

Tackling Online Inequality: Making Platforms Work for Inclusive Development

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Executive summary

IT for Change's research project, 'Policy Frameworks for Digital Platforms – Moving from Openness to Inclusion' (2017 to 2019), unpacks the platformization phenomenon, focusing on the necessary institutional-legal arrangements for a future economy that furthers development justice. This multi-country, cross-sectoral research project brings together learnings from a range of socio-economic contexts across the world.

As part of this project, 12 research studies – case studies of different economic sectors and legal reviews in the domains of e-commerce, agriculture, video-on-demand, food delivery, fintech, ride-hailing and travel – were undertaken in various sites in the global north and south. In addition, a series of think-pieces were commissioned to inform the analysis.

Our findings show that platforms restructure socio-economic relations, with far-reaching consequences for the real economy.

1. Platforms emerge from varying historical contexts, economic motivations and development choices
2. Platforms work to recursively create and consolidate the 'intelligence premium'
3. Platforms use algorithmic optimization to remediate existing socio-economic relations, expanding or constraining actor choices
4. Governance of data as an economic resource emerges as an important and contentious issue in the platform economy

Additionally, what emerges through our research is that platforms are not only infrastructures of value, but also ecologies of choice. We identify three specific axes that co-determine the manner in which choices accrue to actors in the platform ecosystem – enterprise ownership, control of the data and algorithmic assemblage and value distribution. Using these axes, we explicate possible typologies through a 'A Strategic Choices Framework for Platform Models' that offer a variety of pathways for the platform marketplace.

The platform mode of economic organization urgently needs to be reoriented towards a more equitable distribution of the efficiencies of intelligence scale economies. This is possible through a multi-scalar policy approach (spanning interventions at global to national and local levels) that is also cross-sectoral (encompassing integrated actions in digital, economic and social policy domains). It will need to achieve the following:

1. Overhaul the traditional legal approaches to managing the rights, relations and conduct of persons and businesses engaged in commerce in the digital context.
2. Create an enabling environment for inclusive innovation by catalyzing domestic digital innovation.
3. Redraft worker rights in the gig economy to future proof the platformizing economy and allow for a renegotiated social contract empowering for workers.
4. Build a data constitutionalism for the platform economy that moves beyond privacy and personal data protection to setting clear rules for managing data as an economic resource.

In a platform planet, explorations of different local, national and trans-geographic models, and theoretical model-building, both, are necessary to inform policy with a steady ethical-normative compass. A future research agenda must therefore reimagine the nature and role of digital intelligence through empirically grounded research that surfaces human aspiration as if the last woman mattered.

The research problem

Among the key global debates today, the governance of digital platforms has garnered widespread policy attention. Concerns about the platform economy extend to the adverse terms of market engagement for smaller players – workers, small producers and enterprises, developing nations – and the real world outcomes for local development. Regulatory deficits present an equally important challenge, as institutions struggle to respond to the public policy-making imperative in relation to the platform economy.

IT for Change's research project, 'Policy Frameworks for Digital Platforms – Moving from Openness to Inclusion' (2017 to 2019), unpacked the platformization phenomenon, focusing on the necessary institutional-legal arrangements for a future economy that furthers development justice.

The project addressed two key questions:

1. What are the social-relational architectures of the platform economy?
2. What legal-institutional approaches can be used to future-proof the platform economy from inequality, injustice and exclusion?

As part of this project, 12 research studies – case studies of different economic sectors and legal reviews in the domains of e-commerce, agriculture, video-on-demand, food delivery, fintech, ride-hailing and travel– were undertaken in various sites in the global north and south (See Tables 1 and 2). In addition, a series of think-pieces were commissioned to inform the analysis (See Table 3).

