as well as extend their presence in critical infrastructure spheres such as public finance, education, and health. This has not only hurt workers' rights, but also impoverished the public sector and undercut equity. Course correcting for this will require interventions in the following domains:

- Comprehensive economic regulation and curbing Big Tech excess
- Innovation towards public interest and equity
- National and international data and AI governance frameworks

## 4.1.3 New work futures

Beyond the immediate here-and-now imperatives of correcting for labor injustices in the digital economy, a parallel and allied goal is the reimagining of the economy and work. It is clear that the status quo of extractivist data-driven capitalism, propped up by financialization, cannot serve the interests of workers and small economic actors. Charting enabling pathways to alternative economic futures that put workers' rights at the center, giving them control and agency over digital resources in sustainable, locally responsive ways should, therefore, be a priority for philanthropy. More critically, if workers of the Global South are to have an equitable future, developing nations must strengthen infrastructure and policy frameworks around key economic and social pillars of development. This is a crucial agenda for civil society actors to steer. Against this backdrop, domains which become important to target include:

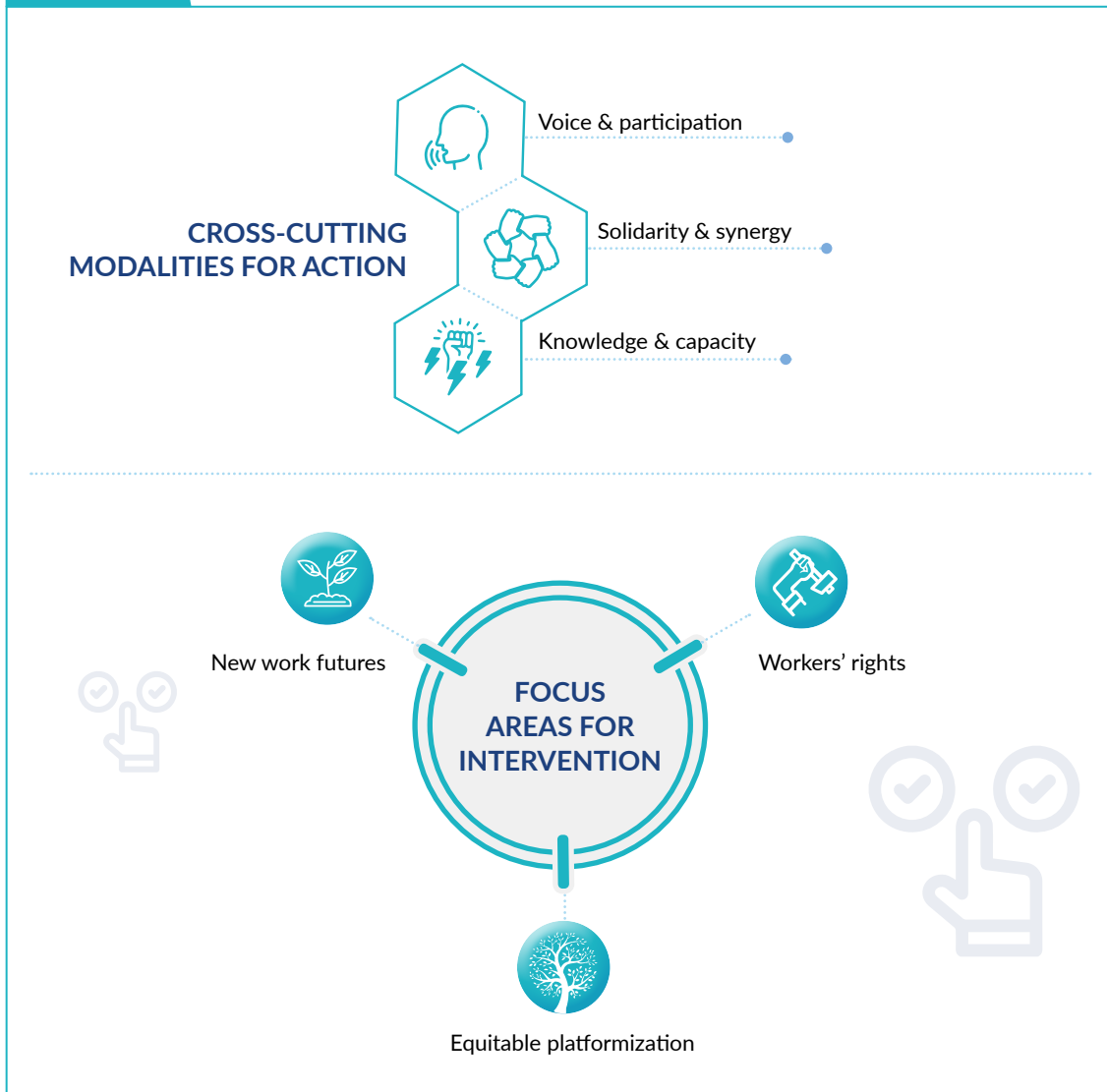
- National-level policies towards meaningful work futures
- Workforce preparedness and upskilling
- Solidarity economy models and sustainable local economies

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<sup>12</sup> Such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) for instance: <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/big-issues/un-guiding-principles-on-business-human-rights/>



**Figure 13:** Entry points for philanthropic intervention



## 4.2 Entry points for philanthropic intervention

Bringing together the key domains articulated in section 4.1 (see Figure 12) with the attendant strategies of action outlined in section 3.5, we suggest concrete, time-bound pathways for intervention (see Figure 13). The strategies suggested within this schema are of two kinds. The medium-term strategies target issues that either call for an immediate response or can be tackled concretely in 3-5 years. These strategies are also intended to enhance momentum and/or capitalize on emerging and existing efforts in the space of research, activism, and policy intervention.

The long-term strategies target two categories of issues: 1) those that are still nascent and must be galvanized towards concrete action, thus necessitating a longer window of resources, and 2) core organizing and coalition-building imperatives which are long standing, ongoing, and require continued lines of support. Suggested regions and rationale for the same (provided in footnotes), offer a second level of stratification to guide programming.

