

► Episode 4

Harnessing Artificial Intelligence for refugee empowerment



Guest speaker: Hester Gartrell, Chief Impact Officer and Interim Director of Humans in the Loop

Podcast host: Thomas Netter

► **Tom:**

Welcome to the ILO PROSPECTS podcast series, “Promoting decent work in the digital economy”. I am your host Tom Netter and today we are going to talk about how to improve the lives of conflict-affected people through employment opportunities related to artificial intelligence. Can artificial intelligence help us close the digital divide affecting conflict-affected people?

Artificial Intelligence is helping to expand work opportunities for young people in refugee settings. Some of these jobs require highly skilled workers. But others are low-skilled. How do we close the gap?

Joining us today to share her knowledge of these issues is Hester Gartrell, Chief Impact Officer and Interim Director of a group called [Humans in the Loop](#). Humans in the Loop is an award-winning social enterprise that provides model training and validation services for machine learning. Hester has been working on developing and delivering education and training programmes that improve the lives of conflict-affected people with technology and innovation.

Hester was a participant in a recent [Learning Lab](#) episode in the [PROSPECTS Opportunity Fund project “Promotion, inclusion and protection of refugees and host communities in the gig economy.”](#) The project is being implemented jointly by the ILO and UNHCR and, in this particular episode, [it] involved the ILO’s International Training Centre in Turin, Italy. It has the overall aim of promoting inclusive and decent work pathways in the digital economy.

Hester, welcome to the podcast. First of all, tell us a bit about Humans in the Loop, what it is, what it does, and who you are working with.

► **Hester:**

Hello Tom. Very happy to be here today. And yes, of course, Humans in the Loop is an award-winning social enterprise. We provide digital upskilling and remote work opportunities in the global digital economy for people affected by conflict. When people are displaced due to conflict, they often lose access to education and to work and they are forced into often low-paid or work in the grey economy. We are aiming to provide a solution to this problem by offering our upskilling programs, but at the same time through our social enterprise, offering work opportunities in the field of annotation.

Now, I think we will talk more about this in the course of the podcast, but annotation is essentially the labeling of documents, of videos or of pictures, and it is a really key part of the AI industry, and this is what we employ people in through Humans in the Loop.

► **Tom:**

Okay. Well, you are working to improve the lives of conflict-affected people through employment opportunities in the field of AI as you have just said. Can you tell us more about your model of intervention?

► **Hester:**

Yes, so we really are a two-part organization. We work as an NGO where we provide digital upskilling. So, that is skills in basic IT, English language, and also more advanced IT such as programming or business analytics. We then have our company, and it is in our company that we employ people affected by conflict in client-facing annotation work. How do we do that? Well, we work in Bulgaria and here, we employ people as freelancers directly with Humans in the Loop, but we also work in a number of other countries, including Lebanon, Turkey, Syria and Afghanistan.

In these countries, we have a really unique model where we work in partnership with a grassroots NGO and it is that grassroots NGO on the ground who will support us to recruit and to train people in annotation, and also to support us to distribute the funds in locations that can also often be challenging to distribute money and salaries in a standard way through bank accounts.

► **Tom:**

Okay, great. I wanted to just pursue that a little bit. Since one-third of the world's population is still disconnected, how are you overcoming these barriers to digital connectivity, especially in conflict in fragile settings? How do you help young refugees access connected devices and how do you pay them if they do not have electronic wallets or e-banking services?

► **Hester:**

Yeah, so as I have already suggested, and as you have suggested, it can be very challenging to employ people in these contexts and even to train people due to the connectivity and also some of the structural limitations in place. Those might be legal around sanctions or around the government's approach to refugees in that country. So, we have two main ways in which we address that. The first is that when we are working in Bulgaria, in our country, where we were founded, we do provide people with loans of equipment. When we are working in other locations where we work with our partner NGOs, it is really important for us that NGO, which is based in that country, is providing a space, a digital hub where people can go and [where they] can use the equipment. This is absolutely essential because we are often working in areas where there is poor access to equipment and annotation work has to be done on a computer or laptop. So, it is not possible to do it on a smartphone or tablet. And also, where there might be issues with electricity supply.

So, it is really important that our local partner, we work very closely with them on this, is able to provide a space where people can access the technical equipment that they need. Secondly, you mentioned payment and how do we do that? Yes, there are many circumstances where due to the situation on the ground, people may not have access to bank accounts. In that situation, that is why we work so closely again, with the local partner NGO. We will distribute the funds to the local partner NGO and the NGO partner then distributes those funds in a way that works for those people on the ground. Sometimes that is very much within the informal economy. That might be via cash, that might be via something such as Western Union. It is because many of these people that we are working with really face structural issues to more formal finance access and we have to work closely with our NGO partners to find a workaround.

