

Swipe Right for Work: Redefining Labour in Africa's Digital Futures



Authors:
Mardiya Siba Yahaya
Bonnita Nyamwire
Neema Iyer

Executive Summary

Throughout the past decade, technology has played a significant role in our collective labour practices. While the Covid-19 pandemic's lockdown increased the need for remote work, learning and platform labour in the form of delivery services, private technology companies have been at the forefront of driving our present and future work experiences and practices. As new forms of labour have provided opportunities to reskill, learn and gain additional income, it continues to be marred by precarious labour conditions that tends to disproportionately affect marginalised communities in Africa.

The report examines the interplay between supposed opportunities within the future of work, and the anxieties and harmful realities associated with these existing and emerging organisations of labour. We usher towards a decolonized and intersectional approach to policy development that carefully involves meaningful civic participation with emphasis on the linkages between fluid social identities, technology and capitalist modes of production.

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Introduction: Our Approach to Understanding the Future of Work

The Future of Work refers to the evolving landscape of employment, driven by technological advancements, automation, and the rise of remote work, which has been significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The global South, however, has been slow to adapt to these changes, due to challenges such as inadequate digital infrastructure, digital divide, and limited access to future-proof education and skill development programs. As remote and digital work becomes more prevalent, disparities between the global North and South as well as between digital natives and the disconnected are exacerbated, further widening existing socio-economic inequalities.

We aim to explore the job landscape by asking how African communities and workers view their involvement, significance, and the practical aspects of the so-called future of work. We also explore the opportunities that people in different African settings could expect, the concerns they have about the future of work, and who the main players or stakeholders are in shaping and supporting this evolving work landscape.

The paper is also an attempt to reframe conversations of the future of work to be inclusive of multiple sectors, while mapping out how supposed emerging technologies play a role in how we view and eventually enforce and practice labour within our various contexts.

Methodology

This paper combines information from three qualitative research studies. These include a semi-structured interview study with journalists about their experiences using digital technologies for work. The two other studies are based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with ride-hailing workers, bloggers, and online entrepreneurs, focussed on their experiences with labour practices, platform policies, language, and accessibility.

By comparing these different data points and user groups, we highlight both unique and shared experiences across the different professions.

Beyond primary qualitative data, the report analyses grey literature such as organisational reports, government policies and legislation on labour and worker rights and protection. It also includes research reports, films and blog posts to name a few. Other forms of literature include magazine issues and articles, as well as journal publications.

Who Designs and Defines the Future of Work?

Africa's workforce is projected to be the largest in the world in the coming decades, with hundreds of millions of people below the age of 25 starting to look for work. Transformations in working structures and paradigms have been largely attributed to digitization and automation¹. Both workers and business owners have identified that the current labour and economic realities require a level of automation for companies or businesses to scale². The future of work is thus a point where automation, digitization and regular work intersect.

¹ Gurumurthy, Bharthur, and Korjan, "Future of Work We Seek."

² Hilgers, "When Your Boss Is an App."

The Dream of Self-employment

Service and production jobs are predicted to decrease, while high-skill jobs are likely to increase³. In this situation, middle-income earners may still benefit by offering flexible or remote freelance services. However, lower-skilled workers, especially in the service sector, often face unfair labour practices, platform exploitation and feel disconnected from their work. This creates a “K-shaped” pattern, with high-income earners on one side and low-income earners on the other, both working independently but experiencing remarkably different outcomes⁴.

The Gig Economy

The future of labour and how we work is significantly influenced by digital transformation and private companies that turn informal jobs into platform and gig work. These companies play a major role in shaping labour practices currently and in coming years. As technology reshapes work, other social, political, and environmental factors contribute to this shift. For example, during the COVID-19 lockdown, schools adopted technology to provide remote education. Services relied on apps to minimise contact, leading to a higher demand for gig delivery workers.

