GIG WORK ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS:

Executive Summary—
Learning, Evaluation and Research Activity II (LER II)
## CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION
   1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION 2
   1.2 METHOD 2

2. FINDINGS
   2.1 QUICKRJOBS – INDIA 4
   2.2 SWEEPSOUTH – SOUTH AFRICA 5
   2.3 ONLINE SUPPORT FORUMS FOR AMAZON MECHANICAL TURK 6
   2.4 GOLDEN DREAMS 7

3. CONCLUSION 8
I. INTRODUCTION

The platform economy is creating new opportunities for income generation and value creation. This is particularly relevant for developing countries, where finding “decent work” within the formal or organized sectors of the economy remains aspirational for many workers. However, the platform economy is also creating precarity for workers. Recent studies have shown that workers are subject to methods of algorithmic control and lack access to formal social protection mechanisms. By classifying workers as “freelancers” or “independent contractors,” platforms absolve themselves of the responsibilities associated with formal employment and often leave workers with little to no bargaining power.

Several countries in the Global South view digital labor platforms as key drivers of future employment, and some have even included them in national policies. In India, for example, the government has entered into partnerships with platforms for skilling initiatives, the distribution of social welfare schemes, and job creation strategies; similarly, the governments of Philippines and Nigeria actively support and promote online work initiatives. Most studies on the impact of the platform economy on labor conditions have focused on industrialized economies, highlighting how a shift from formal employment to gig work is resulting in greater insecurity for workers, characterized by irregular wages and a loss of formal social protection mechanisms. Labor markets in the Global South, however, are characterized by informality and the prevalence of non-standard employment relationships, where work is often fraught with low wages, poor working conditions, and a lack of social protection. Therefore,

1 Terms like “gig economy” and “sharing economy” have also been used to refer to this growing ecosystem of technologically mediated marketplaces. However, we prefer to use the term “platform economy” for two reasons: piecework, where workers are paid a piece rate, is a prevalent characteristic of labor markets marked by informality and where workers perform labor in the unorganized sectors. This employment relationship has existed long before the gig economy came into popularity in the past few years. The sharing economy, on the other hand, may have started with the intention of allowing asset owners to monetize their unused assets with interactions between owners and “customers” mediated by the platform. It implied a more or less equal relationship between asset owners and platforms. However, numerous changes to the business model over time have concentrated a disproportionate amount of control and power by platform owners over asset owners, thereby negating the “sharing” relationship.


narratives from industrialized nations on the platform economy must be contextualized to labor market conditions in developing countries.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION

This study sought to understand how digital platforms impact workers in developing nations, especially those in low-wage, low-skill work. Platforms at the most general level can be understood as digital infrastructures that enable two groups to interact. Therefore, they function as intermediaries that bring together different users—customers, service providers, producers, advertisers and suppliers—and provide the basic infrastructure required to mediate these groups. Accordingly, this study is structured around three lines of inquiry:

1. How are employment relationships and conditions changing? Have platforms enabled or improved access to quality work in developing countries?

2. Do such labor platforms support or undermine workers’ rights and ability to bargain for adequate wages, compensation, and terms and conditions of their labor?

3. Do supporting organizations meant to help workers, such as information-sharing platforms, successfully facilitate workers’ understanding of their rights and their ability to organize? Are social media tools effective in improving worker access to information and agency?

Digital platforms address different aspects of work and differ in structure and objective. Farrell and Greig make the distinction between capital platforms and labor platforms. Capital platforms allow participants to sell goods or rent assets, while labor platforms allow the participants to perform many tasks.7 Ford et al. offer an alternative typology to assist with policy making for the platform economy. They classify platforms depending on whether the work is done online or offline, and the degree of control platforms exert over workers.8 This study looks specifically at labor platforms catering to both offline and online labor and with varying degrees of worker autonomy.

1.2 METHOD

This inquiry adopts a case-study approach, looking at four platforms for workers in developing countries. Corresponding to the research questions posed in this study, we studied two types of platforms: job-matching and information-sharing platforms. Within each category, we looked at two platforms. For job matching, we studied QuikrJobs in India and SweepSouth in South Africa; for information sharing, we examined online forums that support workers on Amazon Mechanical Turk and Golden Dreams in Myanmar.