## 4.2.1 Pathways for workers' rights with an emphasis on the Global South

### a. Domain of focus: Standards for decent work in the digital economy

Strategies suggested	Actors who can drive change	Suggested region	Funding cycle	Cross-cutting modalities
Set up rapid response funds for trade unions and workers' organizations to challenge issues of wage theft, unpaid severances, and arbitrary terminations in courts of law	Workers' rights organizations, trade union federations, trade unions	Asia-Pacific	Medium term (3-5 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy
Facilitate national networks for sustained action vis-a-vis policy and legal reform to recognize the rights of platform workers	Trade unions, CSOs working on economic justice	Asia-Pacific	Medium term (3-5 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy
Invest in building data capabilities – for high quality, real-time, quantitative datasets and qualitative explorations – on digital value chains, including employment trends, changing labor conditions, impacts on women workers and workers from marginalized locations, skilling trends, etc., at national and regional levels	Academia, research institutions, CSOs working on economic justice, relevant government agencies	Africa Asia-Pacific Latin America	Long term (5-10 years)	Knowledge & capacity
Catalyze a multi-actor coordinated global campaign to shape international labor laws and guarantee decent work in the platform paradigm	Coalition of workers' rights organizations, trade union federations, CSOs working on economic justice	Africa Asia-Pacific Europe Latin America North America	Long term (5-10 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy  Knowledge & capacity



## b. Domain of focus: Worker mobilization and organization building

Strategies suggested	Actors who can drive change	Suggested region	Funding cycle	Cross-cutting modalities
<p>Strengthen workers' organizations and trade unions to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ counter union-busting activities</li> <li>➤ organize campaigns and mount legal action to challenge unfair corporate practices and rights violations</li> <li>➤ facilitate legal aid to workers who face backlash for organizing</li> <li>➤ implement trainings and awareness programs around platform work, especially to empower women workers and workers from marginalized locations</li> <li>➤ participate in local governance decision-making around technology through trade associations and technology councils</li> </ul>	Trade unions, CSOs working on economic justice, workers' rights organizations	Asia-Pacific Latin America	Medium term (3-5 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy  Knowledge & capacity
Fund cross-sectoral dialogue for joint strategizing, coordination, and crystallization of effective transnational labor coalitions	CSOs working on economic justice, workers' rights organizations	Africa Asia-Pacific Latin America	Medium term (3-5 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy
Support programs to address the needs of women workers and workers from marginalized locations who are affected differently and need dedicated platforms to articulate their concerns	CSOs working on economic justice, workers' rights organizations	Africa Asia-Pacific Latin America	Long term (5-10 years)	Voice & participation  Knowledge & capacity
Strengthen trade unions through core funding to sustain institutionalized worker representation on digital economy issues	Trade union federations	Africa Asia-Pacific Latin America	Long term (5-10 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy



### c. Domain of focus: Data rights for workers to end unaccountable algorithmic management

Strategies suggested	Actors who can drive change	Suggested region	Funding cycle	Cross-cutting modalities
Invest in perspective building and collective action of workers on data rights, especially on issues of workplace surveillance, algorithmic management, digital ID programs, data protection, data sovereignty, etc.	Trade unions, CSOs working on economic justice, worker rights organizations	Africa Asia-Pacific Europe Latin America North America	Long term (5-10 years)	Knowledge & capacity  Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy
Support research on workers' data rights	Trade unions, research institutions, CSOs working on digital rights	Asia-Pacific Europe	Long term (5-10 years)	Knowledge & capacity
Extend small grants for workers to access/develop shared technological tools for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ documenting algorithmic disciplining and abuse</li> <li>➤ facilitating data pooling</li> <li>➤ nimbly coordinating collective action</li> </ul>	CSOs working with platform workers	Africa Asia-Pacific Latin America	Medium term (3-5 years)	Voice & participation  Knowledge & capacity

### What does success look like?

#### Short term:

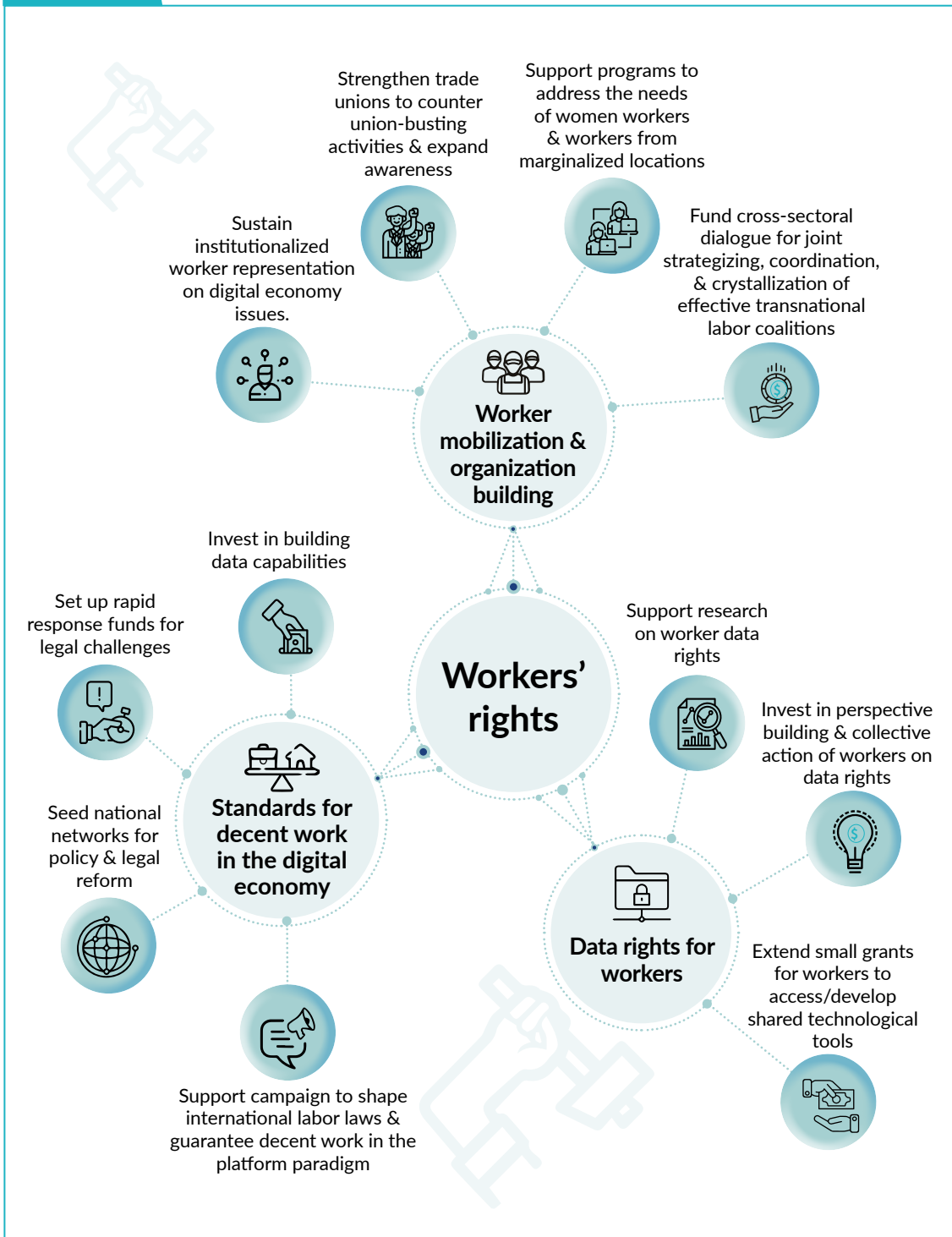
- Improvements in gig-work policies addressing conditions of work, social security coverage for workers, employment misclassification, and reduction in non-standardized contracts are achieved
- Data rights for workers is on the agenda for civil society, trade unions, and workers' organizations

