

# Understanding the Working Conditions of Gig Workers and Decent Work: Evidence from Indonesia's Online Ojek Riders

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## *Abstract*

*This article aims to evaluate the working conditions of gig economy workers in Indonesia in order to understand the implications of such work for the ILO's Decent Work Agenda. The article draws on evidence from focus groups and interviews with 38 ojek riders, Indonesian motorcycle taxi drivers from Jakarta, Bogor and Depok. Initial findings suggest that the interviewees chose to be ojek riders due to limited employment opportunities; they perceived that this kind of work is better than contract-based employment massively practiced by many companies in Indonesia. The findings further suggest that the Decent Work Agenda faces considerable challenges from new forms of non-employee work in the absence of a pro-active state agenda to regulate and promote the growth of waged employment.*

*Keywords: Indonesia, platform, gig, decent work, regulation*

## **Introduction**

A contemporary field of research for work and organisational studies has been that of on-line platform work, synonymous with the *gig economy*. De Stefano (2016) defines platform (gig) work as being either *crowd-work*, where a number of firms and workers are connected via an online platform or *on-demand work*, where a single firm uses an online platform to match workers with the demand for services by customers (also known as location-based platform work). Platform work has increased in incidence across developed and emerging economies alike. One estimate (Heeks 2017) suggested that the digital gig economy in the Global South was worth approximately US\$ 5 billion and utilised approximately 60 million workers. However, whilst its emergence as a labour market phenomenon has been amply documented for mature

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economies, less is known about its incidence and scope in developing and emerging economies, despite the fact that a majority of such workers are to be found there.

As such, little is known about the actual employment conditions such workers face (Stewart/Stanford 2017). Some authors, emphasising the *pull factors* of platform work, have argued that both platform workers, as free agents, and their customers can benefit from the flexibility and ease of use of the services (e.g., Pink 2001; Hill 2016), thereby enabling easier mobility and economic empowerment. An alternative strand of work suggests that *push factors* have driven the growth of platform work, in that such forms of work can represent an escape, or “exit” (Hirschman 1970),<sup>3</sup> from the bureaucratic structures of employment in an organisational hierarchy (Kunda, Barley and Evans 2002).

However, others (e.g., Stanford 2017) argue that such work should be seen as the latest version of highly exploitative, precarious work arrangements that have existed in one form or another since the advent of capitalism; in that platform workers engage in gig work because they are unable to obtain regular (waged) employment. As such, platform work has generated controversy because it has been argued that such workers are in effect surrogate employees (dependent contractors) who due to their official non-employee status have been ineligible for employment benefits across countries (see De Ruyter/Brown 2019 for a discussion). Appeals to address the negative aspects of platform work have been typically addressed in terms of ethical tenets such as “justice” and “fairness” (Heeks 2017), but they are also evident in terms of the ILO’s agenda of promoting *decent work*.

This article draws on primary data from Indonesia, a large and important emerging economy, as evidenced by its membership in the G20. It draws on findings from focus group discussions (FGDs) with location-specific gig workers, namely, motorcycle taxi riders, called *ojek*, across several cities in Indonesia to assess the working conditions of *ojek* riders in the context of the applicability of decent work labour standards. In the material that follows, the Decent Work Agenda is critically assessed in terms of whether it can address the insecurities associated with platform work, before the Indonesian experience is explored utilising the case study of *ojek* taxi riders. The article concludes with policy implications arising from the labour market experience of platform workers.

### **Conceptualising Decent Work and the Challenge of Platform Work**

The Decent Work Agenda, as formalised in the ILO’s 2008 *Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalisation* (see Ewing 2014 for a discussion) has four key aspects: job creation; developing sustainable measures of social protection (including labour protection and enforcement thereof); promotion of social dialogue and tripartism in national systems of labour relations; and “respect, promotion and realisation of the fundamental principles and rights at work” (Ewing 2014: 3-4). In this context, the ILO defines *decent work* as

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<sup>3</sup> The logic of Hirschman’s classic treatise on exit, voice and loyalty has a natural corollary in organisational studies: The worker as a consumer responds to a decline in the quality of the product that is the employment relationship by leaving (*exit*), assumedly to other product providers, if they feel powerless to effect change; alternatively, they exercise voice, traditionally via collective mechanisms such as trade unions. The level of loyalty to the organisation is a moderating factor on the desire to exit.

