

Fair work in South Africa's gig economy: A journey of engaged scholarship

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ABSTRACT

Because of its relatively well-developed, highly urbanised economy and high penetration of mobile internet access, the platform economy took off quickly in South Africa, with international players vying for market share and local platforms pursuing more innovative approaches. Digital labour platforms have offered new earning opportunities to many in the country, but concerns have been raised about the quality of jobs created, and whether they meet standards of decent work. South Africa was one of the pilot countries for the Fairwork Project. This article describes the specific conditions which supported the take-off of location-based digital labour platforms in South Africa, explains the methodology used for pursuing the Fairwork research, discusses ratings outcomes based on the empirical research and summarizes the action research component of the project—with particular attention paid to outcomes for workers. We also list some of the lessons that were learnt and give a critical reflection on the project in the hope of assisting other researchers investigating the fourth industrial revolution, the gig economy, and decent work standards, especially in the Global South.

Introduction and context

As in most other countries, the platform-mediated gig economy in South Africa has grown very quickly in just the last few years. A key enabler for the fast rise of digital labour platforms in South Africa is the very high official unemployment rate, which in the first quarter of 2023 stood at 42.6% by the expanded definition which includes discouraged work seekers (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Unemployment especially impacts the young population, with an unemployment rate of 62.1% for people aged between 15 and 24 in the first quarter of 2023 (Statistics South Africa, 2023). 3.1 million people are estimated to be working in the informal economy (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Additional factors driving growth in the South African gig economy are the high levels of urbanisation resulting in a concentration of supply and demand, regulatory settings favouring entrepreneurship and innovation, a very high penetration of mobile phones, and a sophisticated connectivity infrastructure (Chidoori & Van Belle, 2020; Van Belle & Mudavanhu, 2018). Furthermore, South Africa is also characterised by huge income and wealth inequalities driving middle class demand for platform labour services supplied by low-income workers. Apart from race- and gender-

based inequalities, South Africa also has a large migrant population, members of which also experience labour market discrimination and particularly high barriers to obtaining formal employment; and thus are overrepresented in the informal and platform economy.

Because of its connectivity infrastructure, favourable regulatory environment, and ongoing unemployment crisis, South Africa has not only offered a fertile ground for international platforms, such as Uber and Bolt to establish themselves in the market, but a critical mass of tech entrepreneurs has also given rise to an even larger number of locally developed platforms, which organise the labour of a rapidly growing segment of the workforce. A rough pre-Covid-19 estimate was that there are around 30,000 workers engaged in location-based platform work, and potentially a further 100,000 in online “cloudwork”, representing around 1% of workers in South Africa (Heeks, 2019). This number is likely to have increased further.

Government regulations and legislation have been slow to catch up with the rapid take-off of these platforms. Although there is a comprehensive body of labour legislation protecting employees, platforms have usually carefully positioned themselves to fall outside the scope of this legislation by classifying their workers as ‘self-employed’ rather than as

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employees (Fredman et al., 2020; Heeks, Graham, Mungai, Van Belle, & Woodcock, 2020). In line with the common global practice of contractually classifying platform workers as independent, workers in the platform economy tend to experience a higher level of risk, vulnerability and insecurity. In South Africa, platform workers are excluded from key social protections including unemployment insurance, holiday pay, sick leave, and the ability to seek legal redress for, for example, unfair termination via account deactivation. Further contributing to injustice experienced by platform workers is the fact that the South African labour market is characterised by multifaceted dimensions of inequality, including geographical, racial and gendered (Leibbrandt, Woolard, McEwen, & Koep, 2010). The platform economy intersects with these inequalities in specific ways. While digital labour platforms have the potential to provide decent work opportunities to those who need them, where the jobs created are characterised by low quality labour conditions and insecurity, platforms can serve to exacerbate existing inequalities and patterns of poverty and exclusion based on gender, race, or migration background.