Overall, the future of work has emerged as a result of private companies’ pursuit of innovation and profits, combined with environmental and societal changes. The interplay between these factors has contributed to the transformation of labour practices and the evolving work landscape, in some instances for better, and in others, for worse.

³ “What Is the Future of Work?,” McKinsey & Company, January 23, 2023, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-the-future-of-work>.

⁴ IBID,2

How has digitization reshaped the Future of Work (FoW) for Journalists, Entrepreneurs and Gig Workers

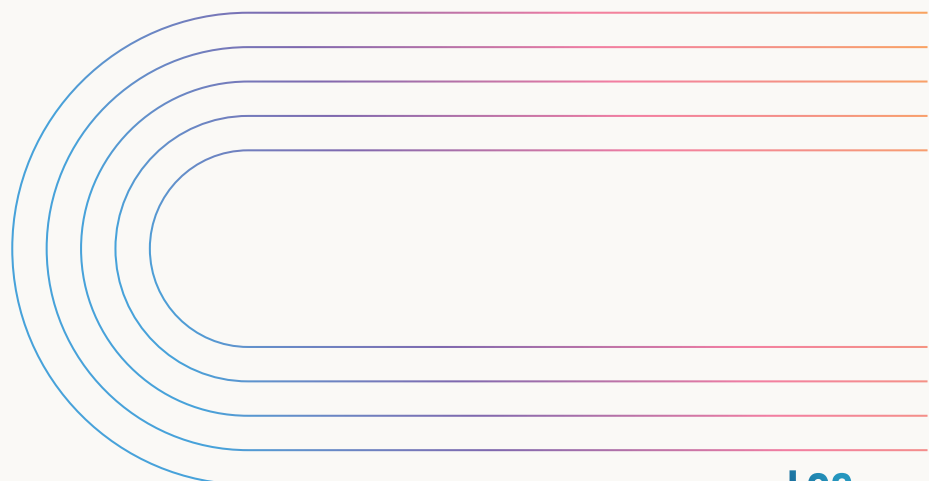


The use of technology and digital tools by journalists remains limited. Both Kenyan and Ugandan women journalists reported using search engines such as Google and Yahoo to verify statistics and information on the cases they are working on or to find new business opportunities. They use messaging apps to conduct interviews, have instant access and direct communication with other people, and prefer these messaging apps because they are relatively cheaper for calls and messaging than SMS or other conferencing tools.

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, is another space for verifying news from organisations who share information online. Twitter particularly is used by journalists in Uganda to stay informed on what is trending in the country because Facebook was blocked during the 2021 General Elections. The journalists also mentioned social media to be an important space to have a larger reach and receive feedback from audiences. It also serves as a personal entertainment space for the journalists.

Digital media, technology and services also facilitates spaces where journalists can also share stories with their editors at a distance through emails and other remote working platforms, without having to be in a physical location.

Meanwhile, journalists also use social media for advocacy to put together supporting resources for victims and survivors of violence, for example. Digital technologies have also provided new avenues for learning and upskilling.



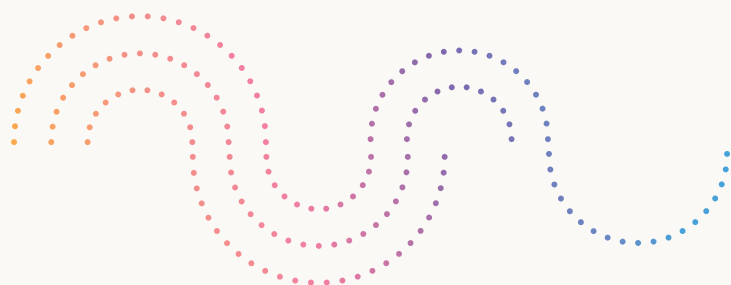
Beyond the current use of technology by journalists, other organisations are exploring the potential of data journalism in Africa. The practice is emerging, yet seems to disrupt normative approaches to journalistic reporting.