*work that is productive and delivers a fair income, with a safe workplace and social protection, better prospects for social development and integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organise and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and fair treatment for all women and men. (ILO 2016: 247)*

Subsequent attempts to operationalise the concept of decent work led to the creation of 10 ILO Framework Work Indicators in 2008<sup>5</sup> that further refined the concept of decent work around:

1. employment opportunities
2. adequate earnings and productive work
3. decent working time
4. combining work, family and personal life
5. work that should be abolished
6. stability and security of work
7. equal opportunity and treatment in employment
8. a safe work environment
9. social security
10. social dialogue, employers' and workers' representation

However, the concept of decent work is one that – given the disparate levels of development and different structural features across the 150 or so member countries – could only ever be a relative one, making absolute rankings of country performance against set indicators difficult, as acknowledged by the ILO:

*[T]he development of an aggregate composite index that ranks countries has little value for policy analysis as such indices fail to provide appropriate context and often require the use of restrictive assumptions in order to build a comparative database. (ILO 2008: 3)*

Suffice to say, the growth of forms of work associated with the gig economy which could be considered as precarious does pose a challenge to the Decent Work Agenda. Indeed, it could be argued that it is highly problematic to apply such principles to a group of workers who have been consistently referred to as non-employees by their user companies in their attempts to avoid labour regulation. Thus, it could be said that the basic structural premises of gig work are antithetical to the very premise of decent and as such de-commodified work, as defined by the ILO.

This only serves to reiterate the precarious nature of such work. In this context, one striking finding from the ILO (2016: 188) was in respect to non-standard employment being a bridge to standard employment: in the vast majority of counties examined, this was only the case for less than 55% of such workers – and in some cases, less than 10%. For graduates, migrant workers and those initially disadvantaged with low education or earnings, these effects were particularly pronounced. What this suggests is that the gig economy – rather than being the manifestation

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<sup>5</sup> See [https://www.ilo.org/integration/themes/mdw/WCMS\\_189392/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/integration/themes/mdw/WCMS_189392/lang--en/index.htm).

of some choice-theoretic freelancer ideal – is more typified by workers caught in cycles of precarious work, alternating with spells of unemployment or economic inactivity.

In considering emerging economies, the debate on precariousness is subsumed into a wider debate on labour market vulnerability, the extant nature of the informal sector, and a creeping informalisation of the formal sector via the pressure to implement market-oriented reforms to labour laws (Warnecke/De Ruyter 2012). Informal sector workers, of course, are particularly vulnerable due to their relative invisibility, and the ILO's Decent Work Agenda has arisen in recent years partially as a result of criticisms of its perceived corporatist approach in focussing on national systems of labour regulation and the formal sector, with its implicit developed-country bias.<sup>6</sup> This should not be surprising, given the historical trajectory of the ILO and its traditional emphasis on developing institutional capacity for regulatory standards (and enforcement thereof; traditionally achieved through the promotion of collective bargaining) in member countries.

Herein lies the key challenge to the Decent Work Agenda, in so far as it requires a willingness and commitment to adhere to a framework of labour standards by workers, firms and governments alike. As Heeks (2017) notes, the labour standard frameworks that have been developed by ILO conventions, e.g. the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) Base Code<sup>7</sup> or the Social Accountability (SA8000) set of standards<sup>8</sup>, generally have been crafted with an employment relationship in mind and thus are not readily applicable to workers denoted as non-employees. With regards to platform workers in particular, they miss key areas of the work relationship peculiar to the gig economy arising from the ambiguity around the lack of a clear employer – is it the platform provider or the client?

In addition, there are questions over how to enforce labour standards. The ETI Base Code and SA8000 are voluntaristic, in that they serve as badges of organisations one can be member of (ETI), or be otherwise accredited with (SA8000). They are thus examples of how organisations can certify that they practise good governance and labour relations. In a similar fashion, the Taylor Review of gig work in the UK concluded that “[t]he best way to achieve better work is not national regulation but responsible corporate governance, good management and strong employment relations within the organisation” (cited in Heeks 2017: 29). All of these approaches then are *sub-hegemonic*, to use D’Cruz’s (2017) term, in that they do not attempt to mandatorily change existing labour relations structures.

