Chapter One

Data governance for inclusive development and decent work

Isabel Rocha de Siqueira
International Relations Institute (IRI)
Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-RIo)
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Beatriz Nazareth de S. Teixeira
BRICS Policy Center
Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-RIo)
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Renan Guimarães Canellas de Oliveira
International Relations Institute (IRI)
Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio)
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Bernardo Beiriz Marques Barbosa
Instituto de Relações Internacionais
Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio)
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Abstract

This chapter proposes ways to achieve digital transformation through the adoption of inclusive policies in the deployment of emerging technologies, particularly related to the world of work. It analyses how digital transformation can help foster decent work and increase well-being instead of furthering precarity, especially in the global South. It has been argued that digital technologies and digital data can accelerate the implementation

of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As digital development is uneven between and within countries, such advances must be grounded on effective normative frameworks, so that they promote fairness and inclusivity, rather than exacerbate inequalities. To explore this possibility, the chapter examines the case of work and the digitally deliverable services (DDS) market in the global South. Given the global nature of these changes, international cooperation and governance are essential. Data governance is crucial to addressing the intersectional inequalities amplified online, while coordinated regulatory policies are needed to ensure equitable outcomes. The G20 can advance digital labour rights through initiatives like the Global Digital Compact and reinforce frameworks such as the ILO's guidelines, promoting fairer impacts of data-driven technologies.

Keywords: digitalization – decent work – development – inequalities

1. Diagnosis of the Issue: systemic inequalities

Digital development is uneven between and within countries (Figures 1 and 2). From Internet access to complex and vital issues of literacy, privacy and agency, countries in the global South face various challenges in their digital transformation processes. The asymmetric nature of digital development, therefore, further accentuates previously existing inequities in the world economy, reinforcing the need for actions that enable developing countries to effectively participate in a digitalized economy.

The G20's Rio de Janeiro Leaders 'Declaration (2024a) acknowledged those inequalities and looked to digital and emerging technologies as having the potential to contribute to their reduction via a process of digital inclusion which "requires universal and meaningful connectivity". The document also emphasised the "contribution of digital public infrastructure to an equitable digital transformation" and described as "transformative" the power of digital technologies to bridge

existing divides and empower societies and individuals. (G20, 2024a, paragraph 29).

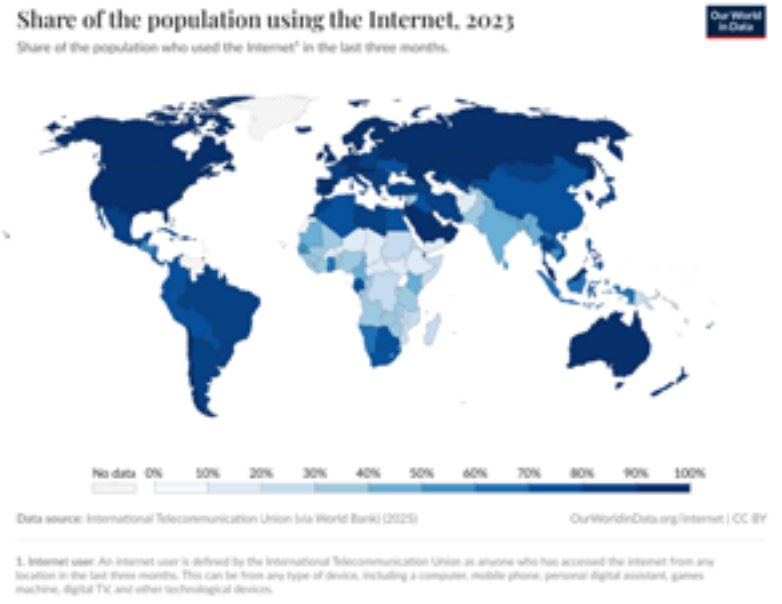

Figure 1: Percentage of the population using the internet. Source: Our World in Data, 2025, ITU (via World Bank)

However, it is increasingly clear that said potential will continue unrealised unless the issue of digital inequality among countries is effectively addressed, a sentiment echoed by the 2025 South Africa presidency of the G20 under the theme "Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability". The focus has been on ensuring that "regional perspectives are integrated into the international discourse on an inclusive digital transformation" (G20, 2024b, p.13).

Many aspects of the digital economy are especially sensitive for the global South precisely due to the challenges posed by the multifaceted nature of existing inequalities and to the need to make timely use of windows of opportunity

for growth and innovation in scenarios ridden with structural limitations.