#### Long term:

- Strong national-to-global networks focused on workers' rights in the digital economy are institutionalized
- Robust public data infrastructure to effectively address and inform future of work issues is incubated in the Global South
- Unions and workers' organizations are strengthened and well resourced, with expanded mandate and capacities to tackle and address digital economy issues
- New collectives emerge to address the needs of platform-based workers, including women workers



**Figure 14: Workers' rights with an emphasis on the Global South**



## 4.2.2 Pathways for equitable platformization

### a. Domains of focus: Comprehensive economic regulation and curbing Big Tech excess

Strategies suggested	Actors who can drive change	Suggested region	Funding cycle	Cross-cutting modalities
<p>Support organizations to monitor and track</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ activities of Big Tech companies</li> <li>➤ corporate compliance with labor regulations</li> <li>➤ linked investors/investments and capital flows</li> </ul>	Trade union federations, research institutions, CSOs working on economic justice, workers' rights organizations	Global	Long term (5-10 years)	Voice & participation  Knowledge & capacity
<p>Fund capacity building of small economic actors – including platform workers, farmers, traders, artisans – to participate in decision-making spaces/forums from local to global levels to influence norm development on digitalization and the platform economy (including trade and tax justice, digital industrialization, data and AI governance, etc.)</p>	Trade union federations, research institutions, CSOs working on economic justice, workers' rights organizations	Global	Long term (5-10 years)	Voice & participation  Knowledge & capacity
<p>Support coalition building to influence international forums, spaces, and processes to address global economic justice, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ UN binding treaty process</li> <li>➤ UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights 10+ process</li> <li>➤ UN model taxation treaty process on digital taxation</li> <li>➤ WTO processes on digital trade and e-commerce</li> <li>➤ relevant regional trade partnerships and free trade agreements (FTAs)</li> <li>➤ ratification/adoption by member nations on existing ILO resolutions and declarations that can increase and strengthen employer obligations towards workers' well-being</li> </ul>	Trade union federations, research institutions, CSOs working on economic justice, workers' rights organizations	Global	Long term (5-10 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy  Knowledge & capacity



Strategies suggested	Actors who can drive change	Suggested region	Funding cycle	Cross-cutting modalities
Promote and support public-facing activities/campaigns to create awareness and public support on digital justice agendas	Coalition among CSOs working on economic justice, CSOs working on digital rights, trade unions, workers' rights organizations	Global	Medium term (5-10 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy

## b. Domain of focus: Innovation for public interest and equity

Strategies suggested	Actors who can drive change	Suggested region	Funding cycle	Cross-cutting modalities
Support sustained engagement of CSOs and trade unions in global debates on frontier technologies, 4IR, access to knowledge, and trade justice by making available the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ resources and training materials in local languages</li> <li>➤ non-textual media outputs and training materials</li> </ul>	Trade unions, CSOs working on economic justice	Global Asia-Pacific	Medium term (3-5 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy  Knowledge & capacity
Set up a Global South AI observatory to study the impact of AI-driven transformations on developing economies	Academia, research institutions	Global	Long term (5-10 years)	Knowledge & capacity

## c. Domain of focus: National and international data and AI governance frameworks

Strategies suggested	Actors who can drive change	Suggested region	Funding cycle	Cross-cutting modalities
Support global civil society networking to influence international rule of law on the data and AI economy	Trade union federations, research institutions, CSOs working on economic justice, workers' rights organizations	Global	Long term (5-10 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy  Knowledge & capacity
Invest in national CSOs working on economic governance of data, including workers' data rights	Academia, research institutions	Africa Asia-Pacific Latin America	Long term (5-10 years)	Knowledge & capacity





Strategies suggested	Actors who can drive change	Suggested region	Funding cycle	Cross-cutting modalities
Enable data and AI policy research in sectors such as health, agriculture, biodiversity and climate justice, with a focus on understanding digitalizing value chains, community data rights and benefit sharing	Academia, research institutions, CSOs working on economic justice	Africa Asia-Pacific Latin America	Long term (5-10 years)	Knowledge & capacity
Fund research and action around <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ the design and data governance of digital ID systems that preserve the rights of workers</li> <li>➤ principles to promote responsible and inclusive fintech</li> <li>➤ policies to govern use of data-driven technologies in education and skilling initiatives</li> </ul>	Academia, CSOs working on digital rights	Africa Asia-Pacific	Medium term (3-5 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy  Knowledge & capacity