These platforms are different in their function, structure, and aims, but all target low-wage, low-skill workers in developing countries. The selection of case studies was motivated by the attempt to

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understand the different varieties and forms that digital platforms take, to gather a range of insights on the ways in which platforms are disrupting traditional models of work, and to understand the agency and rights of workers. The study is thus intended to be formative rather than comparative.

A research team of two people conducted field visits of five to seven days at each site for in-person interviews. Interviews of workers who use Amazon Mechanical Turk forums were conducted online, as it caters to an online, geographically dispersed labor force. The study relied on semi-structured in-depth interviews with workers, platform management teams, and domestic labor market experts. This allowed us to elicit narratives from relevant stakeholders to understand the issues and concerns that they prioritized. The importance of interviews to qualitative research is that they allow participants to express themselves in their own voice and language. Questions centered around motivations for joining the platform; access to job opportunities; changes in earnings, terms of employment, and working conditions; access to social protection schemes; and engagement with other workers and the ability to organize. Since we were dealing with two distinct types of platforms—job matching and information sharing—questions were tailored to accommodate the differences in platform function. The sampling strategy was also tailored according to the platform—some workers were directly recruited from the platform, where possible, while others were recommended to us by the platform managers or other researchers or workers themselves.

The aim of the study was to cover a diversity of experiences rather than an in-depth look at specific platforms. This is also one of the limitations of the study. With only five to seven days available for field work at each site, the study was limited to a very small sample size of workers. It was also not possible to build a deep understanding of individual contexts or develop relationships of understanding and trust with workers. The duration of the study allowed for only a snapshot view of each case. Accessing workers and platform management teams was also difficult in such a short duration—workers were dispersed around the country, as in the case of Golden Dreams, or reluctant to speak as they were unsure of our intentions, as was the case with QuikrJobs. Platform management teams were similarly reluctant in some cases, such as with Sweep South. A more comprehensive view of these platforms would require a deeper dive into each context to build trust with key informants and reach out to a larger sample size. The limited time available also impacted our sampling strategy. In many cases, we accessed workers either through contacting the platform management or by booking a gig through the platform. In the case of the former, this carried the risk of workers being hand-picked by platform managers and not necessarily being representative of the experiences of other workers. In the case of the later strategy, workers were often reluctant to speak candidly, fearing that it would affect their ratings or they would be penalized by the platforms. These limitations notwithstanding, the aim of this study was to generate an initial set of hypotheses or lines of inquiry that can guide USAID in evaluating its programmatic priorities, rather than systematically and comprehensively evaluating each platform.
2. FINDINGS

2.1 QUICKRJOBS – INDIA

QuikrJobs is a job-matching platform in India that connects blue-collar and gray-collar workers to employment opportunities. It functions like a job bulletin board, allowing employers and prospective employees to share and seek work opportunities respectively. Despite high rates of economic growth in India over the past two decades, employment growth has been notably slow; unemployment reached a 40-year high at 6.1 percent between 2017 and 2018.9 Over 4.75 million young people are expected to join the labor force every year, yet only 1 to 2 million jobs are reported to have been created in 2017.10 Over 80 percent of the labor force in India is engaged in non-standard employment within the unorganized sector, characterized by low wages, poor job security, and the absence of employment-related social protection benefits.11 Under-employment is an equally pressing concern, as most workers are unable to access enough hours of paid work to make a decent living or are working in jobs below their skill level.12

QuikrJobs plays a limited role in creating new employment opportunities or improving employment conditions for workers. The availability of jobs on the platform is a function of demand in the labor market, and QuikrJobs does not play a role in negotiating employment terms. Yet, this does not mean it has no value for workers. It allows workers to look for suitable or desirable employment opportunities, even while they are engaged in other forms of employment; it provides a valuable resource for first time jobseekers, particularly migrant workers who do not have social networks through which they can access work; and it allows workers to avoid traditional recruitment agencies, many of which charge a fee or are fraudulent. In this sense, QuickrJobs creates infrastructure that supports the labor market. It is also worth highlighting that the platform has been more useful for gray-collar workers, such as telecom operators, sales executives, and customer relations executives, than for blue collar workers, such as domestic help or guards. This is for two reasons. Employers, typically large companies, often engage QuikrJobs to bulk-hire workers, relying on QuikrJobs for an initial verification or screening process. In the case of blue-collar workers, employers continue to rely on social networks and referrals, because trust is critical for hires at a household level. Platforms like QuickrJobs do, however, have the potential to improve conditions for workers by providing them information on wages or likely demand in various sectors and verification of employers. Platforms like QuickrJobs are also collecting large amounts of

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labor market data that could be used to reduce information asymmetry for workers and improve labor policy. In its current form, however, this potential is not being realized.