Meanwhile, for ride hailing and gig delivery workers, platforms offer additional and main income sources. Many explained that being platform workers came as either a side or a main job, with the opportunity to use one's equipment or vehicle to make money.

Entrepreneurs however, use social media as a space to promote their business. Some business owners use spaces such as Instagram or Facebook as a main business platform, while others supplement social media sites with e-commerce platforms.

For each of these working groups, technology services and platforms have provided significant opportunities to relearn, adapt and advance their work amidst growing challenges.

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The Current Challenges and Anxieties with the Future of Work

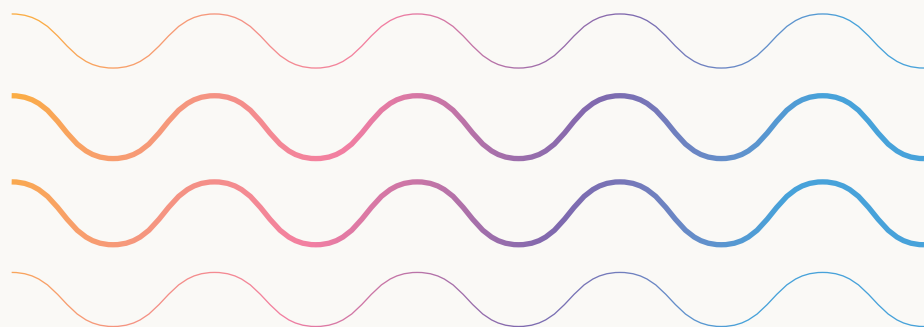


The Future of Work Needs to be Language Critical

The heterogeneity of Africa is represented in the multiple and diverse languages spoken. Language is an important component of culture and an essential means of binding communities together. One of the inherited legacies of the colonial era is that in most African states, including Uganda and Kenya, most systems are conducted in foreign languages as is now most social media and other online platforms.

Participants shared that they use different languages depending on the intended audience or purpose of interaction. Business owners find that customers prefer to communicate in English. Respondents from Ethiopia shared that online data is represented in English, thus having to switch between languages to access needed information. With general social media engagements, participants switch between languages, using English within professional settings or their local languages depending on who they engage with.

Study participants demonstrated some understanding of the role of languages in making technology usage more accessible. By switching from one language to another based on need, the participants consciously and subconsciously acknowledged existing language dynamics online. Some shared insights on their languages such as Kiswahili and Luganda having complexities that made it difficult to easily communicate online, making English the preferred language while others shared that automated translated terminologies were often complex and unfamiliar to them.



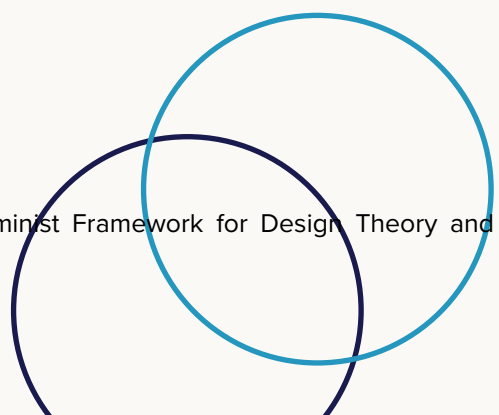
Given the instrumental nature of various technologies in mediating work, critical language inclusivity is significant in ensuring that various African communities have unrestricted access to technology and its services. The language gaps in our technologies present dysaffordances⁵ that limit some communities' participation in the present and future of work

For the Future of Work to Flourish, Online Spaces need to be Safe and Secure

Journalists cited security as the ability to be safe from harassment, bullying, malware, spyware and hacking in online spaces. This includes one's personal data and identity being protected from adversaries. Yet, their current realities demonstrate otherwise. Some respondents reported experiences of hacking of their social media accounts, while others experienced impersonation. Participants shared experiences of doxing, and receiving what they considered to be either phishing attacks or unsolicited emails. These threats disproportionately affect gendered and sexual minorities including women journalists.