Table 1. Sectoral Case Studies

Africa			
Country	Domain	Focus	Method
Nigeria	Mobile money, E-commerce, Navigation	The institutional-regulatory context of platformization and digital economy in Nigeria and implications for the growth of domestic platforms	Content analysis, Interviews
South Africa	Ride-hailing	The operational and labor dynamics of ride-hailing platforms Uber and Taxify in South Africa in the context of 'taxi wars' in the country	Content analysis, Interviews
Asia			
Country	Domain	Focus	Method
China	Ride-hailing, Food delivery	Worker perspectives on platform work and the Chinese state's policy response in the context of its techno-nationalistic vision	Survey, Ethnography, Participant Observation, Interviews
India	Agriculture & Grocery e-tail	Impact of platformization on the livelihoods of small producers and traders at various stages of the agricultural supply chain	Interviews, Participant Observation, FGDs, Policy Analysis

Indonesia	Tourism	The economic, spatial, territorial and cultural implications of travel platforms in the travel and tourism sector in Indonesia for social inclusion	Interviews, Participant Observation, FGDs
Philippines	Care work	Impact of emerging digital platforms in care work in the Philippines on narratives of domestic work, gender and labor	Policy Analysis, Interviews

Latin America			
Country	Domain	Focus	Method
Argentina, Uruguay	E-commerce	The Rioplatense platform economy of MercadoLibre, a regional e-commerce 'unicorn' company	Interviews, Actor-Network Mapping, Discursive Analysis
Brazil	Video-on-Demand	Impact of Video on Demand (VoD) platforms on Brazilian cultural diversity and independent media	Policy Analysis, Interviews
Uruguay	Fintech	Peer-to-Peer (P2P) based lending platforms in Uruguay and the fintech regulatory environment in the country	Interviews, Policy Analysis

North America			
Country	Domain	Focus	Method
Canada	Goods-sharing	Data regimes in the platform economy in Canada and how they shape possibilities for collaboration and community building	Interviews, App Walkthrough ¹ , Policy Analysis

Table 2. Legal Reviews

European Union			
Country	Domain	Focus	Method
Belgium, France, Italy (EU)	Consumer Protection, Labor Rights, Data Governance	Gaps in European consumer protection and labor laws with respect to ride-hailing, gig work and accommodation platforms in Belgium, France and Italy	Interviews, Survey Policy Analysis, Stakeholder Consultation
UK	Data governance	UK's policy environment for data collection, analysis, and sharing in the context of laws such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), Investigatory Powers Act and the Digital Economy Act	Interviews, Policy Analysis, Stakeholder Consultation

Note: For more information on the projects and the research teams, please see the project website²

¹ Deploys a walk-through technique to systematically and forensically step through the various stages of app registration and entry, everyday use and discontinuation of use (Light et al, 2019, as cited in Reilly & Nieves, 2019)

² <https://itforchange.net/platformpolitics/research-network/>

Table 3. Think Pieces

Author(s)	Title	Focus
Urvashi Aneja & Aishwarya Sridhar	Show me the Money! Worker Well-Being on Labor Platforms in India	Assessment of worker well-being in the platform economy based on perspectives of blue-collar workers in ride-hailing and home-service platforms in India
Maya Ganesh	Tipping the Scale: Notes on the Topologies of Big Data Platforms	Reflections about technical, policy, legal, design, and regulatory mechanisms that seek to hold algorithmic systems in platforms to account
Laura Mann & Gianluca Iazzolino	See, Nudge, Control and Profit: Digital Platforms as Privatized Epistemic Infrastructures	Analysis of how digital platforms are reshaping knowledge production systems and the development outcomes of the same
Hong Shen	The Rise of Ant Financial: The Double Articulation of “Platformization” and “Infrastructuralization” in China	Evaluation of the recent rise of Ant Financial in China and the power dynamics that characterize Chinese-style platform capitalism
Supinya Klangnarong	Regulating Digital Media Platforms: Challenges and Initiatives in Thailand	Roadmap for regulatory sandbox approaches to digital content platforms as an alternative to heavy-handed regulation practices in Thailand

Progress towards milestones

a. Research.