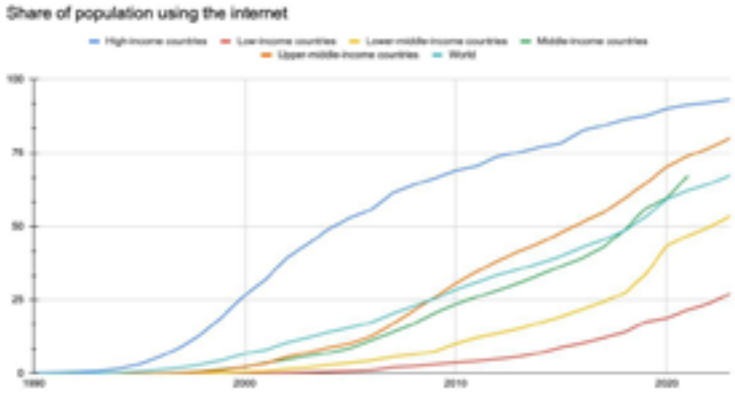

Figure 2: Percentage of the population using the internet. Source: Our World in Data, 2025, ITU (via World Bank)

Let us take the case of digital services or services provided through digital platforms. For lower- and high-middle income countries such as those composing the G20, the sector that has generally seen the most significant economic increase is that of the digitally deliverable services (DDS), mainly because of the impact of digital technologies (Figure 3). These services can be defined as those delivered remotely over computer networks (IMF, 2023), however it should be noted that this definition does not exclude the possibility of human-to human interaction in the delivery of the service in question. That impact was noted on the G20'S Rio de Janeiro Leaders 'Declaration, which recognised that "digital platforms have reshaped the digital ecosystem and online interactions by amplifying information dissemination and facilitating communication within and across geographical boundaries" (G20, 2024a, paragraph 29).

Figure 3: Global exports of digitally delivered services have grown faster than exports of goods and other services. Source: WTO 2023

The figures offered by e-commerce reports clearly showcase the potential for growth of digital services: 'in China, sales almost tripled from $1.6 trillion in 2016 to $4.5 trillion in 2022 and in the United States, e-commerce sales by businesses increased from $7 trillion in 2016 to an estimated $11 trillion in 2022. 'However, while in some countries more than 80% of the population shop online, in some developing countries with the lowest levels of connectivity, this figure is below 10% (UNCTAD, 2024, p. 144). Some sales take place in dedicated e-commerce websites, but much is done through social media platforms. Online platforms 'act as market makers, facilitating transactions between multiple buyers and sellers who communicate through the platform', and often selling their own products (as Amazon) (UNCTAD, 2024, p. 147).

Those are all elements that compose windows of opportunity and potentialities for emerging economies. However, there are many bumps on the way.

For all these economic activities to function effectively, data needs to flow across borders. The cross-border flow of data, however, requires the coordination of infrastructure and economics policies, laws and regulations, as well as the design of institutions that enable data to deliver its potential benefits while safeguarding against harmful outcomes (World Bank,

2021). The coordination of these elements is translated in the concept of *data governance*, which can therefore be seen as a tool that can guide the use of data in the direction of inclusive development and positive social change (Fumega, 2024).[1]

The data capabilities of a country "involves not just the presence of digital resources, and access to data literacy, but also involves the freedoms and opportunities for skills and resources to be put to use in service of wider social goals" (ILDA, 2022, p. 33). As these capabilities remain unequal between countries, two potential risks for increasing inequality arise: the danger of reducing worker's access to rights and safety in countries where the 'gig economy 'has taken up most of the significant increase in the DDS market, such as the emerging economies of the G20; and the danger of placing such countries in an even more disadvantaged position in the global economy, since "countries with adequate ICT infrastructure and overall digital readiness are more capable of taking advantage of the opportunities arising from the digitalization of services (UNCTAD, 2022, p. 6). Moreover, it is also known that the "extent of a country's export volumes of goods and services is positively associated with its internet connectivity (United Nations, 2016) with supporting infrastructure and extending digital literacy", further reflecting the potential for compounding inequalities. Indeed, a report by United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 2024 highlighted the centrality of the digital divide as a key impediment for the fulfillment of the digital services 'promising opportunities, indicating the need to address the 'highly uneven levels of digital readiness 'among countries (UNCTAD, 2024, p. 147).