However, platform operators that have gone to great lengths to expound that their workers are not employees but rather (independent) contractors, are unlikely to voluntarily subscribe to

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<sup>6</sup> See Vosko (2002) for an interesting discussion of the historical antecedents here.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.ethicaltrade.org/resources/eti-base-code>. The ETI Base Code has nine themes: employment is freely chosen; freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining are respected; working conditions are safe and hygienic; child labour shall not be used; living wages are paid; working hours are not excessive; no discrimination is practised; regular employment is provided; and no harsh or inhumane treatment is allowed.

<sup>8</sup> See [https://www.bsigroup.com/LocalFiles/en-IN/Certification/Social/IN\\_SocialAccountability\\_Flyer-Ver1-Nov-2016.pdf](https://www.bsigroup.com/LocalFiles/en-IN/Certification/Social/IN_SocialAccountability_Flyer-Ver1-Nov-2016.pdf). SA8000 “measures the performance of organisations in eight key areas: child labour, forced labour, health and safety, freedom of association and collective bargaining, discrimination, disciplinary practices, working hours and remuneration. The 2014 version brings in the concept of risk identification and controls. It focuses on the management systems approach to improve the social accountability”.

such frameworks.<sup>9</sup> The ETI Base Code, for example, commits signatories to providing regular employment, which is antithetical to a basic structural feature of platform work, namely that of arbitrary precarity in that each job assignment is individually contracted and offers no guarantee of further work.

Thus, for scholars and activists concerned with promoting decent work, *counter-hegemonic* measures (D’Cruz 2017) are more likely to deliver change. The ILO’s approach in this regard traditionally has been to promote the extension of regulatory coverage and raise workers’ awareness of their rights. However, the Decent Work Agenda also alludes to the reality that regulatory capacity in emerging economies is often patchy at best and non-compliance or corruption in enforcement mechanisms weakens its effectiveness. Hence, there is merit to an approach that understands the growth of waged employment as a precursor to extending regulatory mechanisms (Caraway 2004; Ruggie 2013).

Alternatively, or in tandem, one could look to reforming ownership structures in platform providers, with a view to promoting enhanced industrial democracy.<sup>10</sup> The next section considers the growth of platform work in the context of the Indonesian experience.

### **The Growth of Platform Work in Indonesia**

The Indonesian economy has enjoyed considerable economic growth in recent years, after a long period of stagnation in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. This long period of relative stagnation began to end in 2008, after recovery from the global economic downturn, and the period since 2008 has been characterised by strong growth in waged employment, as evidenced by growth in the share of the *employee* category in Table 1. This has been accompanied by a commensurate decline in the share of unpaid/family helpers as well as those who classify themselves as “self-employed with unpaid/family helpers”. Prima facie, denoting employees and self-employed with permanent workers as the formal sector, and the remaining categories (own-account workers, family helpers, casual workers) as informal points to a marked growth of the formal sector in Indonesia over the past ten years.

However, much of the growth of the employee category has been driven by the growth of fixed-term/temporary contract work (ILO 2017) under the auspices of “creating a flexible labour market” (Tadjoeddin 2014: 32), implying precariousness in terms of job security and stability of earnings. As Tadjoeddin (2014: 12) reminds us, “economic security largely depends on the quality of [...] employment”. In considering overall employment trends then, it can be said that growth in the formal sector has been accompanied by an erosion of the terms and conditions of work that constitute a creeping informalisation of the formal sector. From this thus follows a need to consider a more nuanced spectrum of precariousness and vulnerability in employment arrangements than a simple formal-informal dichotomy would suggest. It is in this context that the growth of platform work should be considered.

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<sup>9</sup> As evidenced by a number of high-profile court cases in the US and UK; see De Ruyter, Brown and Burgess 2019.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., through the establishment of worker cooperatives; see Scholz (2017) for a discussion.