These conditions made South Africa an appropriate country in which to pilot action research on labour conditions in the gig economy—especially in order to provide insight into the experience of platform workers in the Global South. The Fairwork project (<https://fairwork.org>), a global initiative based in Oxford and Berlin, evaluates the working conditions of digital platform workers. Five principles of fair platform work were developed through a series of multi-stakeholder workshops, which brought together platforms and workers in Cape Town and Johannesburg, alongside other cities, in 2018. These set benchmarks for fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management, and fair representation for platform workers, which were in turn broken down into two thresholds, creating ten categories (Graham, Woodcock, Heeks et al., 2020). Utilising this framework, a research team consisting of academics from the Universities of Cape Town, the Western Cape, Oxford and Manchester, undertook action research in order to award the most prominent platforms operating in South Africa a score out of 10. The scores were displayed on a league table to highlight the best and worst labour practices in the South Africa platform economy. Data was collected through interviews with platform managers and platform workers, as well as independent desk research. The first league table was published in early 2019, featuring 10 platforms, including the international e-hailing giants Uber and Bolt, and local companies such as domestic work platform SweepSouth, and last mile delivery platform Picup. Fairwork South Africa is now in its fifth annual scoring cycle, with results to be published in the middle of 2023.

This article summarizes the methodology and discusses the key findings of the first three rounds of Fairwork empirical research, whilst highlighting some unique aspects of the South African project.¹ The action research component of the Fairwork project is also mentioned briefly. Lessons that were learnt and a critical reflection on the project are presented in the hope that this will assist other researchers investigating social issues in similar contexts.

Methodology

The methodology of the Fairwork project is aimed at obtaining defensible data for rating each platform according to the five principles or 'pillars' of fair work. The first step is the platform selection—choosing which platforms are to be rated. Three guiding criteria are: to find the platforms with the most workers, to include platforms that have been rated in previous rounds and, ideally, to have at least two platforms represented in each sector (e.g. e-hailing) to allow comparison. It was also decided to exclude global cloudwork platforms such as Upwork

since those are more difficult to rate and engage with at a national level (Graham, Hjorth, & Lehdonvirta, 2017).² This resulted in a focus on geographically tethered platforms, or those that transact location-specific services, such as cleaning, transport and delivery. For the first year, 2019, we selected 10 platforms: Uber and Bolt (formerly Taxify) in e-hailing; Picup, Uber Eats, Bottles and Wumdrop in delivery; Nosweat and NomadNow in professional freelancing; and SweepSouth and Domestly in domestic cleaning (Fairwork, 2019). For the 2020 ratings, some platforms that had few workers or that were re-organising had to be dropped i.e. Wumdrop and Bottles. New additions to increase sectoral diversity were GetTOD (artisans) and M4Jam (micro-services); to have greater sectoral representativeness in the delivery sector OrderIn and Mr Delivery (Mr D) were also added (Howson, Katta, Graham et al., 2020). 13 platforms were assessed in the 2022 ratings, across the domestic, e-hailing, food and last mile delivery, home and micro services sectors.

The empirical data collection consisted of three sources. Firstly, desk research was used not only to select the platforms but also to review publicly available documentation including platforms' terms of service and policies affecting workers, as well as relevant news or academic reports. A second source of information was platform owner or manager engagement. Meetings with platforms were sought to inform them about the project, request data considered necessary to the ratings, and later to suggest changes platforms could make to their policies and practices in order to improve their Fairwork score. While some platforms have chosen not to engage with Fairwork researchers, both the instances and quality of engagement have improved with each annual scoring cycle as the project's local profile has grown. This experience suggests that the annual repetition of the research methodology, and efforts to engage platforms in ongoing dialogue, are key to the potential impact of the action research. The third method employed in order to produce Fairwork scores is interviewing platform workers directly with a target sample of 6 to 10 workers per platform. While not intended to comprise representative samples allowing researchers to draw conclusions about (for example) average worker earnings, worker interviews provide important insight into workers' experiences, and allow for the verification (or potentially the falsification) of the existence of stated platform policies and practices. Data or claims provided by platform management are cross-checked against worker evidence. Note that worker interviews were limited to the two largest metropolises i.e. Cape Town and Johannesburg, as well as Pretoria. However, these economic hubs represent the bulk of the platform-based gig economy in South Africa.