The Employment Working Group (EWG) for G20 South Africa 2025 indicates the decline in labor income share as

1 Data governance is addressed in both the G20s latest Leaders' Declaration (Rio de Janeiro, 2024) and the concept note for its upcoming South Africa 2025. The latter emphasizes that an effective global data governance would allow for a shift "away from the individualistic, exploitative model of data ownership towards one that emphasises collaboration, community control and the equitable distribution of data's value" (G20, 2024a, p. 13).

evidence of a rising inequality which is exacerbated by non-standard forms of employment, such as temporary, part-time, and platform work, especially in the informal sector (2024, p.8).

For some researchers of these tendencies, however, exclusion-based approaches to these inequalities might only go so far in helping address them. That is because while undoubtedly many are still excluded from access to digital technologies, especially in the global South, as mentioned, we observe digital inequalities intensifying as a phenomenon *within* the group of individuals who do have access to these resources. Among these are small businesses and farmers trading on digital platforms, workers employed by gig platforms, communities that have been digitally mapped and others (Heeks, 2022). What is required, thus, is both a theoretical and practical new framework that is capable of encompassing the complexity of these dynamics, not least in times of trade war and increasing unpredictability. Newly-coined notions such as 'data colonialism', 'data literacy', and 'data feminism 'can offer rich contributions (Rocha de Siqueira, 2023). The practicalities of this engagement, in turn, concern aspects of regulation, governance and public policies. We seek below to indirectly mobilize the first as lenses in order to elaborate recommendations that can contribute to the development of these practical tools.

2. Digital technologies and workers' rights

If we are to focus on the intensification of inequalities within the group of those who do have access to digital technologies, as seen, workers employed by the so-called gig economy are a key subset of especially affected individuals.

Digital technology and online platforms are in nearly every business and workplace, reshaping the world of work (ILO, 2022). This rapid digitalization has not only transformed how work is organized and performed but also opened up new markets for businesses, generating employment and income opportunities. For some workers, it offers greater flexibility and is often characterized by low entry barriers, further reinforcing its role as a key driver of change in the modern labor landscape.

Informal self-employed workers are engaged in the "gig economy" and the global North is increasingly outsourcing digital workers to the global South. In a world economic scenario characterised by the constant transformation of supply chains, non-standard jobs in information and communication technology (ICT) are an alternative for low-skilled men and women in the poorest areas (Mexi, 2020; ILO, 2024).

Informal self-employed workers in ICT-dependent and on-demand jobs are the most vulnerable to coverage gaps in social security and labour laws, especially in the global South (ILO, 2022; 2024). In addition, outsourcing self-employed and informal workers may foster economic asymmetry in territories with low educational and income levels.

In the global South, where the use of computers and laptops is still lower than in the developed regions, participation in digital jobs is predominantly performed on smartphones with no guarantee of a minimum salary and lack of commitment to the ILO's (1998) Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (ILO, 2022).

Given this context, as Costa and Pagani (2021) point out, the central issue surrounding digitalization is not merely the potential loss of jobs due to technological advances, but rather the emergence of a large number of new jobs that lack the minimum conditions necessary for dignified work, and are therefore misaligned with the promotion of decent work. Decent work refers to employment that upholds labor and human rights, contributing to the worker's self-realization. Its effectiveness is closely tied to ensuring that all workers have access to the basic guarantees needed for a dignified existence (Costa and Pagani, 2021).

Illustrating this precariousness, in Brazil, a middle-income developing country, 91.7% of the platform workers are associated with on-demand services, such as UBER and other food delivery platforms, with 77.1% of them self-employed men, with medium and low levels of education (IBGE, 2023) and informality corresponding to 70.1% of the total of the self-employed in platforms. This is higher than the level of

informals among the total occupied population in the private sector in Brazil, 44.2% (IBGE, 2023). However, it is important to highlight that, unlike in developed countries, where platform work is generally a secondary source of income, in Brazil, 52.2% of the total digital workers have it as their primary source of income (ILO, 2022; IBGE, 2023).

The distribution of these workers within Brazil is also unequal. The Southeast stands out both in the share of DDS workers among its workforce (2.2%) and in its dominance of the national distribution (57.8%) In contrast, regions like the North and Central-West, despite high internet access rates, account for smaller shares of DDS workers. This suggests that while internet access is a necessary condition for platform-based work, other factors, such as regional economic structures and labor market dynamics, play a significant role in shaping the distribution of digital labor.