Most of the respondents identified basic security measures they take to remain safe online. Various journalists are aware of national and international frameworks and policies for digital safety and security, they have also in part received training, however, their experiences highlight that the onus of 'staying safe' often remains on them.

⁵ Costanza-Chock, Design Justice: Towards an Intersectional Feminist Framework for Design Theory and Practice.



A significant number of the research participants rely on technology for their work. Continuously experiencing coordinated threats limits their ability to successfully engage in their work, thus the future and present practices of work should not be mutually exclusive of holistic safety and security for vulnerable groups.

The Future of Work Needs to Address Labour Exploitation

A host of local and global gig-work platforms have emerged, paving the way for a number of citizens pursuing platform-based livelihoods. From the interviews we conducted, many platform employers are realising that they can hire several freelance workers at lower wages and are thus taking advantage of this potential arbitrage. Moreover, few platform workers we spoke to have legally binding contracts to these freelance jobs, apart from blindly agreeing to terms and conditions instead of written or physical agreements. Platform workers grapple with concerns including depressed earnings, the absence of benefits and job security, and insufficient safeguards against occupational hazards such as theft, sickness or accidents.

Through some of the policies that are enforced in already precarious environments, gig platforms are able to maintain unbalanced relationships and power against workers. The automated and abstracted nature of management creates an enabling environment for platforms to evade accountability from workers whose challenges are rarely addressed. Gig platforms also have been involved in disrupting associations or workers' right to representation⁶. A lack of formal worker representation fuels and exacerbates the problem of worker exploitation.

⁶ Omoniyi, "Uber and Bolt vs Drivers Union: Are Drivers Employees or Independent Contractors?"

The gig economy, has thus far, been the mainstream representation of the *Future of Work* yet, it is embedded in extreme exploitation of workers' rights, while labour laws continue to lag in ensuring that workers are protected.

Policy and Regulatory Framework for The Future of Work

The future of work in Africa focuses on the key themes of creating productive jobs and addressing the needs of the growing population that is increasingly leaning on digital technology for their work. The African region has an opportunity to forge a different path from the rest of the world – if digital technologies are harnessed appropriately by governments and businesses by ensuring that critical policies and investments are in place⁷.

The work conducted on digital platforms is diverse including image identification, transcription and annotation, data collection and processing, content moderation, audio and video transcription and translation⁸. Personal data is collected and used, knowingly and unknowingly, from workers to build online brands and profiles, which eventually becomes their source of visibility. Clients use digital platforms to post tasks that need completion, workers select these tasks from the platforms and are paid by said clients after successful completion⁹. Most online work has limited data protection policies implemented as compared to regular work in employment places.

⁷ “Choi, Jieun; Dutz, Mark; Usman, Zainab. (2020). *The Future of Work in Africa: Harnessing the Potential of Digital Technologies for All. Africa*. Development Forum. © Washington, DC: World Bank. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/32124>

⁸ Sangeet Paul Choudary. (2018). *The Architecture of Digital Labour platforms: Policy recommendations on platform design for worker well-being*. ILO.

⁹ World Bank. (2019). *The Future of Work in Africa: The Roles of Skills, Informality, and Social Protection in Unleashing the Promise of Digital Technologies for All*. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr/publication/africa-future-of-work>

Labour Protection

Most notably, online work is not subject to policy regulation. For example most gig economy work is not subject to labour regulations so workers have little control over their working conditions and their schedule, although the initial appeal for gig work was 'flexible scheduling'. They also have limited options for recourse in cases of unfair treatment¹⁰.

Data Protection

Moreover, gig economy workers find themselves sharing their personal data as job applicants and workers for a number of purposes: to comply with law; to assist in selection for employment, training and promotion; to ensure personal safety, personal security, quality control, customer service. New ways of collecting and processing data entail some new risks for workers. While various national policies and regional standards have established binding procedures for the processing of personal data, adherence to these policies and regulations remains low.

