



“Any future-minded approach toward labor markets and global well-being must look toward the South.”

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Image Source: Wikimedia Commons. June 14, 2013. Migrant workers at the Al Ghanim Central Bus Station in Doha, Qatar. Photo Credit: Alex Sergeev (www.asergeev.com). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Migrant_workers_at_Al_Ghanim_Central_Bus_Station.jpg



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The infinite shapes of the future of work. Views from the South

Signs of revolution

Digitalization, the cloud, artificial intelligence (AI), and data-driven decision-making increasingly enable the pro-

duction of old and new goods and services in novelty ways. The other side of the same coin is the transformation of the very essence of jobs, as the new forms of production and organization raise new requirements from workers while deeming some of their skills obsolete.

At the technological frontier, robots and software assume duties that used to belong to humans. These AI-based solutions seem to tick all the boxes in the definition of general-purpose technologies (GPTs): (1) They are highly malleable, with room for improvement; (2) They are widely used in different sectors of the economy; (3) They generate spillover effects that foster further innovation.

GPTs do not emerge very frequently: Richard Lipsey et al.¹ have only identified about 25 GPTs in the history of humanity. But when they do, they have the power to alter entire economies and societies. Many of these GPTs redefined the world of work: the Neolithic revolution transformed hunter-gatherers into farmers and; the Industrial Revolution converted the self-employed into factory workers.² Are we witnessing artificial intelligence's grand entrance to the exclusive inventory of GPTs?

Forking paths

GPTs have also proven they can open windows of opportunity for creating jobs and increasing productivity, especially for early adopters. Examples of countries that have caught past technological waves at the right time are the UK in the

first industrial revolution, the US in the second, and arguably China in the third. But the opposite is also true; firms, sectors, and countries that fail to catch up to technological change can quickly lag behind. For this reason, disruptive technologies have come hand in hand with phases of large bifurcations in income, productivity, real wages, and welfare between countries.

The prospect of such deep transformations raises the stakes and forces us to think about what comes next. What paths are available, and which one will we follow? Will robots fill in our jobs? Will technology exacerbate social gaps? The stakes are exceptionally high for the Global South, countries that were outperformed in the past and cannot afford to fall further behind. Will these regions manage to embrace new technologies while avoiding job displacement?

Future building

These questions are important, but there is an inherent limitation in attempting to predict the future. It reduces society's capacity for agenda setting and transforms people into spectators of an approaching "otherness." In fact, the shape of the future is continually evolving, as our collective past and present actions result in new configurations and (dis)equilibria. There is room to create new futures and value in defining what we want in them.

A key factor to be embraced when future-designing is con-

text. Even in convoluted times, opportunities do not appear in a vacuum but within specific cultures, institutions, and histories. For the Global South, there are several distinct elements to consider.³ First, we cannot take for granted the exponential innovation and technological adoption levels observed in high-income countries. This may seem apparent, but such implicit assumptions are far too common in the future of work literature. A more realistic challenge for developing countries is to enable conditions to adopt and adapt both old and new technologies in contexts where institutions and business environments are weak and technological anxiety abounds.

Second, skilling, upskilling, and reskilling are essential, but bring about particularly complex challenges in the Global South. This is because the curricular updates needed to convey XXI-century skills interact with other developing countries-specific challenges. One such challenge is informality, which implies that vocational training and labor market institutions struggle to reach significant population segments. Another one is the quality of learning in the formal education systems, as youths are reaching labor markets without requisite levels. Demographics have an impact as well: the younger a country's population, the more relative emphasis it needs to place on early childhood and formal education systems. As a result, Global South countries must find avenues to target adult learning in fragile institutional settings while keep investing in earlier educational stages.

By 2050, high-income countries' working-age population will have shrunk 7% due to aging, while Sub-Saharan Africa's will have more than doubled. The Global South will then account for roughly 90% of working-age men and women worldwide. Any future-minded approach toward labor markets and global well-being must look toward the South. It is time to pass on the torch and give ownership to these countries to support their transformational and future building capacities.

References

1. Lipsey, R.; Carlaw, K. and C. Bekar (2006), *Economic Transformations: General Purpose Technologies and Long Term Growth*. Oxford University Press.
2. Lucassen, J. (2021). *The story of work: a new history of humankind*. Yale University Press.
3. See Albrieu, R. (2021), *Cracking the future of work. Automation and labor platforms in the Global South*. Available in [link](#).