Table 1: Internet Access and Regional Distribution of DDS Workers in Brazil Source: Own work, based on *IBGE, 2022 and IBGE, 2023.*

Region	Internet access by household (%)	DDS workers	
		Percentage of DDS workers among total workers (%)	Percentage of DDS workers by region (%)
North	90.4	1.4	6.4
Northeast	89.1	1.3	16.6
Southeast	94.1	2.2	57.8
South	93.5	1.3	12.1
Central-West	95.4	1.4	7.1

Considering the increasing informality in DDS with a high presence of self-employed and contract workers, there is a risk that economic uncertainty could threaten the welfare and health of individuals and reduce the revenues of social security public systems (EU Council, 2018 p.8). Cooperation and governance are, therefore, critical points of departure

to tackle the new challenges facing the world of work with a commitment by governments, employers and workers' organisations of the G20 countries to guarantee a minimum standard of rights to DDS workers worldwide. Furthermore, the existing inequities in the local, regional and international contexts, such as the gender divide in Internet usage, might influence the transformations in the field of work due to the digitization process. In order for digital technologies to fulfil their promises of generating new possibilities of employment, facilitating access to educational resources and enabling broader social and economic development, coordinated policies must be simultaneously developed.

3. Recommendations for decent work, inclusive development and fair digitization

3.1. Advance meaningful access and connectivity

As digital technologies transform the global landscapes of markets and work, underlying inequalities may allow those better positioned to respond to emerging opportunities to benefit from open regimes, thus perpetuating existing extreme asymmetries.

If the global scenario already demonstrates the differences in access and usage of the Internet, with 70% of the male population using it versus only 65% of the women (ITU, 2024), the regional realities showcase even more striking inequities. As an example, in the African region 43% of the male population is counted as using the Internet, compared to only 31% of the women (ITU, 2024). There is the need to acknowledge and address the issue of grave inequity in opportunities as a result of the lack of meaningful access and connectivity. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2022), this type of connectivity entails a "safe, satisfying, enriching and productive online experience at an affordable cost" (p. 19).

The counting, categorisation and visualisation of development issues in lower- and middle-income countries have been increasingly spearheaded by large corporations that

offer their own or user-provided data to donors and investors. That expression of data colonialism – the merging of the extractive logic of historical colonialism with the quantification methods of digital technologies (Couldry and Mejias, 2018) – has been denounced by researchers as yet another manifestation of North-South divide.

In the Global South, understanding Big Data means recognizing capitalism's growing reliance on this new form of appropriation, which operates through today's networks of connection. Just as historical colonialism enabled industrial capitalism, data colonialism is laying the foundations for a future phase of capitalism centered on the extraction of human life through data. Rather than speculating about this future, the urgent task is to resist the ongoing expansion of data colonialism (Couldry and Mejias, 2018).

Finally, advancing meaningful access and connectivity also means providing the ones who are currently the most distanced from the economic digitalization process with a chance to be effectively included in this changing economy.

The Digital Economy Group (DEWG) of the G20 South Africa 2025 has committed itself to examining continuing challenges to meaningful connectivity, namely, examine the different aspects of policy, regulation, and data governance required for Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) to be transformational and an incremental approach to investment in the DPI critical infrastructures. The group also warns that "without the institutional, human and financial resources and without innovative economic regulation to redress digital inequalities, the efficiencies offered by DPIs will disproportionately benefit those with access to these infrastructures and the services they offer" (2024a, p.3).

In line with the acknowledgement of the need for universal and meaningful connectivity (G20, 2024a), the G20 should seek to advance common principles and practices in relation to access, interoperability, security, privacy, and sovereignty of data, especially in initiatives such as the Global Digital Compact, the Tech Envoy AI Advisory Council and proposed AI framework.

Under the auspices of the Brazilian presidency of the G20, and building on previous declarations of the group, the DEWG has developed a measurement framework for universal and meaningful connectivity. The adoption of a multi-dimensional measurement framework is a crucial step towards achieving this connectivity, as it allows for "effective policy planning, the adjustment of already implemented action routes, and the accurate allocation of invested resources" (DEWG, 2024b, p. 16).

3.2. Reduce digital inequalities

There are various expressions of inequality within the digital economy and digital employment landscape. These encompass the exclusion of minority groups, often due to insufficient skills and limited access to digital infrastructure and connectivity.

Despite the common misconception of youth as digital natives, their capacity to engage in the digital economy is contingent upon the socio-economic status of their families. Additionally, gender, ethnic minority, and disability-related inequalities in ICT remain prevalent (ILO, 2022). Accessing opportunities, rights, and services online requires affordable, secure, fast internet and the skills required to navigate it and assess the reliability of digital media. These requisite inputs vary by sociodemographic profile (wealth, income, race, rurality, etc.) and gender.