- **Outputs from research network.** Over the reporting period, our global network of researchers completed research in their respective sites of study and produced a policy overview, research report and policy brief. All outputs have been reviewed and finalized, with reports either having been published or moving towards final production stage in the coming weeks.³ IT for Change will be bringing out and disseminating these outputs at critical international policy spaces such as the IGF in Berlin in November 2019. A series of five think-pieces, Platform Politick, was also produced as part of the project.⁴
- **Synthesis by IT for Change.** IT for Change successfully concluded a synthesis of learnings and findings from the global project. This was done at two stages in the project cycle. In September 2018, we brought out a mid-project reflections report that synthesized findings from the policy overviews that were submitted as part of the first set of deliverables.⁵ Subsequently, in June 2019, a first draft of the final synthesis report was also brought out and shared with actors in the academic and policy community.⁶ The report was subsequently shared with our research network for inputs and validation. Revisions to the report have been undertaken and the final version is scheduled for release in the first week of November 2019. All research outputs from the project that have been published so far have been made available as open access under this project.

³ See <https://itforchange.net/platformpolitics/publications/policy-overviews/> for outputs published so far

⁴ <https://itforchange.net/platformpolitics/platform-politick/>

⁵ <https://itforchange.net/platformpolitics/resources/>

⁶ https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/2019-10/Platform%20Planet-%20Development%20in%20the%20%20Intelligence%20Economy_Report.pdf

d. Dissemination and advocacy. In the reporting period, we have taken insights from the project far and wide to a range of global fora. Through panels, presentations, lectures and policy submissions, IT for Change team members have taken learnings from the project to forums such as the International Governance Forum (2017), the RightsCon Global Summit (2018 and 2019), the WTO Public Forum (2018 and 2019)⁷, the UNCTAD e-commerce week (2018 and 2019).

Outputs from our project including our mid-project reflections were translated into key international language, French and Spanish and were cross-posted and disseminated very widely. The executive summary of our report⁸ was similarly translated and circulated widely at the WTO Public Forum in October 2019 (Spanish) and will be similarly shared at IGF 2019. (For a detailed description of the impact level aspects of dissemination and advocacy, please refer to the section below on Synthesis of research results and development outcomes.)

c. Events. Two key events were organized in the reporting period. A Project Review Meeting was convened in June 2018.⁹ Co-hosted by the Centre for Policy Studies, IIT-Bombay in partnership with IT for Change, this two-day meeting in Mumbai provided an opportunity for network members to share insights from ongoing research with one another, discuss the ways in which impacts could be widened and strategize about the future of the network. The peer feedback received during this meeting was incorporated by many members when finalizing their outputs.

In August 2019, an end of project national workshop to disseminate the results of the project and connect to debates in India was organized in New Delhi as a capstone to the project. Titled 'Dialogues on Policies for the Platform Economy', the workshop engaged critical stakeholders, from civil society members, Indian tech entrepreneurs, lawyers and researchers working on issues pertaining to the digital economy. The workshop also had government representation through S. Gopalakrishnan, Joint Secretary at the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Government of India.

Synthesis of research results and development outcomes

The project was able to bring in an interdisciplinary network of researchers, a majority from the global south with different sectoral foci, to provide an empirically grounded, complex perspective of platformization from various geographical, economic and political contexts foregrounding always the development question.

For instance, our study through the diverse network of researchers was able to access the voices of workers, and their negotiation with regard to platforms in the global south - in highly racialized and unequal post-apartheid South-Africa, in the context of the Chinese platform model, and in the Indian context where gig-work has exacerbated informalization in an already informal labor market. By uncovering the Hobson's choice a largely migrant Zimbabwean population faces when opting to drive for Uber and Taxify under violent and xenophobic conditions in South Africa, or the brutalizing algorithmic management and unilateral contracting that DiDi and Ola drivers face in Beijing and New Delhi respectively, our researchers brought in fresh perspectives to the over-studied domain of ride-hailing.