Following the completion of the data-collection phase, Fairwork researchers undertake the scoring process, by analysing data against the ten thresholds of fair platform work. A positive score is only awarded on the basis of sufficient documentary evidence that is not contradicted in worker interviews. Correspondingly, where a threshold is not met, this could be as a result of either insufficient evidence of compliance (a lack of data), or evidence of non-compliance (data proving the platform contravenes the threshold). This distinction is not made in the final scorecard, and this aspect of the methodology is critical in incentivising platforms to assist with the scoring process by providing evidence that they are meeting the thresholds. When provisional scores have been determined, they go through a peer-review process involving selected Fairwork researchers from other countries. All platforms are informed of their provisional score and invited to provide final evidence (including of changes they have implemented) in order to strengthen it further. Ethics for the South African project were obtained both from Oxford University and the University of Cape Town. In particular, great care was taken to ensure the anonymity of workers interviewed, and the secure storage and management of data.

¹ All empirical evidence available at the time of writing.

² Fairwork has since adapted the five principles for the context of cloudwork platforms and released the first global cloud-work league table in 2021.

Main findings re the 5 principles (summary & discussion)

Fig. 1 presents the ratings for the first 3 years of platform ratings. Note that principles have changed slightly from 2019 (Year-1) to 2021 (Year-3) and the actual benchmarks for the principle will continue to evolve (<https://fair.work/en/fw/principles/fairwork-principles-gig-work/>).³

In the first three years of Fairwork scoring in South Africa, we have demonstrated that a spectrum exists in the fairness of working conditions provided by digital labour platforms; from very low scores to something approaching a benchmark of fair work (conceptualised through the principles as a score of 10). This is an extremely important finding in that it highlights that it is indeed possible to provide decent work opportunities via digital labour platform in South Africa. We conclude from this finding that unfair work is not an inherent outcome of the platform model, supporting the hope that platforms can play a greater role in the creation of fair work in the future. Notably, in all relevant scoring rounds the four non-South African platforms included in the league table (Uber, Uber Eats, Bolt and Indriver) scored five or lower. This suggests that global platforms are less likely to provide decent work opportunities for South African workers, perhaps due to a lower level of public and legal accountability within South Africa, though a greater evidence base may be needed to substantiate this.

With regard to fair pay, we found that only half of the platforms scored could evidence that workers earned the minimum wage after direct work-related costs and waiting time were taken into account. Because platforms classify them as independent contractors, platform workers are usually responsible for covering all the costs related to their labour, such as fuel, rental and/or maintenance on a vehicle, transport, or other materials, often substantially reducing their net earnings per task completed. Because most platform workers are paid on the basis of tasks completed, as opposed to hours worked (piece-rate pay), their income can vary based on how many tasks they are able to complete. If demand for their services is low on a given day, they may be forced to spend a significant amount of time waiting between tasks. This leads some delivery and e-hailing drivers to work extreme overtime in order to earn enough income. Some delivery riders we interviewed worked over 80 hours per week when waiting time at restaurant hubs was taken into account, in order to earn a sufficient income after expenses. Work-related costs for domestic workers include transport between jobs. The research found that in many instances domestic work platforms have not taken travel and proximity into account when assigning tasks. This is a particular problem in the South African context where the legacy of spatial apartheid often means workers reside in locations far from their clients' residences.

In researching fair conditions, we found that six platforms were able to evidence some measures to protect workers from certain risks arising from their work. For instance, some platforms provided accident and injury cover for their workers, as well as access to a panic button if they experienced a hijacking or robbery. However, we found that workers still experienced high levels of anxiety around safety. Possibly due to the need to maintain the legitimacy of independent contract classifications, platforms were reluctant to (for example) provide helmets to motorcycle couriers - maintaining that was their responsibility as independent workers.

³ In these three years, principles "20.06" and "21.01" were used to assess the platforms. The Fairwork project undertakes to review and amend principles periodically through a democratic process involving input from all research teams as well as consultation with external stakeholders. This is undertaken in response to changing conditions in the platform economy, and informed primarily by our grounded insights into workers' experiences in the countries in which we work. Principle updates usually involve minor changes to criteria. For instance the 21.01 principles added a criterion that platforms provided workers a safety net in instances where they were unable to work.

In assessing the existence of fair contracts, we examined whether workers could access the terms and conditions they had signed up to, and whether they were written in language that workers could be expected to understand. Most platforms satisfied these conditions. However, their terms of service commonly transfer the majority of risk and liability onto the worker as independent contractor, allowing platforms to limit their responsibility towards the workers they enrol. Another issue identified with regard to fair contracts, is that a number of contracts (including those of some South African platforms) are subject to the authority of courts in a foreign jurisdiction - presenting a high barrier to South African workers in seeking redress in the case of a dispute (Fredman et al., 2020).