Table 1: Main employment status, Indonesia (%), 2008-2018<sup>11</sup>

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Self-employed	20.4	20.1	19.4	17.5	16.7	17.0	17.9	17.0	16.9	19.3	19.1
Self-employed with temporary/unpaid workers	21.2	20.9	20.4	18.4	17.1	17.2	16.8	15.8	16.4	14.9	15.8
Self-employed with permanent/paid workers	2.4	2.9	3.0	3.4	3.5	3.4	3.6	3.5	3.7	3.3	3.5
Employees	27.4	27.8	30.1	34.4	36.3	36.5	37.0	38.7	38.7	39.7	39.7
Casual workers in agriculture	5.8	5.6	5.4	4.9	4.8	4.6	4.4	4.4	4.6	4.8	4.2
Casual workers not in agriculture	5.2	5.4	4.7	5.1	5.5	5.4	5.6	6.5	5.9	5.9	5.6
Family/unpaid workers	16.9	17.4	17.3	16.4	16.1	15.9	14.7	14.0	13.7	12.3	12.2
Missing/unidentified											
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: Figures for August of each year. Technically, even the categories of employer and employee can display elements of informality (e.g., contract work).

The growth of platform work in Indonesia became first evident in 2015, when the public were introduced to the first online *ojek* provider. Since then, the demand has been increasing steadily, particularly in urban areas, as many people rely on their services for human mobility as well as food and package delivery. Following increased demand, *ojek* rider has become an alternative source of work for many job seekers. The growth of fixed term/temporary contract work in the formal sector, coupled with an abundant productive age population, have made workers more likely to take on *ojek* work because it has lenient requirements (i.e., there is no age nor education requirements) and at the same time the possibility to earn an income higher than the minimum wage with no term restriction.

However, it should be noted that aggregate data on such workers is lacking. This is a problem common to all countries, as labour force surveys typically do not ask workers how their job assignments are mediated, i.e., via what mechanism their labour supply is matched to labour demand (De Ruyter et al. 2019). In general, labour force surveys typically ask respondents to self-identify based on a set number of categories, so that it is possible that platform workers identify as self-employed or alternatively as casual workers. Platform providers regard them as contractors and not employees, and much of the controversy surrounding such work has stemmed from the extent to which trade unions argue that they are disguised employees or sham self-employed (De Ruyter/Brown 2019). Conventional nomenclature refers to such individuals as *dependent contractors*.

To date, there is no official data on the number of online *ojek* riders in Indonesia. The President of GARDA, a collective organisation for online *ojek* riders, estimated that there were

<sup>11</sup> Calculated from BPS Indonesia, see <http://www.bps.go.id/>.

approximately 2.5 million across Indonesia.<sup>12</sup> This data suggests that platform workers comprise only a small part of the workforce in Indonesia, only 1.8% of around 138 million.<sup>13</sup>

However, the limited incidence of platform work does not reduce its significance as an emergent workforce trend across countries. Rather, such forms of work could be the thin edge of the wedge in terms of their corrosive effect on other firms – that is, their potential to gig-ise other sectors of the economy. Indeed, the potential for “gigification” (Miller 2015) of the labour market could be regarded as the 21<sup>st</sup> century update of the casualisation of the workforce. Also evident is that much of what counts as contingent work is clearly being done on an involuntary basis because better alternatives – i.e., obtaining a permanent job – appear to be unavailable (De Ruyter/Brown 2019). This casts doubts on arguments that for example seek to explain the emergence of platform work purely in terms of free agents expressing preferences (Pink 2001).

Rather, if individuals are caught in cycles of precarious work and unemployment (or economic inactivity), then substantive issues regarding their own well-being arise. That argument has even more traction for developing and emerging economies, where social security coverage is often lacking and workers end up forced into any kind of economic activity, no matter how marginal. There is thus a need to document the experiences of such workers, in order to assess to what extent platform work is a stepping stone to decent work or whether it undermines the concept of decent work altogether.

This research focuses on particular aspects of decent work such as employment opportunity, stability and security at work, social security and social dialogue, which are central to the discussion as the nature of gig work, with its unclear employment status, calls them into question.

## Methodology

The methodology underpinning the research conducted for this article was one of an inductive, qualitative mode of data collection and analysis based on interviews and focus groups. As such, the research approach utilised an interpretivist epistemology, whereby the construction of knowledge is based upon the cumulative analysis and cross-referencing of individuals’ interpretation of meaning. Hence, the research approach is explicit in terms of its subjectivist ontology and its value-laden axiology (and research subjects) on the findings of the research.