**New ways of collecting
and processing data
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¹⁰ Jieun Choi, Mark A. Dutz, and Zainab Usman. (2020). *The Future of Work in Africa. Harnessing the Potential of Digital Technologies for all*

Every country, at present, has a plethora of opportunities to introduce legislation for the protection of workers and the betterment of workplace conditions since the gig economy is at a nascent stage. This opportunity, if approached positively, can improve the future of work. However only one out of five African countries have a legal framework for digital security, and 11 countries have adopted substantive laws on cybercrime¹¹, which has been argued to be against the best interest of citizens. African states preparing legislation on cyber crime may draw on various regional documents like the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection adopted in Malabo in June 2014 to develop measures for protection of personal data, electronic transactions, cyber security and cyber crime for the future of work and digitalisation¹².

Licensing and Freedom of Speech

In Africa, media reporting is becoming increasingly digitised and datafied, and evidence suggests that as media houses and reporters responded to the disruption caused by COVID-19 to keep up with changing production, distribution and consumption habits. Many areas of journalistic practice have been criminalised, with the adoption of cybercrime laws that prohibit the publication of ‘false’ news or news deemed to ‘threaten national security’ or public health, in countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania. Cybercrime laws grant investigating authorities unrestricted power to block or suspend locally-based or foreign websites featuring content that is deemed harmful to national security or the national economy¹³.

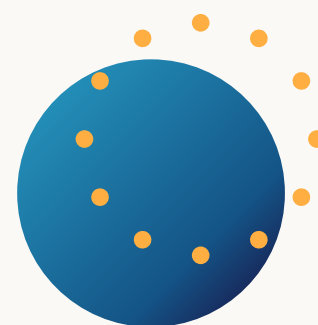
¹¹ *Cyber Crime & Cyber Security. Trends in Africa.* (2016). https://securitydelta.nl/media/com_hsd/report/135-document/Cyber-security-trends-report-Africa-en.pdf

¹² Ibid

¹³ CIPESA. (2021). *Mapping and Analysis of Privacy Laws in Africa.*

In order to remain viable, several traditional media outlets have restructured to include internet and social media platforms for information sharing and audience engagement, with several journalists becoming online content creators such as bloggers for their media houses or in their individual capacity¹⁴. Increasingly, digital media and independent content creators are also coming under government policies and regulations for future operations¹⁵. Other hurdles included the regulatory burdens placed on accreditation and fees associated with registration and licensing to practise journalism. Additionally, social media is largely unregulated, its shortcomings, such as disseminating and amplifying misinformation, disinformation and hate speech, have provided some governments with a convenient excuse to clamp down on online communication and online expression¹⁶.

Indeed, governments in several countries have initiated numerous measures, including the enactment of laws and policies aimed at enhancing control and curtailment of the digital civic space: through enabling surveillance and unrestricted interception of communication, the registering and licensing of online content creators, and limiting the use of encryption¹⁷. Unfortunately, these policies and practices – many of which lack watertight safeguards against abuse – have had a negative impact on the practice of journalism and the safety of journalists in Africa¹⁸, as well as content creators.



¹⁴ World Economic Forum. (2017). *The Future of Jobs and Skills in Africa. Preparing the Region for the Fourth Industrial Revolution*.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Jieun Choi, Mark A. Dutz, and Zainab Usman. (2020). *The Future of Work in Africa. Harnessing the Potential of Digital Technologies for all*.

¹⁸ Ibid

Intersectionality of the Future of Work

The future of work in the African continent is analysed in a one-dimensional manner i.e. either with gender or age as an identity marker. When discussing policies of the future of work, the concept of intersectionality is discarded, thereby ignoring the impact of multiple marginalities. For example, to what extent are gender issues incorporated in policy documents, planning and practice with regard to the gig economy in East Africa? Intersectionality in our policy discourse and application helps to identify gaps thereby providing a theoretical lens for addressing inequities. The methods for application of intersectionality in the future of work discourse are in the nascent stages¹⁹.