The G20, in line with the recognition of digital education as an enabler for human dignity and empowerment stated in its Rio de Janeiro Leaders 'Declaration (2024a, paragraph 27) should:

- Implement comprehensive digital skills training programs aimed at equipping individuals from minority groups, youth, and those with disabilities with the necessary skills to thrive in the digital economy. In addition, it is also important to integrate digital literacy and STEM education into school curriculums from an early age to ensure all students have equal access to essential digital skills.
- Develop roadmaps to encourage businesses and industries to adopt inclusive hiring practices that prioritise diversity

and equal opportunity. This includes providing mentorship programs, internships targeted at underrepresented groups in the digital environment.
- Develop roadmaps to the implementation of policies aimed at reducing socioeconomic disparities that hinder access to the digital economy. This may include providing financial assistance for internet access, affordable devices, and digital services for low-income families.

3.3. International regulation and governance

As digital labour platforms expand across borders, existing national frameworks struggle to guarantee basic rights and social protections for platform workers. The transnational and often opaque nature of web-based and *crowdwork* platforms demands international regulatory approaches that promote fairness, accountability, and social justice (ILO, 2019a). Without coordinated action, digital work risks deepening precariousness, especially in vulnerable economies. Strengthening global governance mechanisms is therefore essential to ensure that digital transformation supports decent work rather than undermining it.

The G20 should:

- Encourage public and private (self-) regulation on digital work in the form of bipartite, tripartite multi-stakeholder dialogue (ILO, 2019a).
- Seek solutions to the gaps on social protection calling cross border social dialogue in the ILO sectorial, regional and global meetings.
- Incentivise the commitment of digital platforms to the ILO Multinational Enterprises
    - Declaration, OECD Multinational Enterprises guidelines and UN guidelines on Business and Human Rights.

3.4. Democratic governance models

As digital platforms increasingly take on public functions - such as creating jobs and organizing labor across borders - they wield significant influence over economic and social

outcomes. Despite their growing role, these platforms remain largely unaccountable to the public, with governance structures that lack democratic oversight and worker representation. The absence of transparent, participatory decision-making processes within these platforms' risks perpetuating undemocratic practices and exacerbating social and economic inequalities. A shift towards democratic governance is essential to ensure that the benefits of digital platforms are distributed fairly and responsibly.

The need for enhanced transparency and accountability of digital platforms in line with relevant policies and legal frameworks was highlighted by G20 leaders in their Rio declaration (2024a, paragraph 29). The DEWG, under the 2025 South African G29 Presidency, honing its focus on AI, once more emphasises the centrality of data governance, including issues of protection, access, and utilisation (2024, p.9).

The G20 should:

- Present legislation proposals to amend the existing corporate laws and include workers' representation on the board of directors in digital value chains.
- Present legislation proposals to create community-shared ownership models and support special finance schemes and tax exemptions to enhance their local competitiveness.
    - A Kenyan court decided that Meta can be sued by workers employed in its African Hub operated by another company, thus rejecting the company's argument of lack of jurisdiction (Africa News, 2024).
    - Following an agreement with Meta, Kenyan digital creators will start getting paid for their content on the platform (Mwangi, 2024).

3.5. Need for algorithmic transparency of all digital platforms

Workers and governments are not informed of the impact of surveillance through algorithm controls by digital platforms in decision-making regarding contracting, payments and customers (Fairwork UK, 2023). The complexity of creating

unions and legal representation for digital workers is a fact and it needs to be addressed.

Under Brazil's 2024 Presidency, G20 Labor and Employment Ministers decided to establish guidelines for the safe, secure and trustworthy use of AI in the world of work, in collaboration with other relevant workstreams (2024a, paragraph 78).

The G20 labour agencies and social security schemes should make it compulsory for digital platforms to report annually specific information on the numbers, profiles of their workers, job classifications, and salaries per category of DDS.

The G20 countries should respect freedom of association and effectively recognize the right to effective bargaining. The platforms should disclose information about mathematical and algorithmic formulae to workers' representations reducing effects of asymmetric negotiations.

Against decent work?

In Brazil, 97.3% and 84.3% of drivers and deliverers connected to digital platforms, respectively, said that it was the "apps" that determined the amount to be received for each ride and task, and for 87.2% and 85.3%, respectively, the app determined the customers to be served. (IBGE, 2023).