Our qualitative research was used to shed more light on the nature of the working conditions *ojek* riders face. Aggregate data approaches to analysing working conditions are somewhat limited as context is all-important in understanding the day-to-day experience of workers, which calls for a narrative approach to data presentation to let the research subjects speak for themselves as it were. There is also a clear gap in our knowledge of the working conditions of such workers, as most of literature on actual working conditions has focussed on traditional business, where the status of and the relationship between employers and employees are clear. In contrast,

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<sup>12</sup> See <https://ekonomi.bisnis.com/read/20191112/98/1169620/berapa-sih-jumlah-pengemudi-ojek-online-simak-penelusuran-bisnis.com>.

<sup>13</sup> Similar low incidences are evident in developed economies: the BLS (2018a) estimated that platform workers in the US (as of May 2017) accounted for about 1% of the workforce. Katz and Krueger (2016) estimated 3-4% based on online surveys in the UK, Germany and Sweden, while Minifie (2016) estimated that only 80,000 Australians (less than 0.5% of the workforce) regularly work via a digital platform.

very little is known about the actual working conditions of platform workers over time, and conventional labour market statistics do not reflect the job churn that characterises platform jobs (De Ruyter et al. 2019).

Furthermore, *Ojek* riders are also classified as informal sector workers or self-employed – which makes a reliance on aggregate data problematic, because these separate categories of workers might actually be a cohort.<sup>14</sup> In any case, for the platform provider such workers are not employees but contractors, raising further definitional and regulatory issues.

In order to develop multiple case studies, primary data was collected in Jakarta and two nearby cities, Bogor and Depok. Case studies allow a focus on a specific situation, capturing contextual conditions that are important parts of the studied phenomenon. The research participants were online *ojek* riders. The main method used was the focus group discussion (FGD). Participants were approached by contacts. In Bogor, for example, the researchers asked a small shop owner whose place was where online *ojek* riders would come to rest and chat between orders. In Jakarta and Depok, the researchers asked a contact with connections to online *ojek* riders to assist them in sourcing FGD participants.

Each FGD was held for around 90 minutes and was recorded and transcribed. Prior to exploring the decent work aspects in the FGDs and interviews, the authors asked the participants some personal information, such as age, tenure, whether this job was their main or side job and reasons for joining the platform. Research notes were taken during FGDs and interviews to complement the recordings. After the recordings were transcribed, the data was analysed with a thematic coding approach. Several steps of coding were conducted to saturate the data to obtain a thick description of the findings. Validity was ensured via researcher and location triangulation whilst reliability was ensured through the development and use of FGD protocols, for which the exploration guidance was included.

The sampling technique used was that of convenience sampling, with the number of participants recruited until a point of theoretical saturation (Glaser/Strauss 1967) was reached – that is, the point where collecting further data would not yield any additional insights. Thus, it could reasonably be expected that the data would yield findings revealing aspects of working conditions in the sector in general and hence justify some generalisation.

The discussion that follows explores the experience of the participants within the framework of decent work. Employment opportunity, stability and security at work, social security and social dialogue are central in the discussion, as they appear to be especially problematic in the context of gig work.

## Findings

This section presents the findings of the FGDs from fieldwork involving 41 participants from Jakarta, Bogor and Depok.

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<sup>14</sup> This is a common feature of surveys where respondents are asked to categorize their main job might have different realities underpinning their work experience that lead them to identify themselves in a particular fashion.



Table 2: Participant details

City	Methods	Number of participants	Age range	Average tenure (years)	Average work hours/day	Range of average income/month (USD)
Jakarta	FGD	11	26-48	2	12	71.5-428.5
Bogor	FGD	10	19-46	2	12	71.5-286
Depok	FGD	11	26-56	3	12	71.5-357

This table demonstrates a wide age range of participants. With that said, gig work attracts not only those who are newly entering the labour market but also those with work experience who feel insecure with the fixed-term contract offered by many companies:

*I was working for a company for five years as a contract worker, but they never made me a permanent worker; I felt insecure. When this platform had a vacancy, I decided to resign and join it. (FGD Participant 3, Jakarta)*

Ojek work is also seen as having few entry barriers, as there are no age restrictions or qualification requirements:

*It's hard to find a job. Age is my issue, I cannot find a job in the formal sector, but I could find one in the informal sector. That's why I joined this platform. There is no age restriction. (FGD Participant 1, Bogor)*

The reported experience of relative ease of getting work is contextual to the current condition of the Indonesian labour market, particularly in urban areas. Indonesia is experiencing a demographic bonus in that the productive-aged population outnumbered those of non-productive age. Thus job opportunities in the formal sector have become more difficult to secure. The formal sector in Indonesia, as in the rest of the world, has been affected by the trend of digitalisation. Many jobs have been made redundant, for example due to the impact of e-tolls, mobile banking, and online shopping. Hence, getting a full-time permanent job has become more difficult. It is in this context that the enthusiasm to take up *ojek* work should be considered.

Evident from all responses were long working hours; as most work full time, *ojek* work is their main point of contact with the labour market. As such, it is also their main source of income, although the income figures reported showed considerable variation, pointing to the unequal or volatile nature of such earnings. The minimum wage in these areas ranged between USD 260 and 280 per month, revealing the low-paid nature of this work. In what follows, these aspects of *ojek* working are considered further from the standpoint of the principles of decent work as previously outlined.

There is no systematic injury protection program for work-related accidents provided by the app companies in question. This is not unimportant, as motorcycle fatalities are a serious problem in Indonesia and a particular work hazard for *ojek* riders. The risk of being involved in an accident is high considering that in Jakarta alone, there were over 5,000 incidents with

more than 500 fatalities involving motorbikes in 2017 and 2018 respectively.<sup>15</sup> Insurance provisions against such accidents are scant. Riders can register to *BPJS Kesehatan* or *BPJS Ketenagakerjaan*, Indonesian social security system agencies, and pay the premium by themselves. However, because they would have had to pay the premium themselves – which for them was quite expensive – most respondents were not protected by the national social security system. One platform provider, *Grab*, was reported to provide accident insurance for both riders and customers, under certain conditions: *Grab* riders had to wear a uniform, and the passenger had to be the same person who booked the service in the app.

In terms of whether the *ojek* riders feel they are treated fairly by the platform provider, the key aspects evaluated in this research were whether they feel like they have a voice on the job and whether they are able to express concerns to their employers. Mostly, that is not the case: Respondents found the work more difficult than expected and the means to address concerns rather limited. Platform providers were said to often introduce new policies without detailed introduction to the riders, who are confronted with changes via the app shortly before their implementation and have little opportunity to express their opinions about new policies.

Respondents also reported that there are many rules that have to be followed so as to ensure customer satisfaction. They perceived that customers were the main if not sole concern of the platform providers, whilst workers were regarded as far less important and their working conditions did not matter to the provider. For example, *ojek* riders are sometimes suspended without any investigation because of a customer's complaint: "They [the platform] just listen to the customers; they don't listen to us [*ojek* riders]" (FGD Participant 5, Depok), or "after the customer got off, they gave one star [...] and the next day, our account was suspended" (FGD Participant 3, Bogor).

In contrast, it is much more difficult to file a complaint about a customer, such as a fake order or bad treatment. If riders cancel an order because the customer does not show up, the app still registers this as bad performance on the part of the rider.

Suspension is announced through the app, and shortly after that notification, the rider cannot access their app. The suspension can be as short as 30 minutes if riders cancel orders twice within one hour and up to as long as seven days due to customers' complaints or uncompleted tasks. Respondents also stated that they could be permanently suspended or fired if the system indicated that they have been cheating or if there were substantial complaints from customers. The riders can ask for an appeal, where they have to go to the headquarters or branch office. However, the results of these are mixed as decisions on penalties and appeals have a highly personal element to them in that they very much depended on the HR staff at the office.

*Ojek* riders did also on occasion take industrial action: riders were mobilised and protested in front of the platform provider offices, e.g. against pay deduction policies which they argued were unfair (the platforms typically take 20%). However, they perceived that their voices were largely ignored in this regard and that platform providers continued to enact policies unfavourable to them. Thus, some respondents felt that industrial action was a waste of time:

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<sup>15</sup> See <https://m.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20181220214728-20-355379/kecelakaan-di-jakarta-naik-5-persen-sepeda-motor-mendominasi>.