## What does success look like

### Short term:

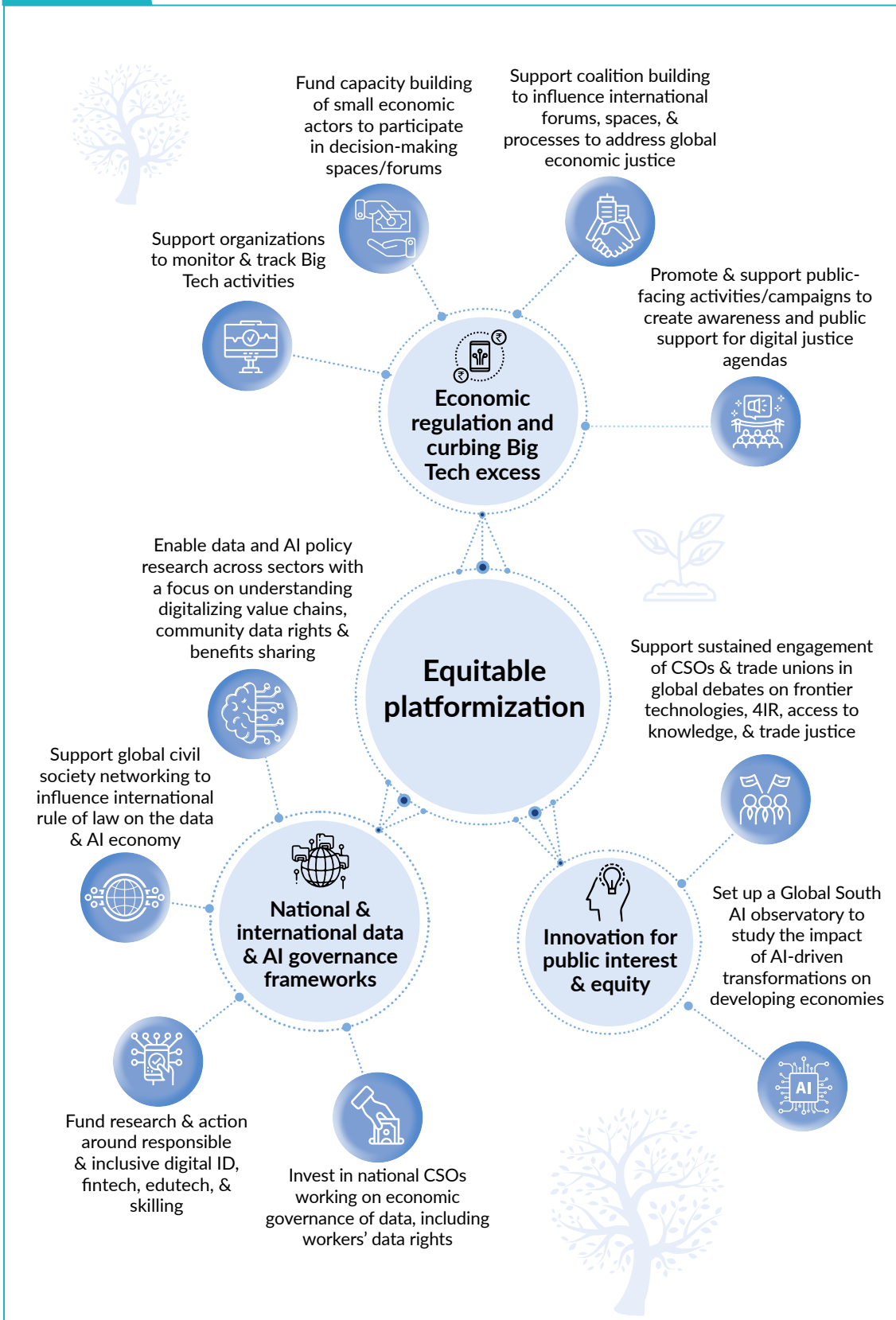
- Field building and knowledge creation on digital economy issues attuned to and situated in Global South contexts is enhanced
- Digital economy regulation, data governance, and frontier technology deployment see greater democratization through increased awareness and engagement of workers' groups, academia and civil society actors
- Regional and global civil society networks to monitor and build public awareness around Big Tech excesses are seeded

### Long term:

- Capacities, representation, and participation of workers' groups (across constituencies), and weaker economic groups in national and digital policy and governance processes are enhanced
- Citizen and worker-centric national-level data governance policy processes, specifically addressing legislative vacuum on individual and collective data rights, gain momentum



**Figure 15: Equitable platformization**



## 4.2.3 Pathways for new work futures

### a. Domain of focus: National-level policies towards meaningful work futures

Strategies suggested	Actors who can drive change	Suggested region	Funding cycle	Cross-cutting modalities
Support sustained action to promote rights-based policy frameworks on social security adequate to platformized work, including through mandatory employer obligations and portable benefit mechanisms	Trade union federations, mutual aid societies, women's self-help groups, CSOs working on economic justice	Asia-Pacific Africa Latin America	Long term (5-10 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy  Knowledge & capacity
Invest in policy, research and program initiatives that take a feminist approach to the platform economy, with an emphasis on care infrastructure, and community-based services and support	Trade union federations, mutual aid societies, women's self-help groups, CSOs working on economic justice	Asia-Pacific Africa Latin America	Long term (5-10 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy  Knowledge & capacity
Support national-level research and action to ensure principles of equity, justice, transparency, and accountability in public digital infrastructures, especially for health, education, social welfare and social protection	Academia, research institutions, CSOs working on digital rights, CSOs working on economic justice	Asia-Pacific Africa Latin America	Long term (5-10 years)	Voice & participation  Knowledge & capacity