Similarly, studies from Latin America and Africa in Argentina, Uruguay and Nigeria were able to contribute unique development insights to burgeoning debates into the rise of e-commerce platforms, highlighting the ways in which e-commerce growth in the global south can take on different trajectories based on historical antecedents and the flows of global trade, sharply bringing back into focus the critical role that public infrastructure (logistics, roads, banking and internet connectivity and platform public goods) can play in fostering the digital economy.

Our Brazilian study into the rise of video-on-demand platforms in analyzing emerging media regulation and the tussle between traditional giants and the streaming platform looked at how best to preserve the right to culture and the right to communication in a media landscape that is rapidly

⁷ https://itforchange.net/WTO_Impact-of-platform-economy

⁸ https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/2019-10/Platform%20Planet-%20Development%20in%20the%20%20Intelligence%20Economy_Research%20Summary.pdf

⁹ <https://www.sutori.com/story/project-review-meeting--MrVULDxB5fjcqADRVApXNoEL>

dictated by algorithmic ‘search’ and ‘recommend’. It also examined the continued efficacy of older forms of public support for content creation through taxation regimes.

In addition to these sectors, the strength of this project also comes from being able to shed light onto nascent but rapidly proliferating platform domains -- fintech, food-delivery, goods-sharing, on-demand home service – in Uruguay, China and Canada, where regulators at various levels are still grappling with the question of appropriate policy action and public interest in a very unregulated market, while attempting to accede room for innovation and consumer choice.

In studies from India and Indonesia, our project made deep dives to highlight the development outcomes of the often invisible but giant paradigmatic shifts of platformization that have unfolded/are unfolding in sectors such as tourism and agriculture, where small producers and entrepreneurs, many of them women, face the ultimate ‘assimilate or perish’ question with regard to their livelihood and economic autonomy.

These sectoral case-studies that brought to fore a deeply human face to the platform economy were in turn, well complimented by policy analysis in the UK and the EU of the emerging area of data-governance as well as older sectors of regulation such as consumer, labor and competition law. These studies were able to examine existing and emerging legislative frameworks for the platform economy, looking at successes, good practices, challenges and inadequacies both for market outcomes (labor relations, competition and consumer interest) as well as for citizen rights (privacy). As Europe has been the pilot site for most digital economy centered regulation including regional legislative frameworks such as the seminal GDPR and the e-commerce directive, not to mention, a host of local and national laws that govern taxation, industry standards, labor laws and foster alternative models, learnings from these studies have proven invaluable in thinking through and developing policy directions from the project.

The cross-learning from the network has been immense to say the least, allowing IT to Change to consolidate rich, compelling insights that throw light on the many development injustices that the platform economy presents for smaller and less powerful actors and point towards policy directions that can serve as appropriate course correctives. The avenues and opportunities presented via the project, have allowed to take these learnings far and wide and meaningfully engage with various communities of stakeholders. These include broadly:

Civil society: One of the critical mandates of IT or Change is to bridge the gap between traditional social justice knowledge frameworks and digital rights issues and create spaces of convergence. In this regard, the project has served as a key resource to further this work in the past year, allowing us to engage with a variety of civil society actors and groups and enhance their capacity to grasp the markedly changed nature of the global economy today including trade networks, workers rights groups, digital rights activists and regional and global cross-movement coalitions. We have been able to influence social movement actors engaged in long standing struggles for equity and justice in domains such as labor, agriculture, trade, gender equality etc., to recognize and come to terms with the digital moment, and also equip them to reconfigure their know-how and advocacy approaches to measure up to the new development challenges.

We have been able to use project insights to embark on new lines of research and advocacy collaboration in engaging with international unions such as the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), UniGlobal Trade Union, Public Services International (PSI) and International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Our partners have similarly engaged with various civil society groups, human rights forums and unions.