► **Tom:**

Okay. Well, let us talk some more about AI. What are some of the innovations involved in using artificial intelligence to expand working opportunities for young people in refugee settings? And I guess these jobs are low skilled.

► **Hester:**

So, really interesting question, and I definitely see a lot of opportunities both in terms of digital upskilling and in terms of work opportunities. So, let us start first with the digital upskilling aspect. I think AI offers a lot of opportunities for people to access resources and to present themselves in different languages, and this can be

super helpful for people who are affected by conflict, and who have potentially been displaced to countries where they are not familiar with the main language being used.

In terms of opportunities for work, one of the great things about AI, and actually about the global digital economy in general, is that many of those jobs are remote. So, we are increasingly moving to a model where you do not have to go to the office, you do not have to be based in the country in which you work, and this can offer many, many opportunities for displaced people.

In terms of Humans in the Loop, we chose annotation. I mentioned already that it is a really key part of the AI sphere. And why did we choose annotation? Well, as you suggested, it can be accessed. It is a work opportunity that can be easily trained. So, if people have not had previous experience in digital work, we believe that annotation can be a great first step into the digital economy and into this type of digital work. However, I would not characterize it only as low-skilled. Depending on the type of annotation that needs to be done, it does require a lot of precision and knowledge and training. And that is one of the things that is key to our work, providing people with training. And before people have even started to work on client projects with us, we always ensure that people are trained on what we call a mock work project, which is also paid, and which simulates what it would be like to work on a client project. So, we are sure that they are really prepared.

There are also some more specialist forms of annotation, ones which require a little bit more expertise or specialism. For example, around medical annotation or also around engineering, where what we are really looking for is people who have a higher level of skill, who potentially have a university-level qualification and can apply that knowledge alongside their technical skill of annotation to build AI models specifically in those spheres of work.

► **Tom:**

I think you were referring to what Humans in the Loop calls Doctors in the Loop. It is a new program you have launched. Can you tell us how this works and what type of skills are needed? Are refugees working on this as well?

► **Hester:**

Yes, it is a really exciting initiative and something that we are looking at scaling up at the moment. Doctors in the Loop is essentially our medical annotation team. It is made up of people who are medically trained. They may be doctors, or they may have other medical qualifications, perhaps dentists or nurses or radiologists, for example, and their role is to support medical projects, to develop medical AI models. What does that actually mean in practice? For example, this could contribute to developing robotic surgery, also quicker diagnosis, and it is really vital that these people have this medical skill in order to annotate the pictures and videos effectively and ensure that those machine learning models can make the right decisions.

So yes, we do work with a number of people affected by conflict in this team, and at the moment we are working very closely with our partner in Lebanon to expand the team. It is something that is very exciting for us because it allows people who have spent a significant amount of time training but potentially due to displacement are no longer able to practice in hospitals in the country in which they are based to be able to use that knowledge and apply it and to really make a difference in the field of medicine.

► **Tom:**

Now I want to ask you about women. How does all this apply to women's access to AI-driven work? And also in the learning lab, you referred to neurodiversity, which is an entirely unfamiliar concept to me. What is neurodiversity and how does it relate to inclusion and de-stigmatization?

► **Hester:**

Okay, so when we talk about neurodiversity, this is also something that is very interesting and I really do believe that AI has the potential to support accessibility to the workforce for people who do have a neurodiversity, but what does neurodiversity actually mean? It is a term that we can use to apply to people who have autism, ADHD or perhaps dyslexia. When we talk about things like neurodiversity, we are often using the language of deficit, that we see something like autism or dyslexia to be a lack of something. When we use the term neurodiversity, it is recognizing that actually, there is not a standard model of approaching the world or of working or of the mind working, but actually, there are many, many different ways in which people experience, view and interact with the world, and none of those is a deficit.

So, it is really important that when we talk about “neurodiversities” and disabilities, we are using a language of inclusion, and we are using a language that recognizes that diversity is a strength. And for us at Humans in the Loop, we have found that our work, which is online and flexible, actually can really be great for people who do have neurodiversity, and it enables them to manage their own time and to work in an environment that they can make comfortable for them.

So, we do see many, many potentials in this type of remote work and flexible work. And I also think that there are many AI technologies that will be able to support people to access work and also to manage the workplace in a way that makes it more accessible for all. And that might be, for example, AI technologies that transcribe or can take on some more administrative roles and also assistive technology. And, actually, even as an annotation team, we have been working on some really exciting projects with clients that support the development of AI for assistive technologies for people with disabilities. So that is also I think a wider conversation, but something that is very exciting for us.