In the category of fair management, we found the threat of account deactivation to be a key concern for South African workers. Because they classify workers as independent contractors, platforms have the ability to deactivate a worker's account, without providing a reason, or due process including the ability to appeal. Workers may be subject to deactivation on the basis of a platform's overly complex or non-transparent performance metrics and rating systems. Often deactivation decisions are made algorithmically and without human oversight. Even if workers are reinstated after investigation, they are not compensated for loss of earnings during the deactivation period. At the beginning of scoring in 2020 only four platforms could evidence that they had documented due process for decisions affecting workers, however after engaging with Fairwork, two more platforms — GetTOD (artisanal services) and NoSweat (professional services) — further codified their disciplinary procedures. Still, a large number of South African platform workers are unprotected against arbitrary deactivation, and the fear of deactivation presents a formidable obstacle to collectively organising or attempting to improve their working conditions.

This point was substantiated by research into fair representation for platform workers in South Africa. While about half of the platforms scored could point to some kind of internal worker voice mechanism, such as a community forum, workers did not have access to an independent collective association that could advocate on their behalf. As a result of engagement with Fairwork, three platforms (No Sweat, GetTOD and SweepSouth) publicly committed to recognising a workers' collective association if one were formed. Fair representation is the most powerful tool for realising a fairer future of platform work, but workers in South Africa still face high barriers to organising. These include the lack of a shared workplace, the high levels of competition between workers for tasks, and lack of employee status which casts into question legal avenues to unionisation.

Fig. 2 shows the detailed break-down of a sample score for one of the high-scoring 2020 platforms (Fairwork, 2020a).

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis hit South Africa immediately after the second year (2020) scores were released. The South Africa team set out to review digital labour platforms, and government responses, supplemented by a small survey of worker experiences (Fairwork, 2020b). The first and quite severe lockdown proved to be catastrophic for platform workers: amongst those surveyed, a majority lost their income entirely, while those able to work during lockdown lost, on average, four-fifths of their income (Fairwork, 2020b). A worker representative described the severity of the situation for platform workers:

Many drivers had to stop working, others who do go into the field find it extremely difficult to generate income and suffer anxiety attacks for the fear of contracting the virus. They hardly cover their expenses with one/two trips if they are lucky. Others are having trouble sanitising and maintaining the vehicles. Drivers who work for car owners are faced with withdrawal of vehicles as they cannot make target. So, the situation is really depressing... (Fairwork, 2020b).