### b. Domain of focus: Workforce preparedness and upskilling

Strategies suggested	Actors who can drive change	Suggested region	Funding cycle	Cross-cutting modalities
Create investment funds for state actors to develop large-scale educational and literacy programs at national and local levels on digitalization	Labor welfare divisions, ministries of labor/education, apex government agencies	Africa Asia-Pacific Latin America	Long term (5-10 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy  Knowledge & capacity
Support social intermediary organizations providing workers training, capacity building, services and linkages to financial, credit and other services	Social intermediary organizations	Africa Asia-Pacific Latin America	Long term (5-10 years)	Knowledge & capacity
Enable workers' rights organizations and trade unions to facilitate access to broadband/data connectivity, smart devices, etc., especially for women workers	Workers' rights organizations, trade unions	Africa Asia-Pacific Latin America	Long term (5-10 years)	Knowledge & capacity



### c. Domain of focus: Solidarity economy models and sustainable local economies

Strategies suggested	Actors who can drive change	Suggested region	Funding cycle	Cross-cutting modalities
<p>Set up multi-actor hubs for experimenting and developing alternative worker-owned, platform prototypes. These can include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ traditional cooperatives looking to integrate digital modalities</li> <li>➤ worker-led platform cooperatives</li> <li>➤ technology infrastructure projects</li> <li>➤ worker data trusts</li> </ul>	Partnerships among academia, workers' rights organizations, local government bodies, CSOs working on economic justice	Latin America Europe Asia-Pacific	Long term (5-10 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy  Knowledge & capacity
Support partnerships between worker-led organizations, technology communities (UI/UX experts, digital rights and open source communities) and other experts (policy researchers) to develop cooperative platform architectures	Workers' rights organizations, university centers, CSOs working on economic justice, open source communities/ technology collectives	Europe North America	Long term (5-10 years)	Solidarity & synergy  Knowledge & capacity
<p>Support coalitions to undertake campaigns for policy and legislative reform to encourage platform cooperatives, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ removing undue burdens of registration</li> <li>➤ easing credit mechanisms and creating targeted financial instruments</li> <li>➤ incentivizing social entrepreneurship through tax breaks</li> <li>➤ incentivizing women's participation and leadership</li> </ul>	Cooperative federations, ILO Cooperatives Unit (COOP), CSOs working on economic justice	Asia-Pacific	Long term (5-10 years)	Voice & participation  Solidarity & synergy
Invest in cooperative models of care services through mutual aid societies, women's self-help groups, solidarity unions	Trade union federations, mutual aid societies, women's self-help groups, CSOs working on economic justice	Asia-Pacific Africa Latin America	Long term (5-10 years)	Solidarity & synergy  Knowledge & capacity





## What does success look like?



### Short term:

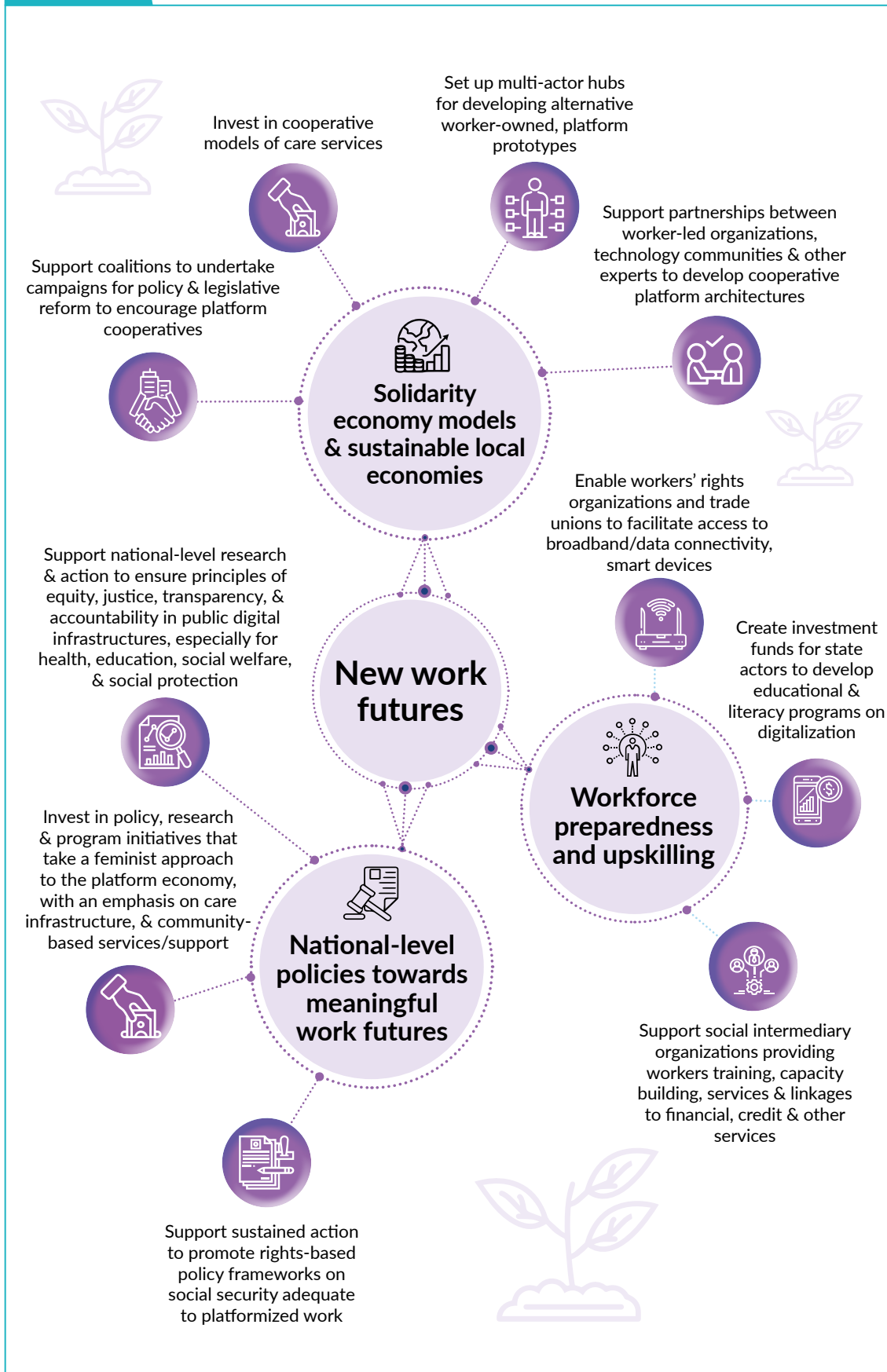
- Funding for worker-led alternatives and initiatives is expanded
- Collaborative multi-disciplinary/multi-actor hubs to explore alternative social and economic models are seeded
- Enabling policy frameworks for alternative platform models is on the agenda of workers' organizations