In our end-of-project national workshop convened in New Delhi, we were also able to bring together key players and stakeholders from the digital rights and policy community in India, social movements, unions, governments, lawyers as well as the private sector. The just-retired telecom secretary of India referred to our meeting as a first of its kind dialogue and was keen that insights be taken on board by the IT and telecom departments. She actively supported the event, coordinating with bureaucrats and encouraging their participation. The event brought together research organizations working on issues such as privacy, data governance, intermediary liability, Artificial Intelligence, financial inclusion, and traditional policy areas such as competition, trade etc.,

with practitioners and rights advocates in development, trade justice, workers' rights, gender justice etc.

Academia: There has been prolific research and academic engagement that has come from this project. IT for Change has used the project as an opportunity to strengthen ties with the Indian academia and institutions such as IIT-Bombay and Azim Premji University and expose students and faculty to the cutting edge issues in the global political economy of data and the digital. Internationally, members of the project team have been invited to participate in virtual presentations to the IAMCR and classroom lectures and webinars including to students of global political economy at Simon Fraser University and the University of Toronto. Our synthesis report has been included as required reading for a forthcoming course in the University of Toronto. We have also delivered keynote addresses and talks at various international conferences where learnings from the project have been shared and particularly well received.

In addition to the deliverables produced as part of the project itself, members of the research network have also produced journal articles, book chapters, media pieces and blogs in English, French, Mandarin and Spanish, building on the research undertaken as part of the project.¹⁰ There has also been significant exchange and dialogue with the academic and scholarly community through panels, presentations, symposiums and round tables that members of the network have either participated in or convened as part of their dissemination efforts.¹¹

Policy makers: A strong policy orientation was embedded into the project from the get-go. Efforts to input into national and global policy discourse have therefore been very much a part of the project's mandate. We have been able to bring in learnings from the project to feed into a high-level committee set up by the Government of India on e-commerce, where we have forwarded a concept of 'community data', which has been included into the draft national e-commerce bill. Following a presentation of our report findings at our national workshop in New Delhi, we were also invited to be part of the MeiT's new committee on non-personal data.

At a global level, learnings from the project have complimented IT for Change's work in the arena of digital trade justice with global policy think tanks such as the G77's South Centre and sharpened our advocacy efforts at global venues such as the WTO public forum and UNCTAD e-commerce week, where we have made presentations, given talks and circulated our outputs to government delegates, policy makers and regional blocs. Outputs such as our Mid-project reflections report and the executive summary of our synthesis report have been translated into key UN languages such as French and Spanish and serve as valuable knowledge resource for stakeholders.

Our partners similarly have strived to create policy impact through their research. For instance, Dr. Julie Chen, a member of our research network organized a policy forum to discuss the issues related to digital work in China, which brought together different perspectives from workers, union representatives, and scholars. Trade union representatives present at this meeting subsequently expressed interest in circulating the research study to government officials in the Chinese ministry. Similarly, our partners in Canada and UK, Dr. Arne Hintz and Dr. Katherine Reilly have also made efforts to use the learnings from the study to comment on national policy debates in their respective sites through media pieces, policy roundtables and engagement with national policy stakeholders.

The positive buzz around the project and our sustained efforts to keep engaging various stakeholders at national, regional and global levels has also opened up a slew of new research opportunities for IT for Change to extend our work on the platform economy and continue to build a stronger global south focus on platformization. Close on the heels of the closure of the project, we were invited to and subsequently chosen for two research consultancies --- a project for the ILO, involving a rapid global mapping of alternative models of platform organization, focussing on workers in on-demand work, micro-work and e-commerce platforms, as well as a project for TourismWatch, to examine the trends and impacts of platform models in the tourism sector in India. We were also invited by the Omidyar Network to develop a proposal on platform governance with

¹⁰ Technical reports submitted by members of the research network to IDRC contain full details of outputs produced under each site-specific study.

¹¹ Technical reports submitted by members of the research network to IDRC contain details of events attended/organized under each site-specific study.

an Asia-Pacific focus and have been shortlisted by the IDRC for an action research project looking at gender and future of work.