2.2 SWEEP SOUTH – SOUTH AFRICA

SweepSouth is an on-demand platform for domestic cleaning services in South Africa. Clients can book domestic services through the application and are matched to a domestic worker. The platform is meant exclusively for women domestic workers, and had 7,500 registered workers, over 150,000 app downloads, and 40,000 users in 2018, making it the biggest on-demand cleaning service app in South Africa. However, it represents less than one percent of domestic workers in the country. Domestic work in South Africa, much like other facets of society, continues to be impacted by the legacy of apartheid-era policies. Historically performed by African and mixed-race women, racial disparity in this sector continues to remain highly stark, with over 91 percent of workers identifying as black African and nine percent as colored.13 Workers are usually from disadvantaged communities, while employers are predominantly white and affluent. The sector employs 14 percent of the workforce, and women make up around 97 percent of the entire sector.

With high unemployment rates in South Africa, particularly for black South Africans, SweepSouth is creating new employment opportunities for low-skill women workers. The platform is also one of the better options for many migrant workers from other parts of Africa who may lack the social networks to access job opportunities or face discrimination. Workers join SweepSouth in the hopes of earning a higher and steadier income. However, the irregularity of work, combined with the costs of transport and data, both of which are borne by the worker, significantly reduce their earning potential on the platform. Workers feel that permanent employment in a household would be more beneficial to their earnings. SweepSouth claims that its aim is to provide dignified opportunities to domestic workers; however, the platform seems to privilege customer experience at the expense of worker welfare. The platform exerts strict algorithmic control over workers, leaving workers with little agency or autonomy in determining the conditions of their work. Workers also have limited bargaining power with the platform or with clients. Grievance redressal mechanisms are poor, and workers feel their complaints aren’t taken seriously by the platform, with the effect of reinforcing exploitative and racial practices prevalent in the industry. Social protection mechanisms, both formal and informal, are not available to workers. As independent contractors, they are also not eligible for state-sponsored insurance schemes. Such outcomes, however, are not inevitable. Both design choices within the platform as well as alternative types of platforms have the potential to better serve workers.

2.3 ONLINE SUPPORT FORUMS FOR AMAZON MECHANICAL TURK

Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) is one of the oldest and longest-running online microwork marketplaces, owned and operated by Amazon. Workers are geographically spread out, but most are from the United States (75%) and India (18%). Online work may enable new opportunities for flexible and remote work. However, recent studies on online work, particularly micro-work, have highlighted some of the risks for workers, from low wages and unstable earnings to the alienation of workers and loss of opportunities for collective bargaining. “Turkers” on AMT use a combination of tools and online fora to band together to battle exploitative working conditions in online crowd-work. We looked at two online tools, Turkopticon and TurkerNation, selected because of their popularity amongst workers and their widespread usage. Turkopticon is a browser extension meant for Turkers to review requesters and share information useful to other Turkers regarding Human Intelligence Tasks (HITs). Turker Nation is a Turker-created, Turker-led worker forum where Turkers can share information about well-paid HITs, share tips about completing HITs, and have casual chats about working on AMT. Along with these tools, we also looked at social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and YouTube.

Confirming the findings in some of the emerging literature on Turkers in developing nations, Indian Turkers are generally satisfied with their earnings, owing to a favorable exchange rate. However, the availability of work fluctuates greatly, preventing many workers from generating stable earnings. Indian workers face further constraints because of poor internet connectivity, time differences with most employers in the U.S., and in some cases, fluency in English. However, it is crucial to point out that most of these Turkers were high-skilled workers, often with undergraduate degrees, doing low-skill work for very low wages. Online tools, forums, and social media groups play an important role in improving Turkers’ access to information, identifying good HITs and requesters, reducing time spent searching for HITs, enabling workers to exchange quality work opportunities, and retaining them to continue working on AMT. Further, virtual communities can help create new solidarities between geographically dispersed workers. Smaller and localized groups are more successful in mitigating the alienating effect of work on crowdwork platforms, making conversations more relevant and relatable by creating a familiar environment and addressing mistrust. However, it is important to recognize the limited capacity of these support platforms. While they do ease the workers’ experiences and enable the formation of new collaborative networks, they are unable to address the sources and causes of exploitation on the platform. One must also not assume that the “collaborative crowd” is a sufficient safety net for all workers.