*[M]any drivers and riders joined some industrial action. I joined one in the DPR [People's Representative Council] Office, in Benhil [an area in Jakarta] where the action went chaotic [...] but still no results. (FGD Participant 7, Jakarta)*

*Just a waste of time [...] no results. When we protest, the company makes an even harder policy for us, they don't listen to us. No results, we just lost our income when we protested. (FGD Participant 3, Depok)*

## Discussion

The findings of this article suggest that platform work, as epitomised by the *ojek* riders, is simply a form of highly commodified, precarious work. Indeed, what was manifest in our focus group data was that the balance of power in the work relationship was tilted in favour of the platform provider. The extent of growth of that form of work in the past decade points to the fact that companies have been using the non-employee status of *ojek* riders and gig economy workers in general to avoid the costs of employment benefits. In turn, the lacking employee status leads to them falling outside the regulatory purview of the state.

As noted earlier, the trajectory of Indonesian labour regulation has been somewhat schizophrenic. On the one hand the state, in its post-Suharto democratising period, has been exemplary in terms of adopting labour standards and rights in the workplace to serve as a benchmark by emerging economy standards. On the other hand, recent labour regulation has increasingly legitimised the use of temporary and contract labour, pointing to an increasing informalisation of the formal sector. Regarding the progressing informalisation, government policy has been markedly silent on the issue of working conditions and labour rights.

In the Indonesian context, the emphasis on Industry 4.0 and skills – totemic of technology having a benign influence on employment – sits uncomfortably with the emergence of low-skill and insecure platform work, as evidenced in our findings. Indeed, to the extent that automation has impacted on formal sector jobs, such developments have only served to reinforce the growth of platform work.

However, the emphasis on Industry 4.0 and skills also affects the formal sector, thereby excluding unregulated and documented workers which would otherwise increase labour market segmentation. For platform workers, the emergence of cheap technology in the form of mobile phone apps does lend credence to Braverman's (1974) hypothesis of technology having a deliberate de-skilling function on the workforce. In a similar manner, Stanford (2017: 383) argues that "the onward march of technology is neither neutral nor exogenous: what kinds of technologies are developed, how they are implemented and how they affect work, all reflect the decisions and interests of competing constituencies".

Because of the competitive advantage these technologies give platform providers, the pressure on the traditional business model to co-opt such practices grows, which only further contributes to the informalisation of the formal sector. What this means is that attempts to promote decent work through sub-hegemonic means, such as the voluntary codes of conduct referred to earlier, are unlikely to succeed with online platform providers. The challenges for regulators, trade unions, and others concerned with the promotion and enabling of decent work in general are thus substantial. As the establishment of the Ethical Trading Initiative attested, in the

absence of concrete action from the government, trade unions, NGOs, the ILO and community groups have an important role in informing workers of their rights and helping them gain a better understanding of what they are entitled to (Warnecke/De Ruyter 2012).

However, the state also has to be pressured to directly address the various insecurities associated with platform work and ensure that full-time gig workers as manifest surrogate employees are also accorded employment rights. Heeks (2017), in arguing for a digital gig economy standard, makes a persuasive case for a set of measures that should be put in place for platform workers.

*Table 3: “Decent Digital Work” – Standards for the Digital Gig Economy (reproduced from Heeks 2017:26)*