Methodology

This research project followed an empirical analysis method. Using the case study method, collaborating teams covered specific sectors and platforms, and domains of policy, situating their analysis within specific geographic sites of analysis. A research framework for the project was developed by the lead research team at IT for Change through a synthesis of the initial proposals and a literature review of the domain (See Table 4).

Table 4. Research Framework

Level 1: Mapping the platform ecosystem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actors that make up the platform ecosystem • Structures that constitute the norms, rules and practices of the platform ecosystem • Value created and distributed within the platform ecosystem
Level 2: Analyzing development outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion • Choices • Capabilities • Location • Identity
Level 3: Constructing inclusive policy frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sectoral governance • Social justice • Economic equity

Depending on the specific contours of the study in question, elements of the research framework developed by the lead research team were included by collaborating teams into their research and analysis. A range of secondary methods were used by collaborating teams for data collection and analysis (see Tables (1,2)) including interviews, surveys, ethnography, participant observation and policy analysis.¹²

Research reports and policy overviews authored by collaborating teams for their respective sites, and think-pieces were subsequently analyzed by the lead research team through a multi-step process as below.

- An initial template with broad pegs for analysis was developed, building on 1. the research framework, and 2. a first level review of research reports and policy overviews from collaborating partners.
- This template was used as a guide to undertake close-reading of the research reports and to identify and excerpt key analytical threads from every study and think-piece in the project.

Through a collaborative review and workshopping, emerging themes were debated and further refined.

Project outputs

A prolific range of outputs have been produced under the ambit of the project (See Table 5) spanning the purposes of knowledge production, dialogue and national/global advocacy.

¹² Methods were deployed and used for analysis through different scholarly traditions by collaborating teams.

Table 5. List of Outputs Produced Under Policy Frameworks for Digital Platforms

Type of Work	Output	Description	Number	Status
Research	Policy Overview	A state of play of the research site with sectoral specific policy enquiry.	12	Reports finalized and in final production stage
	Research report	Case studies that examine in detail specific domains through an analysis of platforms.	12	Reports finalized and in final production stage
	Think Piece	Short, analytical outputs that give a big picture view of the global phenomenon of platformization.	5	4 out of 5 published, one in final review stage.
	Mid-project reflections report	Interim synthesis report from policy overview insights	1	Published
	Synthesis Report	Final research report produced by IT for Change through a comparative analysis of the different studies.	1	Published
	Synthesis Report Executive Summary	Summary of the synthesis report	1	Published
	Workshop/ Roundtable	Events held by research partners, including small university round tables, workshops and learning events	5	Concluded
	End of Project workshop	Dissemination event held by IT for Change	1	Concluded
	Panels & Presentations	Paper presentations, panels and other sessions	5	Concluded
	Meeting	Mid project review meeting at IIT Bombay, Mumbai	1	Concluded

Type of Work	Output	Description	Number	Status
		in June 2018		
	Webinar	Online meetings of the research network to share learnings and exchange notes.	3	Concluded
Advocacy	Policy Brief	Excerpt of key learnings and policy outcomes from each case study.	10	Reports finalized and in final production stage
	Policy Inputs	Advocacy statements and other submissions inputted into key intergovernmental spaces.	2	Submitted

Problems and challenges

As the project has been supported by a network of researchers (all of whom had separate consultancies or grants with IDRC), we also draw from technical reports submitted by them in this reflection of the project's problems and challenges, addressing pertinent issues highlighted in reports as they bear upon the overall project progress as well as IT for Change's role in convening and coordinating the network and the project.¹³ Building a global network on a critical and emerging policy issue, with limited resources and a tight timeline presents a bitter-sweet opportunity. We have benefited immensely and the network has had many rewarding moments. There have also been some challenges:

- **Difficulties in finding respondents/research leads:** Research teams faced significant difficulties in finding leads and informants who would be willing to speak for the study. This is understandable in a field where the private sector seeks to keep its cards closed. In the Philippines, our partners found that the sector they were studying (on-demand cleaning) was very nascent and platform/business owners were thus guarded and/or unwilling to participate. Similarly, in Canada, working with private sector start-ups posed somewhat of a challenge for partners as companies were hesitant to open themselves up to analysis by researchers, particularly with regards to their data practices. In the agritech startup sector, IT for Change's team found it impossible to speak to startups who were always busy and mostly unwilling to share information.
- **Delays in meeting deadlines:** The project cycle kicked off later than anticipated. Given the initial delays in money allocation (which were documented in our previous report and by network members), and the aforementioned difficulty in securing leads for the study, there have been cascading delays to the project outputs. In addition to this, principal investigators in our network (From Argentina and Indonesia) were unable to work for some portions of the project cycle on account of critical personal and family reasons. Almost all network members including ourselves found it difficult to keep deadlines on account of competing workloads and asynchronous academic calendars (As reported in reports filed by our UK and EU teams). In such cases, these delays were communicated to us and timelines were reconfigured accordingly.
- **Pace of production of outputs:** As a small team working with a research network made up of many members, the most significant challenge has also been with dealing with the

¹³ As per IDRC guidelines, only grantees are required to submit technical reports. No technical reports were submitted by consultants in the network.

immense volume of research outputs we have been able to produce from the project and finalizing them towards production. While we definitely count it as a success that our network was able to deliver so strongly and contribute truly unparalleled empirical research, we have been slower than anticipated in being able to bring all of them to publication (as noted in the Philippines and Canada report). The fact that a majority of the outputs exceeded the suggested word count meant IT for Change's combined editorial work from the network had nearly trebled. This necessitated bringing in a copy-editor (on a very small budget) to process the work. The necessary back and forth over production outputs has inevitably led to delays that we are trying to make up for. We do hope to have all of our outputs published and disseminated over the next few weeks in tandem with our final synthesis report. We can say with a fair degree of confidence that we have absorbed the burdens of time delays and output volume well and have been able to push insights and enable network members to do so as well.

- **Communication hiccups and hurdles:** While for the most part, this was not an issue, a couple of communication issues have been highlighted by our network members in reports to IDRC. Specifically, this included not receiving our group mail (Canada) on account of one member's email id not being added and with our orientation webinar (EU) where connectivity was poor and patchy. In both cases, these issues happened on account of technical glitches. In the former, a duplicate institutional email id of the network member that we had used in the past was added to the group email initially (without knowledge of it having been changed on either end) which led to a regrettable but unintended communication gap. This was immediately fixed when brought to our attention. In the latter case, while we had run tests to ensure the smooth functioning on the online meeting, there were many connectivity issues which we could not account for. As a learning from these experiences, we have transitioned to more stable webinar software that can mitigate these issues.
- **Research guidance to network:** The collaboration with the network has been extremely rewarding. While we acknowledge that there remains room for improvements to the guidance and coordination we were able to offer through the project, given our resources and bandwidth as an organization, realistically it is not within our capacity to address some expectation mismatches, which we noted in some technical reports with regard to the guidance, feedback and review process.

For instance, we created resources such as a background document and a research framework, along with detailed templates for major outputs with research and writing guidelines that offered theoretical and methodological directions. We also provided extremely detailed multi-level review and feedback to all network members on their drafts at critical stages in the project cycle followed by skype calls, when needed with the format of feedback tailored to what we felt were the needs of the research team in question. However, it was not possible for us to take on the task of reviewing works in progress (rather than finalized drafts) in the same vein (as indicated in the report by the Canada team) and we adopted a lighter method of feedback in such instances.

Similarly, our budget for the project allowed us to organize only one international project meeting – which given the delays with contracting – was able to serve its purpose better in the mid-point rather than at the inception stage. While we acknowledge that a kick-off meeting could have done much to get the network on the same page (as noted in the report by the EU team) or that the network could have facilitated more cross-learning (as noted in the report by the Canada team), we did not have the financial or organizations resources to work on these aspects.