Platform Fairwork Scores 2019-21

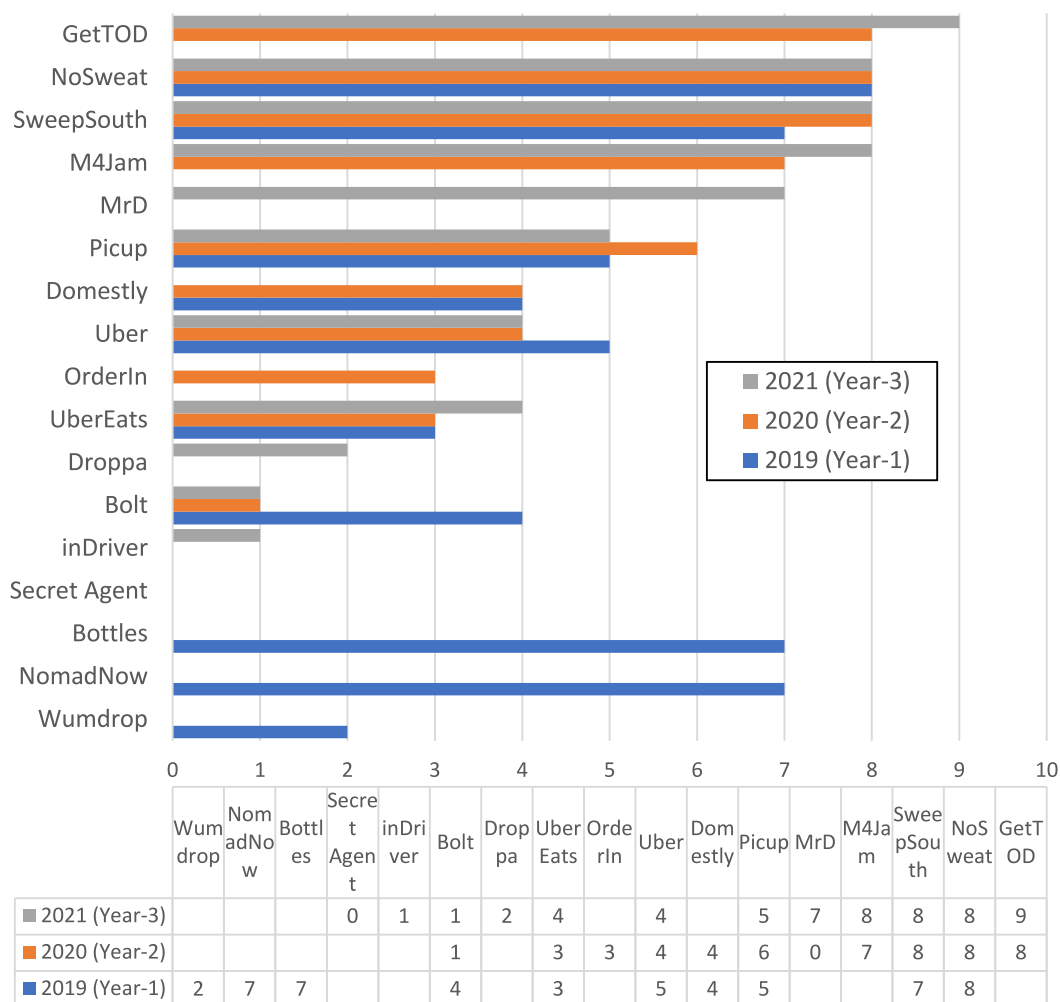


Fig. 1. 2019 (red), 2020 (blue) and 2021 (grey) platform scores (out of 10) (Fairwork, 2019; Fairwork, 2020a; Fairwork, 2021). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

A small number of platforms took measures during lockdown to alleviate some of their workers’ hardships. For example, SweepSouth and M4Jam tried to offset income losses for their workers, and getTOD made efforts to enable online consultation services for its tradespeople. However, on the whole, platform workers appeared to have fallen between the cracks: able to access neither the support offered by government to formal employees, nor the support offered to those registered as small businesses. The lockdowns also had an impact on platforms’ revenue streams, potentially threatening the survival of some of the local platform companies.

Particular South African gig economy characteristics

One of the first Fairwork objectives was to assess whether it was indeed possible to have global fair work principles applied across very diverse countries by means of country-specific thresholds (Graham et al., 2019). The early experiences have provided strong empirical support to validate this hypothesis. However, apart from the fact that the national context is important in determining the thresholds for some of the principles (e.g. the minimum wage), workers are also found to face unique challenges given the country circumstances.

The South African labour market is highly unequal, with crisis-level unemployment disproportionately disadvantaging black people, women and youth (Statistics South Africa, 2023). The most recent Living Conditions Survey in 2015 suggested that more than half the country lives

below the official upper-bound poverty line and more than a quarter in food poverty (Statistics South Africa, 2017). Against the backdrop of chronic structural poverty and unemployment which is unevenly distributed across social groups, the advent of digital labour platforms has been viewed by many as a desperately needed job-creation avenue. In many other countries regulation has begun to respond to the platform model of employment misclassification and the transfer of costs and risks on to workers (see for instance the European Commission’s Directive on Improving Conditions in Platform Work). However, as precarity and economic exclusion are so embedded in the South African labour market, the need for livelihood creation has arguably led to a lack of focus on decent-work deficits in the platform economy. This risks further entrenching a tiered system of labour standards in the country, where only certain privileged workers have access to employment protections.