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2.4 GOLDEN DREAMS

Golden Dreams is a Burmese language app meant for Burmese workers migrating to Thailand. Golden Dreams was launched in 2017 by Issara Institute, and currently has over 14,000 registered users. The app contains information about government-approved recruitment agencies, job opportunities, information about workers’ rights and entitlements, a helpline where users can call in, tips for safe migration, and resources like information about local health clinics and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It also allows users to rate recruitment agencies and employers. Issara Institute has a strong network of local civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs, through which it builds awareness of the app and conducts workshops and training sessions for job seekers. It is estimated that between 2 to 3 million migrants from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia live and work in Thailand. Over 80 percent of these workers are from Myanmar, though exact figures are difficult to ascertain as many workers are undocumented. Exploitation of migrant workers by brokers, recruitment agencies, and employers is extremely underreported. There is a major information gap that leaves migrant workers with little agency.

Golden Dreams has been helpful in encouraging safe migration among Burmese workers by collecting and publishing reliable information from official sources to the platform. By virtue of publishing only verified information, jobseekers using the app are prompted to go through official channels. Even for workers that continue to use informal channels, the app can act as an important source of information. While local CSOs have traditionally addressed some of these needs, the availability of a digital tool that is remotely accessible, reliable, and updated is an added and valuable benefit. However, the app is still in its early stages and uptake is still fairly limited. For the time being, most workers continue to rely on informal networks of support. The Golden Dreams example does nonetheless illustrate how digital platforms can be used to aggregate not just labor demand and supply, but also information for workers. This would seem to be particularly important for low-wage workers, where accessing and verifying information is both time consuming and costly. The Golden Dreams case further highlights how successful technology interventions require a sound understanding of the local context; that both offline and online strategies are needed; and the importance well-established and trusted local networks to raise awareness and the build trust with workers. Finally, even though many workers continue to use social media platforms like Facebook, this can also pose risks to user privacy and safety, thereby underscoring the need for non-commercial platforms to support workers.

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3. CONCLUSION

Platforms are helping address underemployment and unemployment for low-wage workers in developing countries. However, workers are also subject to new forms of algorithmic control, little to no bargaining power, and no access to formal social protection. While these issues are likely to be faced by workers of all skill levels, they are arguably accentuated for low-skill workers due to an under-supply of jobs, an over-supply of labor, poor understanding of rights and entitlements, and limited capacities for bargaining and negotiation. However, platforms can take many different forms. While platforms that play a job-matching function tend to dominate popular narratives, platforms can also be used to share information with workers and connect geographically dispersed workers. While such platform-based interventions may not in themselves address worker rights, they can reduce information asymmetry, enable workers to make better-informed choices, and place reputational pressure on businesses to improve working conditions.

Ultimately, platforms are neutral tools, and the way that they are designed, or the interests they are designed to serve, can play a crucial role in determining whether they are able to address worker concerns. Many platforms seem to be designed to improve customer experience at the expense of workers, but certain design and business considerations can be used to address worker welfare. For example, UrbanClap, a beauty and home services platform in India, provides workers with a minimum wage guarantee, ensuring workers receive enough leads to earn a minimum amount every month. Domestly, a domestic service app based in South Africa, is designed so that workers are hired on a weekly or monthly basis, ensuring that they earn a consistent wage. Identity and repetitional portability across platforms would also allow workers greater agency and control, as well opportunities for progression in earnings. Ultimately, the intent of the platform matters. Commercial platforms motivated solely by profit are likely to prioritize decisions to meet their bottom lines, rather than focusing on worker wellbeing.

If digital labor platforms are the new marketplaces, then supporting institutions need to be re-imagined to suit platform realities. Platforms and applications that should be promoted include those that link platform workers to labor unions or other labor supporting institutions; that give workers information about their rights and the channels available to realize their entitlements; and that allow reporting and rating of employers. Platforms can also be leveraged to improve working conditions and labor market policy. For example, platforms have important labor market information that can be used to address labor market issues in developing countries where such information is often unavailable due to the large number of workers engaged in informal or irregular employment. Additionally, data around wages, skills, and employment conditions could be useful to create some form of standardization for workers in unorganized sectors of work. Just as platforms aggregate labor demand and supply, they could also be used to aggregate and deliver social protection and skilling programs to workers. Worker welfare does not necessarily have to be antithetical to profit and the platform.