A central tenet to this paper's argument is that the inclusion of Indigenous people in policy decision-making processes is essential for developing policies that address inequities in labour and economic justice as well as digital technology access, use and affordability for the future of work. Intersectionality shifts the focus of policy analysis from the aim of quickly producing feasible policy solutions in a fast-paced policy-making environment to carefully considering the complex social and political contexts in which policies are developed, implemented and experienced. Citizens involved in future of work projects ought to be involved in all policy processes including content development during policy formulation as well as implementation. This can deepen their understanding of how policy directions are formulated; how policies are implemented (or not) and how to improve the link between policy formulation and implementation.

¹⁹ UN Women. (2021). *Expanding Available data Knowledge base about women and public transport in Nairobi, Kampala & Dar es salaam. Nairobi Report*. UN Women. https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/Nairobi_public-transport_report.pdf

Decolonizing policy processes is critical since it has its foundation in intersectionality, a feminist perspective that emphasises the fluidity between social identities such as, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age and the inextricable linkages of such identities to systems of power and domination which are also fluid and intersecting. Intersectionality draws attention to how systems of power intersect with individuals' identities to create inequities between and among various groups and individuals. Applying intersectionality to policy analysis can reveal, for example, how power operates within the future of the work ecosystem to determine who is and who is not, and what perspectives, knowledge and views are and are not included in policy processes.

Intersectionality shifts the focus of policy analysis from the aim of quickly producing feasible policy solutions to carefully considering the complex social and political contexts

The Role of Emerging Technologies:

Innovation or Exploitation?

In the Amazon prime series *The Peripheral*²⁰, protagonist Flynne Fisher receives a headset ordered by her brother Burton Fisher, which he claimed to be their ticket out of poverty. To Flynne, the headset may have been another advanced simulator (Sim) game only that she is required to perform tasks in a world she assumes to be fictional, and receives payment by those who assigned the task after successful completion. Flynne is initially unaware of who makes the payment, and realises after a bounty is placed on her through the dark web that tasks carried out through her headsets have real world implications and is not merely a simulation.

The Peripheral is a sci-fi series that involves advanced human-like robots designed to be used as physical avatars to allow a person be present at a location or time despite their actual body being elsewhere²¹. However, actions initially performed by Flynne Fisher before understanding the implications of her tasks, are significant in demonstrating the impact and implications of alienated labour. When labour is alienated, workers who are the core lifeline of production are far removed from the effects and benefits of their commodity. For example, research on *Digital Labour at Economic Margins*²² demonstrated how workers outsourced to train large datasets for machine learning algorithms in data centres were unable to describe why they were engaging in this form of labour. The research highlighted that workers were only able to speculate about the utility of their jobs, while “selling their labour to unknown firms, and helping to build products they might never see or use”²³.

²⁰ Amazon.Com: *The Peripheral* - Season 1: Chloe Grace Moretz, Jack Reynor, Gary Carr, Scott Smith, Greg Plageman, Jamie Chan, Vincenzo Natali, Alrick Riley, Jonah Nolan, Lisa Joy, Athena Wickham: Prime Video.

²¹ IBID,21

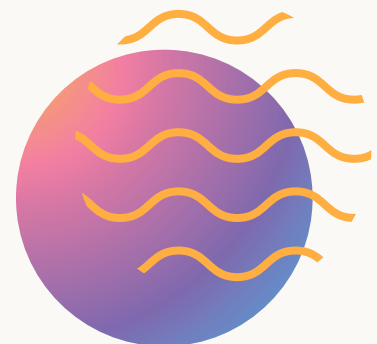
²² Anwar and Graham, “Digital Labour at Economic Margins: African Workers and the Global Information Economy.”