► **Tom:**

Yeah, that is very interesting. Now, one of the things you have emphasized is the local context of digital access and the critical role of partnerships in overcoming barriers for refugees. So, tell us about your approach to partnerships for recruiting refugees and if possible, can you provide us with some examples?

► **Hester:**

Yes, definitely. Partnerships really are our strength, and I also think one of the innovations of our model is that rather than requiring ourselves to set up an office in every region which we want to work with, we very much have a model of working with local partners and supporting them and them supporting us to open up more opportunities for employment to people affected by conflict. But you raise a really good question, how do we actually choose those partners and how do we ensure that we have a good working relationship? For us, we always ensure that we do a pilot project. It is essentially, as I have already mentioned, a mock work project that simulates what it would be like to work on a client project, and we always do one of these when we first identify a partner.

Why do we do this? It is because it gives us a fantastic opportunity to assess whether the partnership will work. It allows the partner to see what it would be like to work with us on a long-term basis, and it also allows us to see whether the partner is suitable. We have a number of locations where we work in the long term, such as I have already mentioned, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and Afghanistan, but we also have a number of locations where we have had more short-term interventions. Those are sometimes because that is what is required from the partner or the funder, but it is also because it is a great opportunity for us to test out and see whether there is a good partnership there. And sometimes unfortunately on one side or the other, it is not something that we decide to progress with because at the end of the day, our model is based on providing high-quality client services and we need to ensure that any partnership that we make is going to allow us to provide that really high-quality annotation service to business clients.

In terms of giving the example, yes, we have so many fantastic partners and I really want to mention a piece of work that we are doing at the moment with the ILO and with our partner, [Learning Lions](#) in Kenya. We have just started a pilot with them, and we have had really successful results. We have trained 20 people in annotation over two weeks, and this has been a great opportunity for us to see how their organization works and also for them to better understand the field of annotation and how we work.

And so we are really looking forward to continuing working with them, and it is been great to work with their supervisors on the ground in Kenya and for us to remotely support that project, which is how we always work, offering remote support, training resources, and also work projects, while on the ground partner has access to all those resources and works in the in-person live project with the annotators or should I say potential annotators on the ground.

► **Tom:**

Well, now in this context, are employers aware of how refugees are contributing to or working to make possible what they do? What is their opinion on Humans in the Loop providing microwork to refugees? Do they see this as a form of philanthropy?

► **Hester:**

So, supporting people affected by conflict is something that is central to our mission, and whenever we are speaking with clients, we always emphasize this because at the end of the day, all our annotators are people affected by conflict. So, it is central to our mission, and it is the reason that we were created in the first place. However, one of the things that we are really proud of is that while our clients do know that we are working on an impact model and supporting people who are affected by conflict to step into work, we are primarily chosen because of our high-quality annotation work. We very much operate as a business, and we are providing a good business service. And when we are working with clients, we are not part of CSR or philanthropy. We are being employed as a partner to help them deliver and develop their AI models.

In relation to that, I also really want to emphasize something that I am very proud of at Humans in the Loop, and that is that the majority of our annotators or workers see themselves primarily as employees and through a professional lens when it comes to Humans in the Loop. It has been something we have been having a lot of conversations with them recently about because we try to build a community at Humans in the Loop, an opportunity for all our annotators to come together to network, to learn together, and to support each other.

And as we have been talking about what those community events will look like in 2024, it has become really clear that what our annotators want from us and from each other is professional networking and professional discussions about the future of AI, the future of the digital sector, how they can develop their personal brand and their career further. And this is really exciting because what we have done is created a community and a setting where people are not viewing themselves as victims of conflict first with us, but actually as employees and professionals. And for me, that is really exciting.

► **Tom:**

Thanks. Now, I would like to ask you about concern over what is called micro work, involving work that requires little or no experience or skill, which you referred to before, but some see this as underemployment. So, what is being done to improve the working conditions in micro work and can this provide a stepping stone to other more complex occupations? For example, moving from micro work to graphic design?

► **Hester:**

It is a really interesting question and something we have to consider at Humans in the Loop. I would say in terms of Humans in the Loop, we are very much a closed system. So, we are working very closely with the NGO partners, and we also distribute the projects, and we act as the intermediary between the client and the annotator. So, this means that we can assure payment, ensure training, and also ensure that we are very much

aware of the number of hours that we are distributing to our annotators, so we are able to safeguard safe working hours and payment on time.