A broader challenge with regard to the study has been the rapidly changing landscape of global platformization, which has prompted us as a network to be constantly agile and keep up with new legislative developments, judicial actions, political resistance as they play out across countries. For instance, we found that even in within six months of having undertaken a synthesis from the first

set of deliverables, we had to undergo a process of significant unlearning when we began the task of synthesizing the final research from the network given how quickly the debates have moved. Also, there is the challenge in scholarly network building of accommodating different cultures of knowledge production, English language proficiency, and differing academic, advocacy and policy expectations and priorities.

Overall assessment and recommendations

We believe that this project that has been able to provide a first of its kind, development focused perspective on platformization foregrounding a global south perspective that draws from examples, illustrations and platform models that do not always make their way to mainstream discourse and thus serves as a valuable body of work that is both scholarly as well as serving the needs of development actors. It has been able to weave in rich, evidence-based insights, while remaining at its core, a policy-oriented effort.

As a southern research and policy organization leading this research, we were able to guide and nudge our collaborating partners into analytical areas that we believe are important from the standpoint of methodological frames. Invariably, researchers from the south are part of networks incubated by northern institutions and network management methodology is standardized and normalized through the institutional cultures and practices of this model. The validation this research has received in terms of translations (Spanish and French) undertaken pro bono by different organizations; requests from multilateral agencies for further research; requests by Foundations like Rockefeller and Ford for capacity building of their grantees; attention from policy makers and trade negotiators across the global South; has been immense.

We hope to be able to leverage the connections to also bring out a book, the process for which is being facilitated currently by IDRC. The network has also managed to sustain the spirit of a scholarly collective and from think piece authors to grant-based collaborators, exchanges continue beyond the boundaries of the project.

Drawing from the technical reports in addition to our own assessment and reflections, we offer the following recommendations:

- **Possibility to sustain the work and its impact:** The nature of one-time funding for an issue, over short time cycles, inhibits the much-needed continuity to engage with the idea and keep the policy advocacy going. It would be useful therefore to support networks with proven value over a longer duration for discursive and policy impact.
- **More flexibility with budget:** The technical report filed by our China team noted difficulties with balancing field-work costs with dissemination activities. A mid-project budget review and allowing research projects that are primarily based on more intensive field-work to present justifications for additional support would be therefore useful for better project outcomes.
- **Increasing scope for meetings:** The report filed by our EU team has suggested that having a kick-off meeting would have been a useful exercise in regards to this project. Given the limited resources, this was not possible for us to organize it in this project but we believe such opportunities can be worked into network based projects of this nature.

Reflections from researchers

IT for Change's guidance, as well as the insights from the project meeting in Mumbai in June 2018 have been invaluable to the conduct of this research.

Lisa Garcia, Foundation for Media Alternatives,

We find the mid-project review meeting IT for Change organized in June 2018, particularly inspiring because it provided a platform for all research teams to convene and exchange findings and challenges so far. The diversity the research teams demonstrate in their research questions, geographical sites, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies is impressive and again very informative for us.

Dr. Julie Chen, University of Leicester (now with University of Toronto)

This has worked well, our working relationship with IT for Change has been positive, and it seems like a useful model for conducting a broader project like this.

Dr. Arne Hintz, Data Justice Lab, Cardiff University

I found this to be a highly rewarding project both as a standalone research project, and also as an activity carried out in networked solidarity with researchers in other parts of the world. I thought the problem statement developed by IT for Change was excellent, and I developed many productive relationships with the other researchers as demonstrated by some of the outcomes of the project. I thoroughly enjoyed the meeting in Mumbai, which brought together many extremely well positioned researchers, and I very much appreciated that IT for Change organized our participation in RightsCon 2018.

Dr. Katherine Reilly, Simon Fraser University