²³ IBID,23

Similarly, emerging technology being dubbed as life changing have so far exacerbated labour exploitation and inequalities within Africa, and among marginalised workers. A recent Mckinsey report²⁴ stated that in the future of work, some job categories such as e-commerce, green economy and accessibility technicians may experience more growth. Meanwhile supermarket till, customer service, call centre and routine office workers' jobs are at risk due to the emergence of self-check out, and the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Large Language models such as Generative Pre-trained Transformers (GPT).

Workers whose jobs are at risk due to technological advancement are 'confronted with greater informalization and precarity'²⁵. These realities present us with an irony that the future of work influenced by digitalization increases labour opportunities and income for minoritized communities. Further, people who exist at the production value chains are made invisible, enabling firms who outsource the labour to evade accountability while engaging in problematic production practices²⁶.

As inequality, exclusion and exploitation risk being reproduced through digitalization of work, states are also faced with the challenge of regulating new labour practices at the gamble of losing these forms of employment altogether.



²⁴ "What Is the Future of Work?," McKinsey & Company, January 23, 2023, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-the-future-of-work>.

²⁵ Gurumurthy, Bharthur, and Korjan, "Future of Work We Seek."

²⁶ Anwar and Graham, "Digital Labour at Economic Margins: African Workers and the Global Information Economy"

Designing and Enforcing an Inclusive Future of Work



Our view of the future of work is a reality where advancement does not reproduce 'disruption' at the expense of marginalised communities. Rather, it should create a reality where people at the margins are central to the exponential benefits of this much anticipated future.

To achieve this, labour policies that prioritise workers' well being regardless of industry and status is crucial. These policies need to be harmonised across contexts and locations to limit the options of firms that outsource labour to engage in evasive practices and move elsewhere when held accountable. Labour regulations also need to ensure that workers are fully aware of the utility of the jobs they sell their labour power to. Additionally, it is essential to create safe online spaces by enacting progressive legislation that protects users while fostering positive and supportive virtual environments.

The long term readiness of people to engage in relevant labour markets relies on African states' ability to adapt education and training to prioritise meta skills that include innovative and critical thinking, problem solving, inquiry, curation and reflection to name a few. These forms of education should not be reserved for the privileged few who have access to quality 21-century-relevant education.

Localised inventions require the support of infrastructure to flourish. Inventors, entrepreneurs, creators and journalists to name a few, have pointed out that to thrive in the present and future of work, tools, and enabling environments for upskilling are required to facilitate learning curves and transitions. Infrastructure and development must be circular, not only focusing advancements that are explicitly technological, but use a framework that considers the interplay between humans, cultures, society and technology.



Digital infrastructure that is accessible, inclusive and affordable –in rural and urban areas, and across all demographics – is key to promoting regional integration. Regional integration plays a critical role in advancing favourable internal business environments and trade and investment policies. Given the relatively small global market influence of many African countries, regional integration (specifically the African Continental and Free Trade area AfCFTA) can prove advantageous for boosting technological innovation and harmonised labour and progressive digital protection at the benefit of marginalised communities.

Finally, long-term creative research is also important to identifying ways various African contexts can use emerging technologies to facilitate socio-political and economic improvements. For instance, community networks in Kenya²⁷ and South Africa²⁸ has been significant in extending affordable internet and infrastructure to rural areas. Stakeholders in Cameroon are also exploring licensing frameworks on community networks for their location as well. Meanwhile in South Africa, an A.I gender-based violence (GBV) app is being created to provide an easy-to-use tool to report and prosecute crime²⁹. In Uganda, innovators, AirQo³⁰ have created affordable and mobile sensors to collect data on air-quality which is being used by environmental protection regulators.

Creative social advancement in this manner, within our imagined future of work should be supported through technical, infrastructural, labour and educational policies and practices.



²⁷ Kenya Adopts Community Networks Licensing Framework | Association for Progressive Communications.

²⁸ Zenzeleni Community Networks NPC, “Zenzeleni Bahlali INetworks.”

²⁹ Kwanele | An App Helping Women Report Abuse in South Africa.

³⁰ AirQo Africa.

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