### Long term:

- Social security and care infrastructure for platform economy workers is on the agenda of policy makers
- Worker-led/centric upskilling policies and frameworks are mainstreamed into policy discourse
- A critical mass of alternative worker-owned platform prototypes is successfully piloted



**Figure 16:** New work futures



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ANNEXURE

1

# METHODOLOGY





The methodology for this study consisted of the following components:

- Structured interviews with key informants from different regions
- Four roundtables with representatives of key constituencies
- A self-administered survey questionnaire that was shared with interviewees and roundtable participants
- Regional deep dives through desk research by a team of consultants

The research team at IT for Change undertook an initial scoping for the study and identified key questions and themes. Instruments for data collection were developed on the basis of this and refined through a process of piloting. Subsequently, a database of over 100 potential informants for the study was compiled, accounting for adequate regional and constituency-based representation.

**Interviews.** A selection of informants from the database were then contacted for 45-60 minute interviews between July and September 2021. A total of 48 interviews were conducted over the course of the project. Interviews touched upon three main issues:


- The state of technological transformation and the state of labor conditions
- The legal and policy landscape
- Opportunities for philanthropic intervention

Each interview was conducted remotely through conferencing platforms and was recorded and an interview highlights document, capturing key takeaways from each conversation. A consent form and survey questionnaire were sent to all candidates ahead of the interview.

**Roundtables.** Four virtual closed door roundtables were convened between August and September 2021. Three roundtables had a regional focus (Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America), while a fourth one had a global focus. The roundtables, which lasted two hours each, were attended by between 12 to 17 experts from across different constituencies. The roundtables were structured similarly, with a context-setting presentation from IT for Change that highlighted initial findings synthesized from data collected so far, followed by facilitated small group discussions with participants on three main prompts:

- What, in your view, are the predominant issue(s) with respect to the digital economy and labor/the future of work discourse in your region; how are you prioritizing some of the more vital issues within this for social justice and equity?
- What have been the challenges associated with the strategies you have pursued/ what have been the successes? Do you know of initiatives that were effective but not pursued subsequently? How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the situation? What adjustments have needed to be made, and what additional resource challenges have arisen?
- How well does the current funding ecosystem address/support your strategies and work as well as the larger future of work domain? How can funders play a more





effective role with respect to advancing meaningful action and impact in this domain?  
What areas, interventions and strategies need support?

Given that translation support was required for the regional roundtable on Latin America, and parallel translation within breakout rooms was not possible, the structure was altered for this roundtable. A large plenary discussion was facilitated using the above prompts. All roundtables were recorded and a detailed report of proceedings was produced from each session.

Following data collection, a multi-step workshopping process was undertaken in order to sift through the material to identify and consolidate key takeaways on major issues. This involved analyzing in detail the survey data, regional literature review undertaken by consultants, interview data, and insights compiled from the roundtables.

Findings from the preliminary draft of the study were shared at a closed-door roundtable convened specifically for and with actors from the philanthropy sector, which was used as a springboard for small group discussions. Feedback received from the roundtable as well as a deep review of the draft led to an additional round of synthesis.



ANNEXURE

2

# DETAILS OF INFORMANTS



# LIST OF INTERVIEW INFORMANTS\*

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Aakash Sethi, QUEST Alliance

Aishwarya Raman, OLA Mobility Institute

Andrea Dehlendorf, United for Respect

Ayoade Ibrahim, International Alliance of App-based Transport Workers (IAATW)

Ben Harmer

Capital Mobility

Christina Colclough, The Why Not Lab

Daniela Muradas Antunes, Universidad Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG)

Deborah James, Center for Economic and Policy Research

Diego Naranjo, European Digital Rights (EDRi) (views personal)

Onoho'Omhen Ebhohimhen, Nigeria Labour Congress

Eduardo Carrillo, Open Internet for Democracy

Edwin Palma Egea, Union Sindical Obrera (USO)

Hanane Boujemi, Internet Society Foundation

Hyungsik Eum, International Cooperative Alliance - Youth Network

Ian McBurney, bHive Cooperative

International Development Research Centre

Khamati Mugalla, East Africa Trade Union Confederation

Lorena Bossi, FUECyS

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María del Pilar Sáenz Campodónico, Fundacion Friedrich Ebert

Maricarmen Sequera, TEDIC

Marino Vani, IndustriALL Global Union

Noopur Raval, AI Now Institute

On Our Radar

Pamela Block, University of Texas

Pradeep Nair, Ford Foundation, India

Priya Vora, Future State

Richard Kozul-Wright, UNCTAD

Richard Scotch, University of Texas

Ridwan Oloyede, Tech Hive Advisory

Robert Karanja

Rodrigo Barbano

Salonie Muralidhara Hiriyur, SEWA Cooperative Federation

Sangam Tripathy, IFAT (views personal)

Sarah de Heusch, Smart Cooperative

Savita Bailur, Caribou Digital

UNI Global Union

\*Only informants who consented to be identified publicly are included here.



## Breakdown of informants by constituency

Total Informants	100
Academia	19
Civil society/NGO - digital rights	20
Civil society/NGO - economic justice	18
Cooperative	7
Government	2
Legal expert	4
Multilateral organization	5
Private sector	2
Philanthropy	5
Social intermediary	2
Trade union	16



ANNEXURE

3

**RESEARCH  
INSTRUMENT:  
INTERVIEW GUIDE**






## 1. Introductory questions

- 1.1 Could you give us a quick introduction to your work and organization?
- 1.2 What worker constituencies does your work address?

