



Youth and the future of work: rethinking social protection and social contracts in the context of the gig economy

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Presentation outline

- Introduction
- Aims & Objectives
- Methodology
- Findings
- Conclusions



Introduction

- The future of work in a digital era is topical, especially in the context of wide-scale youth unemployment.
- In 2021, South Africa had the highest youth unemployment rate in the world at 34.4%.
- Many African countries, including SA, see digital technologies offering new opportunities for young people in the 'gig economy'.
- While new forms of 'gig' work – wherein organisations contract with independent workers on a non-permanent basis, rather than recruiting full-time employees – may ease entry into labour markets, they could also worsen insecurity and vulnerability.
- This is not new – it is the nature of informal and casualised work and has a long history in developing contexts
- BUT, the rise of gig work offers an opportunity to re-examine and reinvigorate debates about the nature of the social contract and what the social policy implications are.



Introduction

- SA has 3.9 million gig workers in different platforms
- SA has been praised for improvement in social protections: Especially in protections focusing on children and older persons
- Still struggles with social protections focusing on people of working age and employed people, especially those in informal work, although there is an improvement in Domestic and Farm work social protections
- Without social protection and/or a commitment on the part of employers to a social contract, growing numbers of gig workers will be vulnerable to contingencies along the life-course.
- It is thus critical to understand these shifts and to develop forward-looking policies that ensure the shift to gig work goes hand in hand with stronger social protection and/or commitments to a social contract.



Aims & Objectives

AIM:

- To assess the nature and scope of gig work in South Africa, as well as the implications for social protection.

OBJECTIVE:

1. To assess how gig workers understand the nature of their work and worker status
2. To assess whether and how gig workers have any access to any forms of social and labour protection
3. To engage platform owners/ managers regarding how they view gig workers and their responsibilities as platform owners/managers
4. To understand from the perspectives of policymakers how best to build an integrated social protection policy for a digital era.



Methodology

- Qualitative research approach - semi-structured interviews
- Purposive sampling
 - 10 M4JAM (Online based)
 - 10 Checkers Sixty60 drivers (Location based)
 - 2 company representatives
 - 2 policy makers (DEL and DSD)
- Data managed by Atlas.ti and thematic analysis conducted



Findings

Nature of work on the platform

- Both platforms allocate tasks online
- No knowledge of who the “employers” are
- Confusion over what the relationship with the “employers” entails.
- Pay is upon task completion but uncertainty with grabbing a task for M4JAM gig workers, waiting for be allocated for Checkers Sixty60 drivers
- At the behest of the unknown “employer”



Findings

Wages and employee benefits

- For M4JAM wages depend on the number of tasks “grabbed” (R45 to R75)
- For Checkers Sixty60 wages depend on the number of deliveries made (R30 per delivery)
- Benefits in the form of tips for Checkers Sixty60 drivers
- Difficult to assess what the monthly take home pay will be.



Findings

Worker identification

- Unemployed and in pursuit of better livelihoods
- Confusion over classification in terms of labour law but the majority classified themselves as independent contractors
- Different reasons for classification including
 - Overhead costs
 - No relationship with employer
- Most would prefer an employment relationship



Findings

Worker's rights and protections

- M4JAM participants signed conditions and agreement but were unsure if this constituted an employment contract (it did not).
- Checkers Sixty60 participants had written contracts in place but they were limited duration (with no end date).
- During Covid-19 participants were provided with safety materials
- All participants stated that social protections were very important however they did not have access to any social protection benefits
- No collective action/ organizing



Findings

Policy makers and company representative views

- No interview secured with Checkers
- M4JAM representative indicated awareness of vulnerability, willingness to find solutions, and gave some examples of how they are trying to protect workers on the platform (e.g. insurance for particular tasks).
- Finds the current legislation difficult as the nature of work (micro-tasks) means that they cannot employ the individuals.
- DSD and DEL representatives indicated an understanding of the challenge and a willingness to find solutions.
 - Focus at the time (for DSD) was on the debates about converting the SRD grant into a permanent basic income grant, which would benefit such workers.
 - For DEL, some interest in how to make UIF more accessible to a wider definition of workers, but difficulties in how to manage this.



Conclusions

- The study findings suggest that there is a need for considered engagement about how to ensure greater security for gig workers and informal workers more broadly.
- Innovative policy solutions are possible but require collaborative efforts to shift current systems.
- Considering the definition of employee in the BCEA might be a starting point but would take considerable debate.
- From other research, it is clear that worker organizing is crucial to advocate for policy changes.
- The BIG debate cannot eclipse the considerations of how to promote better social protection for informal workers, including gig workers.



Thank you!



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