3.6. Enhance formalisation and social protection coverage.

The rise of digital platforms has led to an increase in non-standard forms of employment, with many workers classified as self-employed. However, the employment status of digital platform workers remains unclear, leaving them without the same legal protections as traditional employees. This ambiguity often results in a lack of access to essential rights such as occupational health and safety, fair compensation, and regulated working hours. To ensure that the growing workforce in the digital economy enjoys decent working conditions, it is crucial that all workers – regardless of their status – are covered by robust social protection systems. Aligning these protections

with the ILO's Decent Work Agenda and the Future of Work Centenary Declaration (ILO, 2019b) will ensure a more inclusive and fair digital economy.

The topic should be discussed by the G20 in 2025, as the EWP under South Africa's Presidency has expressed the intention to consider addressing, among others issues, how to ensure decent work in the digital economy; and it has signaled as a possible outcome the strengthening of legal protection and rights of workers including unionisation, access to social security, and fair wages within the group's countries. Other measures to be contemplated, according to the EWP, are enhancing collective bargaining and enforcing minimum wage laws to non-standard and informal workers. (2024, p. 7).

The governments of the G20 countries should incorporate non-standard employees in ICT dependent jobs, especially in platforms, into existing labour and social protection regimes, regardless of their classification.

The governments of the G20 countries should encourage the formalisation of self-employed and contract workers, who will adhere to digital job contracts.

Good practices:

The Riders' Law which came into force in August 2011 in Spain, included a presumption of dependent employment status, rights on algorithmic management and social protection to platform workers.

In March 2024, the Brazilian government launched a law proposal establishing minimum rights for transport platform workers. The proposal created a special status to the category of "autonomous platform workers", with a minimum salary, limits in hours of work, obligation of payments to social security and right to maternity leave.

4. Way ahead

Without digital transformation under rights-preserving conditions, the advances of digital technology, despite the

promise of work creation and increased productivity, are likely to exacerbate existing inequalities.

Digital technologies have undoubtedly transformed the landscape of markets and the world of work, however, the benefits of the digital transformation have not been similarly enjoyed by all – as the global *centre* develops, the periphery finds itself increasingly alienated from digital development.

Thus, the discourse and the initial promise of a *sharing economy* has shifted and been replaced by the unavoidable acknowledgement that, far from sharing, asymmetrical power relations have shaped a highly extractive global economy (Zuboff, 2019; Couldry and Meijas, 2019).

In that context, the best hope of addressing the inequalities and improving opportunities for equitable inclusion in a globalised, complex and adaptive digital and data systems lie in collaborative global governance and collective action. The resulting documents from Brazil's 2024 Presidency and the concept and issue notes published in preparation for the South African 2025 Summit are evidence of the relevance and timeliness of the discussion. They present a shared diagnosis of increasing economic inequality and deteriorating worker protection exacerbated by digital inequalities, incipient regulation and undemocratic data sharing practices.

The recommendations presented seek to address that inequality and foment cooperative action that advances the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), especially related to decent work.

Advancing meaningful access and connectivity should strengthen a resistance to data colonialism and act to reduce the individual and collective vulnerabilities to misinformation, privacy breaches, and online repression.

Reducing digital inequalities can enable minority groups to better position themselves in the digital job market. This can also contribute to enhancing diversity within digital work environments.

Attention to **international regulation and governance** may lead to a permanent dialogue between workers' legal representations, government, state agencies, and to an enhanced commitment to fundamental labour rights and human rights principles worldwide in digital value chains. Beyond the specific scope of labour relations, initiatives such as global tax regimes, for example, could be better deployed for revenue generation and increased social protection (Onuoha, R., & Gillwald, A. 2022).

Democratic governance models are expected to increase the influence of workers' demands on employment and working conditions in digital value chains and promote economic growth at the community level.

Enhancing **transparency** can offer workers more leverage for engaging in collective action and bargaining. Moreover, it is expected to lead to adequate public policy responses to gaps in rights and social protection and to advance worker's protection against discrimination and the violation of their fundamental rights.

Finally, **enhancing formalisation and social protection coverage** should lead to broader access by workers to state services and to an increased revenue for social security systems, the latter an increasingly challenging matter in some of G20 countries. Moreover, the formalisation of self-employed and contract workers in digital supply chains provides visibility of work relations and information for the construction of efficient public policies integrating gender, ethical, educational, cultural, among other relevant factors.

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