## 2. Technological transformation and the state of labor

- 2.1 What have been the general trends in labor rights and the conditions of work within the region?
  - What are the predominant economic sectors within the region?
  - What is the strength and influence of unions and other workers' organizations within the region?
  - What are the kinds of labor and social protections in place?
- 2.2 What do you view as the predominant issue(s) in your region (or generally) with respect to the digital economy and labor/the future of work discourse?
- 2.3 What new opportunities and challenges have emerged for workers in the region with respect to the advent of digital platforms and the gig economy (for both web-based and location-based workers)?
  - What new labor rights issues has digitization brought about. For e.g., algorithmic accountability, surveillance, control of workers' data, etc.?
  - What new dynamics have emerged in terms of employer-employee relationships? How have these new relationships affected the possibilities for collective organizing among workers?
  - What are the main problems associated with the growing use of algorithms in the management of workers and economic activity? What are the strategies being employed to mitigate these problems?
  - How do these issues affect vulnerable and marginalized groups in your region such as women, persons with disabilities, other minority groups differently, in terms of both challenges and opportunities (e.g., are there new avenues for persons with disabilities)?
- 2.4 What new opportunities and challenges have emerged for workers in traditional services and sectors that are being transformed/disrupted by the onset of digitization?
  - How are workers along the e-commerce value chain being impacted?
  - How are workers in other traditional sectors (e.g., manufacturing, agriculture) being impacted?
  - What are the main shifts that have occurred in these areas due to new technologies?
  - Can you give some examples of these shifts and how they are affecting workers?
  - How do these issues affect vulnerable and marginalized groups in your region such as women, persons with disabilities and other minority groups differently?
  - How and to what extent is automation transforming the economy of the region? What are the main sectors affected, and what are the long-term ramifications?



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- 2.5 What are the kinds of responses/strategies being adopted by workers, individually and collectively, through various types of organizations to deal with these novel challenges?
- 2.6 Are there any independent economic initiatives/alternative models (by workers' organizations, social intermediaries, cooperatives etc.) that are being undertaken to support workers in the digital economy? If yes, can you describe some of these?
- What is the impact of these initiatives?
  - What are the main challenges/impediments to setting up and scaling these initiatives?
  - What kind of support would they need to grow and replicate?
  - Are there examples of platform cooperatives, or alternative worker-oriented platform models being developed within the region? If so, can you describe some of these initiatives?
- 2.7 Apart from the topics covered, are there any other issues with respect to the state of labor and technological transformation that you think are crucial and warrant discussion?

### 3. Changes to policy and the law

- 3.1 Within the region, what are the main issues around the impact of new technologies on labor that are currently being debated by policy makers?
- Can you name some influential actors/organizations and forums where these issues are discussed?
  - What are the predominant positions on these issues, and what are the points of disagreement?
  - Who are the key actors whose involvement is necessary to bring about meaningful policy changes?
- 3.2 Are there policies being developed within the region to deal specifically with the impact of digital technologies on the economic landscape?
- Are governments in the region employing a light touch regulatory approach for the digital economy? If not, what kind of regulatory measures are they instituting?
  - Are these policies restricted to privacy/security-related issues, or do they also attempt to create economic rights for workers and citizens?
  - What kinds of economic rights over data, do you believe, would have a significant impact on the condition of workers within the digital economy? To elaborate:

Emerging regulation addresses the question of which actors have economic rights over their data in different ways. A proposed law in India focuses on community rights over data (natural persons), whereas the European framework focuses more on the rights of business actors (legal persons). Do you see these approaches as useful?

(The EU's Digital Markets Act mandates that business users of large platforms should have access to data generated through their activities and of respective end users. Similarly, India's committee on non-personal data recommends mandating that a community of natural persons should have the right to access aggregate data generated over platforms from the activities of its members).

- What new forms of corporate regulation are being envisaged?
- 3.3 What are the legal routes that workers' organizations are taking up to advocate for worker's rights within the digital economy? Have there been significant cases and court rulings within the region that pertain to worker-related issues?
- 3.4 Apart from the topics covered here, are there any other policy issues with respect to labor and the impact of digital technologies that you think are crucial and warrant discussion?

#### 4. Opportunities for intervention

- 4.1 Who are the main actors shaping the debate and the landscape (setting up alternative models, unionizing etc.)? Who seems to be left out?
- 4.2 What do you think are the issues not addressed by current research when it comes to the digital economy and labor?
- 4.3 What do you think are the issues not addressed by current initiatives (by workers' organizations, unions, cooperatives, etc.) when it comes to the digital economy and labor? Why? (What are the barriers?)
  - What new actions and interventions do you think would have the most impact with respect to the future of work?
- 4.4. With respect to philanthropic funding in particular:
  - What are the current priorities? Is there a bias in favor of certain
    - issues or priorities,
    - regions,
    - strategies/approaches?
  - Which areas do you think are most in need of support but are not prioritized by donors?
  - What would be the most fruitful kind of projects/strategies to pursue with respect to the future of work?
  - What are some of the risks associated with these projects/strategies?
  - How should donors account for differences between developed and developing regions, especially in the Covid context?



ANNEXURE

4

**RESEARCH  
INSTRUMENT:  
SURVEY  
QUESTIONNAIRE**

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## 1. Please indicate your primary affiliation.