Especially in light of South Africa’s long legacy of racial and gendered inequality, the impacts of this are felt unevenly across social groups. Historical inequities have been carried through into the platform economy and are seen especially in gendered segregation across sectors. Hunt and Samman (2020) point to the ways in which platformisation in the domestic work sector in South Africa has exacerbated historical trends of precarity and exploitation, sidestepped more recent attempts to extend protections to domestic workers, and reinforced the

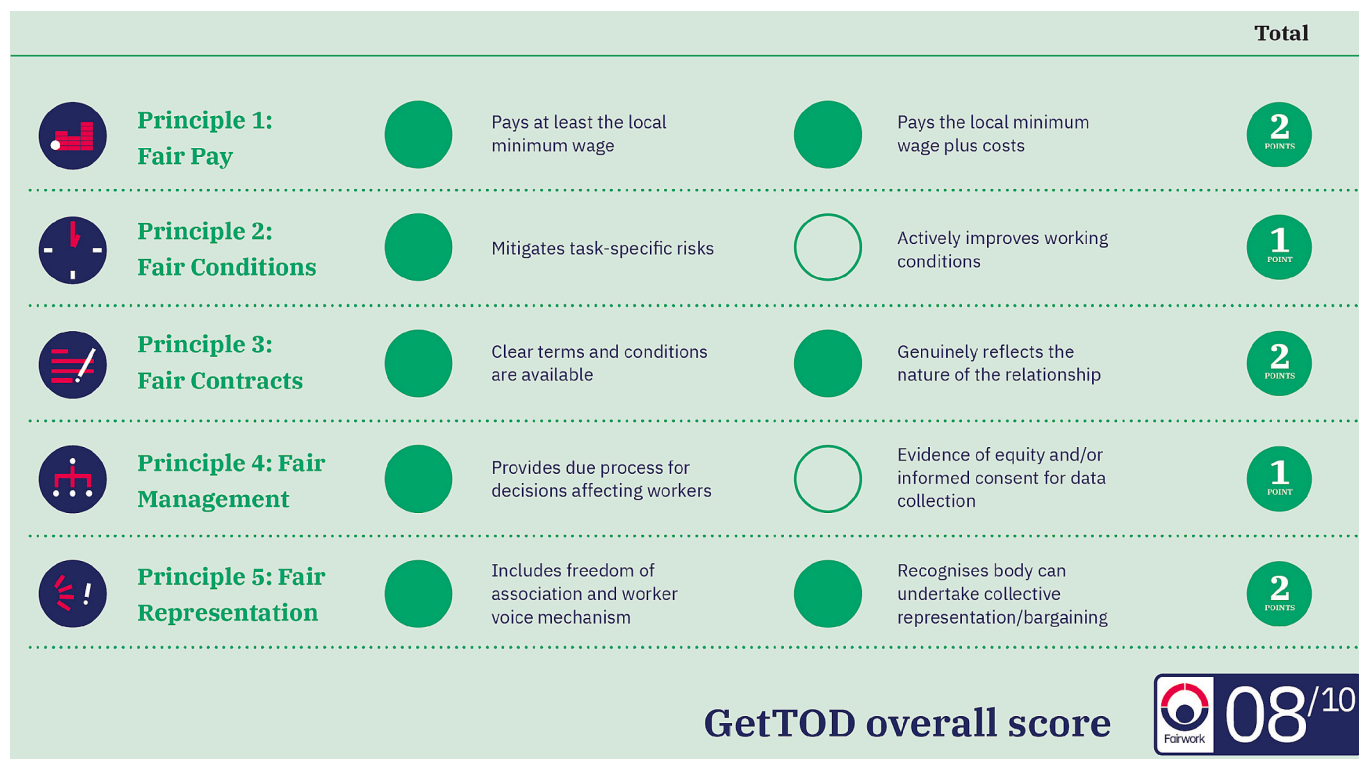


Fig. 2. Sample score calculation for GetTOD, a handyman/artisan platform (Fairwork, 2020a).

marginalisation and undervaluing of women’s labour.

In addition, the country’s high levels of violence and material crime pose safety risks to platform workers. Domestic workers have reported experiencing crime during their journey to and from work (for instance having their mobile phones stolen and thereby losing platform access) and may also face violence and harassment at the homes where they are working (Lesala-Khethisa, Tsibolane, & Van Belle, 2020). E-hailing drivers because they carry passengers in private cars are particularly vulnerable to theft and hijacking (Hunt & Machingura, 2016; Mpofo, Tsibolane, & Van Belle, 2020), and delivery riders face safety risks in going to people’s residences. It was thus not surprising that concerns around violence and theft appeared consistently in our interviews as a major risk that workers faced. A few platforms provided a “panic button” as part of the app, though workers questioned its utility since their phone was the first thing to be stolen in a robbery. But most platforms offered few or no measures to counteract this key contextual risk. Migrant workers also face the problem of xenophobic violence, which has increased in South Africa in recent years, because they’re often perceived to be ‘stealing jobs from locals’ (Adebayo, 2019).