	<b>Digital Gig Economy Standard</b>
<i>Employment Context</i>	
Social Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Provision of annual, sick and maternity leave</li> <li>*Provision of unemployment, disability and health insurance</li> <li>*Provision of liability insurance</li> <li>*Provision of pension contributions</li> <li>*Portable benefits</li> <li>*Shared contributions from workers, platforms and clients including taxation</li> </ul>
Social Dialogue, Employers’ and Workers’ Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Right to organise and negotiate collective agreements</li> <li>*Legal changes where collective negotiation is prevented for independent contractors</li> <li>*Enable (collective) communication between workers</li> </ul>
Economic and Social Context for Decent Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Compliance with all relevant national laws in worker jurisdiction</li> <li>*Client responsibility for digital supply chain</li> <li>*Access for policy-makers to anonymised transactional platform data</li> </ul>
<i>Employment</i>	
Employment Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Opportunity to access digital gig economy work</li> <li>*Provision of training opportunities</li> <li>*Worker-accessible, portable work history and reputation profiles</li> </ul>
Stability and Security of Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Combination of stability and flexibility</li> <li>*Clarification / re-categorisation / development of new / flexibility to choose employment status</li> </ul>
Equal Opportunity and Treatment in Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*No discrimination</li> <li>*Data protection and privacy for both clients and workers</li> </ul>
Dignity and Respect at Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Respectful and prompt communications between clients, platform and workers</li> <li>*Clear rules for work rejection and re-work, worker deactivation, worker ratings, and worker levelling-up</li> <li>*Human review of worker complaints</li> <li>*Neutral third-party dispute resolution mechanism</li> </ul>
<i>Work Conditions</i>	
Adequate Earnings and Productive Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*At least minimum wage paid taking unpaid time into account</li> <li>*Clear information and communication about tasks</li> <li>*Clear information about payment including schedule and conditions and non-payment</li> <li>*General-terms details about client identity and task purpose</li> </ul>

	*Rating system for both clients and workers
Decent Working Time	Compliance with national working time directives and with ILO guidelines
Safe Work Environment	Ensure potentially psychologically unsafe tasks are signalled, and support provided

Heeks highlights that for flexible workers such as platform workers, portability of entitlements is essential, as historically, certain benefits of employment, such as pension contributions, have been contingent on the length of job tenure with one employer. However, the framework would only be effective if it were underpinned by effective enforcement mechanisms – that is, well-functioning labour courts, strong trade unions, and a well-resourced labour inspectorate. None of these are present in Indonesia at this point in time. Moreover, significant corruption at regional and local levels continues to adversely influence the interpretation of labour law in bureaucracy and judiciary (Warnecke/De Ruyter 2012).

Thus, we would argue that the implementation of the Decent Work Agenda needs to go beyond simple reliance on a regulatory framework. When regulatory mechanisms are weak or poorly enforced, as is often the case in emerging economies, providing decent-waged work and enacting government policies to facilitate the growth of waged employment gain all the more in importance. A full discussion of such measures is beyond the scope of this article, but very simply put, they would be policies that serve to increase the voice options and exit options available to platform workers.

Fundamental to the Decent Work Agenda should be the provision of a Universal Basic Income irrespective of labour market status and associated reforms of the social security system to extend welfare coverage beyond government and formal sector workers. As Indonesia is abundant in natural resources (the processing of which could be taxed higher), we would argue that the Indonesian government could relatively easily find the means to pay for a UBI set at an affordable level; be it through higher taxes on the wealthy, higher company taxes, a Tobin tax on financial transactions or taxes on wealth.<sup>16</sup> Other policies could include public sector job schemes and an emphasis on skills development and retraining, which would infer an expansion of free education. Complementing this would be infrastructure, including public transport, and digital development. Only through addressing the wider economic and social context of platform work could the essential precariousness of the labour market experience of platform workers be improved.

## Conclusions

This article explored challenges for the Decent Work Agenda brought about by the emergence of platform (gig) work in developed and emerging economies alike, drawing on primary data from focus groups with motorcycle riders (*ojek*) in Indonesia. The findings of the paper assert the essential powerlessness of such workers and that platform work was mainly taken up because more secure employment options were unavailable. Within the context of a creeping informalisation of the formal sector in Indonesia, the challenges facing those concerned with the

<sup>16</sup> See De Ruyter/Hearne (2020) for a discussion.

promotion of decent work are considerable. To the extent that platform work can be seen as the latest way for firms to evade employment regulation, it's not the technological determination that should be regarded as essential but rather its ability to transcend labour laws by offshoring and purporting self-employment.

The paper highlights the essential role of the state in implementing progressive labour market policies to ameliorate the corrosive effects of commodified gig work on the working conditions and wellbeing of platform workers and the wider workforce. However, further research needs to be conducted to explore the work trajectory of such individuals over a longer period of time. This is in order to more extensively understand how the nature of precariousness of platform work impacts on the labour market experience and how it interacts with the shifting parameters of regulation by the state. Further research should also explore the working conditions of workers in the traditional segment doing similar jobs to assess whether there is a risk premium attached to platform work.

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