- Academia
- Cooperative
- Civil society/NGO – digital rights
- Civil society/NGO – economic justice
- Independent researcher/scholar
- Multilateral organization – global
- Multilateral organization – regional
- Philanthropy
- Social intermediary – skilling
- Trade union
- Government
- Advocacy network/platform
- Private sector
- Legal expert
- Media

## 2. Who would you identify as the main stakeholder group you work with?

- Workers (gig economy)
- Workers (traditional economic sectors)
- Academics and researchers
- Policy makers and government representatives
- Commercial enterprises/small businesses
- Cooperatives
- Civil society organization/activists

## 3. Please mark for ALL of the below issue(s), what you, believe to be their level of importance to tackling the future of work agenda in your region (low priority, medium priority, high priority)

- Erosion of standard employment and labor frameworks
- Dilution of workers' rights/working conditions and weakening of collective bargaining mechanisms



- Deterioration of social protections for workers
- Conditions of workers on web-based platforms (e.g., AMT, other crowdsourced work)
- Conditions of location-based workers
- Conditions of workers along the e-commerce supply-chain
- Conditions of workers in traditional sectors (e.g., manufacturing, agriculture) being transformed/disrupted by digitization
- Disproportionate impact on women workers
- Disproportionate impact on race and other identity-based minority group
- Need for adequate dispute resolution and grievance redressal mechanisms
- AI-led automation and job losses
- Deskilling
- Lack of access to digital capabilities
- Lack of access to formal financial services
- Job polarization – erosion of middle-class jobs
- Data-based worker surveillance and algorithmic management
- Economic rights over data – access to data for business entities/users
- Policies for governance of data resources
- Data protection laws
- Policies towards digital industrialization and digital sovereignty
- Affirmative action – enabling policy framework for MSMEs and new start-ups
- Affirmative action – enabling policy framework for rebooting the cooperative sector
- New avenues of employability for the hitherto disadvantaged

Apart from the list of options above, if there are any issues that you think are very important, please list them here:\_\_\_\_\_

**4. What are the key critical barriers that your stakeholder group faces in your region of operations towards being able to develop and deploy meaningful responses and strategies with regard to the impact of technology on the future of work?**

**a) Knowledge barriers (please check the boxes for all that apply)**

- Overall lack of understanding of issues among workers



- Overall lack of understanding of issues among policy makers
- Lack of access to resource people and experts
- Lack of useful resources and materials in local languages
- Absence of high-quality research
- Absence of sustained mainstream discourse (via media/government/CSOs)
- Absence of evolved policy discourses

**b) Capacity gaps (please check the boxes for all that apply)**

- Limited bandwidth to engage with issues
- Limited financial resources to engage with issues
- Competing priorities and agendas
- Lack of access to key decision makers/decision-making spaces

**5. Please order the level of priority from the list below for the areas that you believe policy must address to ensure an equitable future for workers (low priority, medium priority, high priority)**

- Conditions of work (wage theft; zero-hour contracts; long working hours; easy hire and fire)
- Reforming collective bargaining for the digital age
- Social protection and social care
- Industrialization, job creation and growth
- Skilling
- Improving accessibility for workers with disabilities
- MSME revitalization and support
- Competition policy reform
- Trade policy
- Taxation policy
- Data protection policies for workers
- Data rights of workers
- Technological sovereignty
- Discriminatory impacts of AI on workers (bias and harm)



- Algorithmic management of workers

**6. What kind of funding do you currently draw from to support your intervention strategies (please select all that apply)?**

- Union dues or other membership dues
- Research grants and endowments (public/private)
- Program grants and endowments (public/private)
- Public sector funding (e.g., national financing instruments -schemes and funds, special loans)
- Development financing instruments
- Individual/organizational donations
- Crowd-sourced funding
- Taxation-based/member country contributions (e.g., for multilateral organizations)
- Venture capital
- Bank loans
- Self-funded (personal/organizational capital)
- Self-funded (reinvestment of revenues from commercial activity, e.g., for cooperative enterprises or start-ups)
- No funding currently available

**7. How would you evaluate the current state of funding opportunities and availability of financial support for the interventions you pursue in your region?**

- Funding support available, easy to obtain and stable
- Funding support available but difficult to obtain
- Funding support available but does not target what we work on
- Funding support available but inadequate for driving substantive work
- Funding support unavailable

**8. What intervention(s) in your view are currently unable to take off or be successful on account of underfunding? (please check the boxes for all that apply)**

- Collective bargaining and strike action/protest
- Legal challenges through court systems





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- Research, knowledge exchange and field building
  - Framework development and agenda setting for coordinated multi-scalar action
  - Inputs into policy processes at national/regional and global levels
  - Solidarity building through alliances and networks
  - Awareness and capacity building among constituents
  - Developing new and alternative models of service provisioning (e.g., financial inclusion, insurance, taxation compliance)
  - Developing new and alternative worker-owned models of enterprise (e.g., cooperatives)
  - Developing new data-based models for worker solidarity and cohesion
  - Developing technological tools and solutions to protect and promote workers' rights



ANNEXURE

5

**RESEARCH  
INSTRUMENT:  
CONSENT FORM**



**Dear respondent,**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study titled “Impact of Technology on Workers, Labor, and the Economy”, conducted by IT for Change for a project.

The primary objective of this study is to provide a synoptic overview of key issues across regions, as well as actionable insights that can help inform the philanthropic sector’s decision-making and programmatic agenda in this domain, with the goal of ensuring a just and equitable future for all workers

To this end, the inputs you provide will be synthesized into a landscape report that examines the current and foreseeable impact of digital technologies on workers, labor, and the economy.

The interview session will be conducted online through the Big Blue Button platform, and it will be audio and video-recorded. You can request for the recording to be paused at any time if you would like to say something that is off the record. The recordings of the interviews can be accessed by those who are within the research team, including the researcher, coordinators, and transcribers.

Participation in this discussion is voluntary.

**Please let us know your preference for credit attribution:**

I would like my identity to be kept confidential.

I am okay with my identity being disclosed and would like to be on the list of experts interviewed in the report.

**If you would like to be included in the list of experts, please indicate one of the below options:**

Please include my name only.

Please include my organization’s name only.

Please include my name and my organization’s name.

**Indicate your organizational affiliation here: \_\_\_\_\_**

We may include direct quotes from respondents.

Please feel free to ask any questions about the study and its processes. If you have any concerns or comments beyond the discussion, please contact [xxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxxx](mailto:xxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxxx)