However, a number of the local platforms also publicly claim to have a strong social agenda. The M4Jam micro-task platform had a specific agenda of providing incomes for those based in townships. Delivery platform, Picup sought to be a more socially inclusive employer by providing channels to employment for under-represented groups, such as women. GetTOD similarly engaged with the Fairwork researchers seeking ways of meeting the thresholds and increasing its score. Some local platform owners have expressed a desire to contribute to combatting the stark inequalities within South Africa’s post-apartheid society. However, it is widely accepted that the business model of global digital labour platforms commonly involves aggressive market dominance and monopsony-seeking driven by cross-subsidisation of supply and demand, and venture capital. In competing with these strategies, it may also be the case that local companies have sought to differentiate their offering through their narrative embeddedness in the local context.

Action research: How to change the status quo

Action-oriented research methodologies provide a pathway to conducting research that is engaged with relevant stakeholders to produce knowledge that is transformative, relevant, and valuable to society (Boyer, 1990). Apart from the descriptive component, i.e. gathering empirical data to rate the platform, the Fairwork project also sets out to actively change the status quo and improve the working conditions of gig workers. Thus, the Fairwork project incorporates an action research component:

“Our project [...] works in two dimensions: we appeal to the influence of reputation, publicity and consumer power, while simultaneously shaping appropriate legal standards and exploring avenues to achieve their adoption. We use a ranking system rather than a pass-fail certification to reflect the many-faceted nature of decent work and to create a publicly available record of the standards of work provided by specific platforms. Comparing platforms’ scores publicly on a league table aims to incentivise them to improve their ranking.” (Fredman et al., 2020, p.239).

Right from the beginning of the project, dialogue and engagement with platform owners was seen as a crucial mechanism to effect change. Globally at the time of rating, 40 platforms had made 144 positive changes to their policies and practices after engaging with Fairwork researchers. In South Africa since 2021, GetTOD, SweepSouth and Mr D made changes following engagement with Fairwork, which brought them better in line with the Fairwork principles. Some examples include GetTOD reducing its commissions to improve workers’ net pay; Mr D introducing a variable fuel surcharge to cushion drivers from fuel price increases; and SweepSouth issuing a public statement affirming their willingness to engage with a workers’ collective organisation if one were formed (SweepSouth, 2021).

Additional pathways to impact beyond direct platform changes are also investigated. The South African Fairwork project was multidisciplinary from the outset, with two of its five co-investigators being experts in labour law. They investigated the legal status and pursued the

possibilities of changing legislation and regulations to include protections for gig workers. This has resulted in useful recommendations (Fredman et al., 2020) as well as the development of a set of legal principles and standards incorporated formally into a “code of good practice for the regulation of platform work in South Africa” (Fairwork, 2020c). This route is also pursued by other stakeholders and encouraging results are being seen in other countries as exemplified by the other articles in this journal issue.

From the second year of the project onwards, more extensive and targeted public media coverage of the ratings was seen and used as a potential lever since platforms want to protect their public image and brand. This sensitizes not just the platform owners, but other stakeholders, such as service consumers and government. A more recent focus of the project is on institutionalising the ratings by encouraging corporate and individual platform users (i.e. customers) to endorse and use the Fairwork ratings explicitly as part of their procurement decision-making process and thus exert demand-side pressure on platforms. Globally, Fairwork now has more than 50 organisational partners and supporters who have endorsed and or institutionalised the Fairwork ratings.

Lessons learnt and reflections

This section presents some of the lessons learnt to date in Fairwork South Africa research and reflects on how they might be of relevance to other Fairwork and digital labour researchers in the Global South.