We also have a beneficiary advisory board, and this is really key for us because this is a board which consists of people working as annotators for us. We meet with them monthly, and we also have ongoing conversations with them throughout the month, it is a chance for them to directly have their voice heard and to raise any concerns.

Now, when we talk about micro work, often the concerns are raised in relation to some more kind of global platforms, which are open access platforms where the worker is essentially communicating directly with the client. And here we can sometimes have challenges in terms of workers being paid on time, workers being paid fully for the amount of time that they have put in. Also, we know that workers spend a lot of time searching for work, and obviously, when they are searching for work on these platforms, they are not paid for that time searching.

So, I truly believe that at Humans in the Loop, we cut out many of those challenges, but I do think we also have a role to support our annotators as they look to expand their portfolios and potentially engage with some of those platforms. It is definitely something that our annotators are interested in. And at the moment we are having conversations with some of those platforms about how we can work in a way that opens up more opportunities for people affected by conflict, but at the same time ensures that they have a safe working environment that pays them for their work and where they can have a voice.

In relation to people taking the next step on from micro work, I think engagement with wider freelancing opportunities is a great opportunity for people to do that. In addition, at Humans in the Loop, we do offer a number of more advanced IT skills courses around business analytics, programming, and graphic design, and we also offer a career counselling aspect which supports people to think about their career development and their next steps. So, I do think it is totally possible to move from micro work to more advanced careers. We very much see it as a stepping stone into the global digital economy, and we have support built around our workers to enable them to do that.

Saying that, I do also want to raise that there are a number of structural challenges here. So, in some regions, unfortunately, no matter how highly qualified someone is or how much they have the wish to move on to other work, it is very, very difficult. I would say this, particularly in relation to our beneficiaries in somewhere like Afghanistan, Syria, or Lebanon. Due to the context there, it is just very challenging for people to find legal work and often Humans in the Loop is one of the few opportunities that they have if they desire or are unable to leave the country.

► **Tom:**

Well, that sounds really good, and it leads me to my final question. With the increasingly rapid development of AI and the growing number of displaced persons in the world, what is your vision for the future?

► **Hester:**

For us at Humans in the Loop, we would love to expand the number of locations that we are working in, and obviously, alongside that to expand the number of clients that we are working with. For us, it is really important that not only are we providing support and work for people affected by conflict, but that we are also contributing to the AI sector in a really beneficial way. And by that, I mean firstly, that we are supporting AI for good. So that is AI that is developed to make a social impact. For example, some of these accessibility tools that I was talking about earlier and assistive technology, but also that by providing a diverse workforce, we are able to create AI models that reflect the true image of the world that we are living in, not just reflect a small cohort of people who typically work in the digital sector.

So, for us, I think it is really about expanding our global locations and working with more clients and partners to ensure that we have access to work for people affected by conflict. And we are developing AI, which is diverse and reflects the diversity of our world. In relation to some of the systematic challenges that I mentioned earlier, I think there is definitely work to be done in relation to people in conflict zones or who have been displaced by conflicts, and access to work. One of the really key parts of this is employers and companies and doing good business, and that is not just about making a profit, but it is also about looking at social impact when we hire people and when we do our business. And I really hope that as we move on into 2024 and beyond, and that we have an increasing movement of businesses that are working together to think about the social impact that they can make.

At Humans in the Loop, we are really excited to be a B corporation, a benefit corporation, which means that we are certified to have good working conditions and to take our social and environmental impact into consideration. We are very excited to work with other corporations who have similar impact missions to see how we can make a change for the better in our world and support people affected by conflict.

In terms of a very concrete answer, I think, for me, that is especially around companies looking at refugee talent and the talent of people who have been displaced by conflict, and thinking about how these people can realistically fit into their organization and how they can offer the flexibility and willingness to support people who perhaps are in locations or areas where it might be quite challenging for them to access meaningful work.

► **Tom:**

Hester, that was great. Really, really good interview. I want to thank you very much for your valuable insights on this rapidly developing prospect.

From what we have heard today, AI can definitely be a force for good. That is something that can help us help people in this area, and make sure that their working conditions are both decent and good for their livelihoods.

I am Tom Netter and you have been listening to the PROSPECTS podcast series: Promoting decent work in the digital economy. If you want to hear more from Hester and other speakers on decent work prospects for refugees and host communities in the digital economy, connect to the ILO Prospects Series podcast at www.ilo.org/gigeeconomypodcast. Meanwhile, I hope you found this podcast interesting, and I thank you for your time.