First, although platforms sometimes see the Fairwork project as adversarial, constructive engagement with platforms is possible. A carrot/stick approach can work: Platforms are highly sensitive to consumer perception and need to have a strong public profile to remain competitive, so reputation management plays an important role in their decisions and negative publicity is something they want to avoid (Woodcock & Graham, 2019). Some platforms have changed or tweaked their policies and practices; usually the low-hanging fruit is identified first, e.g. making a public website statement about accepting collective worker representation. Encouragingly, we found that some platforms seem to be inspired by a genuine motivation to improve their worker conditions. We are hoping to nudge other platforms in this direction by exemplifying these platforms as case studies in the media and annual Fairwork reports, as was done for GetTOD (see Fig. 2) in the 2020 report.

An ongoing concern relates to obtaining sufficient empirical data to provide representative insight into average worker experiences. Because the Fairwork principles set a minimum floor below which no worker should fall, we do not require statistically representative data to verify the principle is met. However, because platforms are extremely protective of their proprietary data especially with regard to worker numbers and pay, it is difficult for researchers to gain broad-based comparative insights outside of the limited number of worker interviews we conduct. Therefore, without platform-provided data, or a clear platform policy on minimum pay levels, obtaining representative sample sizes for instance to determine average worker pay is impossible. This underscores the need for stronger regulation, oversight and reporting in the platform economy in South Africa. The lack of transparency of platforms hinders not only research but more importantly workers’ efforts to assert their basic rights. In the Fairwork methodology, in order to award a score, positive evidence is needed implying no need to support a zero score if no evidence is found. This, in effect, puts the final onus on the platform whether it wants to provide supporting evidence or contest worker-provided evidence. A corollary is that platforms need to be given sufficient time to provide the relevant evidence, necessitating early initial contact but also another buffer period between the provisional ratings and final ratings.

Another core finding is that the experience of Global South and African workers, not surprisingly, substantially different from their counterparts in the Global North (Heeks, 2017; Howson, 2022). For instance, in contexts with higher rates of informality, researchers confront the

argument that platformisation serves to solve a ‘problem’ and fill an institutional void, by formalising certain types of service work (Heeks et al., 2021). However, where the resulting jobs are characterised by poorer standards and protections than formal employment, the result can be the institutionalisation and legitimisation of a middle tier of work that is slightly less precarious than the informal economy but does not meet decent work standards. Further, in contexts of systemic under-employment which invite ‘a race to the bottom’ in pay, the importance of enforcing an adequate minimum wage is hard to overstate. With regard to the Fairwork methodology, this poses the problem of whether a platform should be able to receive a high rating through scoring well on the non-pay issues whilst not paying a minimum or living wage.

However, while in a global project of this nature there is often a temptation to draw binary lines of comparison between Global North and Global South contexts, it is important to resist unnuanced comparisons. The team found that the diversity between Global South countries themselves is at least as big as the North/South divide itself. Thus, the South African team was very encouraged to participate in a sub-project: “the Future Of Work In the Global South (FOWIGS)”. This afforded a comparative research effort in Latin America (Ecuador, Chile) and Asia (Indonesia). This research generated numerous country-specific findings and also allowed for some regional generalizations to be made (see Tsibolane et al., 2021).

Conclusions and future pathways

South Africa was one of the pilot countries for the Fairwork project. In a number of ways, the project was more successful and advanced much faster than expected. The initial objective was to test whether it was possible to have a relatively small number of global fair work principles, but measure them using country-specific and context-sensitive thresholds. We found that this was the case, as evidenced by the other articles in this special issue. The comparability of ratings between industries and countries was high. The initial selection of principles was found to be well motivated and, although thresholds and methods are still evolving, only minor changes have been made. The biggest adjustment made was the inclusion of living wage (as well as minimum wage) benchmarks, and the inclusion of direct worker costs in fair pay calculations; this usually sets a higher benchmark for platforms to meet.

Simultaneously, through a dedicated and highly experienced legal team, we aim to achieve legal change. This is a complex process and will take a long time to achieve. Other pathways to actioning improvement in the fair working conditions of platform workers have been also identified, e.g. institutional endorsements and purchasing policies; these are now a core focus in ongoing Fairwork action research.

The effective transfer of knowledge and skills to new country teams joining the global Fairwork project also remain a priority. For instance, the South African Fairwork team obtained funding under the FOWIGS initiative to transfer their skills and initiate similar Fairwork rating projects in Chile, Ecuador and Indonesia. The rapid expansion of the Fairwork project is indicative of the importance and significance of the work done as well as the evolving context and economic dynamic of platform work.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None of the authors have a conflict of interest.

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