

Bringing digital skills and jobs for youth in rural areas and refugees in Turkana, Kenya

Podcast host: Thomas Netter

Welcome to the new ILO podcast series PROSPECTS, promoting decent work in the digital economy. I'm your host, Tom Netter, and today we're going to talk about skills for jobs in the platform economy and how we can promote demand-driven upskilling and re-skilling for young refugees and host communities. As the so-called digital transformation increases across the world, so does the need for digital workers. The impact of digital technology on employment is a given in the high-speed internet and cloud computing world. But what about areas that are remote, off the grid, and maybe even lack a reliable source of electricity?

And with us today to discuss one way of accomplishing this is June Helderle, co-founder of the nonprofit organization Learning Lions, which is an implementing partner of the PROSPECTS programme that works to empower underserved young people, including those in refugee communities. She was a recent participant in a [Learning Lab discussion](#), and from what I hear, she has a fascinating story to tell. June, welcome to the podcast. You were recently part of an ILO Learning Labs panel discussion on digital skills and connected jobs, and I'd like to talk about that. But first, can you give us a brief introduction to your Learning Lions group and why the name Learning Lions and why Kenya?

Hi. Yes, Tom. Thank you so much for having me today. Learning Lions we are a nonprofit training center located in the most remote part of Kenya in Turkana. We're completely off the grid, but able via solar and Starlink to provide internet and electricity to power our coworking space as well as our training spaces. And as for our name, Learning Lions, and how it came about, well, one of our main goals is to build freelancers because they can do this work from anywhere and be able to be here in Turkana. So, we wanted the lion because it's a very majestic animal and it's also very fierce. And to be a successful freelancer, you really need to have that drive and that "upfrontness" that it takes. As a freelancer, you also need to present yourself beautifully as well.

Thanks. So how does your work there help young people acquire IT skills for work? Are you talking about training people to be coders and bearing in mind that you operate from a pretty underserved remote area of Kenya, like Turkana, is this a realistic goal? How could you ensure that a secure, reliable internet connection and power supply is available for this training?

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It's been a process. I mean, we've been doing this now since about 2015, and every year we learn more and we get more stable. When we first started, we barely had a cell tower connection, and when we moved to our even more remote campus, the cell tower, we actually had to have one, we had one built last year. And the introduction of Starlink has helped with that stability. But as for work for the students, I mean, we have students that have graduated a program and are successfully supporting themselves on their freelancing. Some still live on campus, some live in Lodwar, some have gone to Nairobi and other areas, but many in the most have stayed around their families. I mean, our programs, when we bring students in, we're really aiming to get them digitally literate. We know that not everybody is going to be a web developer, not everybody is going to be a programmer, a graphic designer, but what we do know is that you need digital skills for almost any decent paying job these days.

So, many of our students have never touched a keyboard when they come here. Many haven't even had access to a smartphone. They're still on flip phones. So, we're making the most of these resources and all of our students graduate digitally literate. They have email addresses, they know how to send them, they work on their soft skills. And then those that show that drive that's needed to be a freelancer are invited into our second level program and really then start to specialize in being either down the technical track of something like system administration, web development, backend development, or in more of a creative track as an animator or graphic designer.

► **Tom:**

June, you mentioned the drive that the people you're working with have. What is the motivation of the people that you're training? Does this training in IT skills provide a stepping stone to other forms of employment? And also what are your views in general on the pros and cons of platform work?

► **June:**

So, the drive that these students need is, well, they need jobs. In Turkana, there are jobs. You can be a pastoralist, you can be a basket weaver, you could get into a government job or a shopkeeper, but those are often very full and you're waiting for somebody either to step down or pass away or find that connection into a government job. So, the drive here is for income. There's also the fact that they can be independent. Most people in Kenya work many side jobs, many hustles as they call them. It's the hustle nation. Everybody's doing what they can to get food on their table for their family, help support their siblings to go to school or help support themselves, go to school.

So, there's a drive when they start getting some of these gigs in, they see that this work is starting to pay off. I'm glad that we've just recently and thanks to the ILO really started introducing more microtasking, which then allows people even at a level that maybe they're not skilled enough to do Upwork work as a web developer, the microtasking work, as long as they know how to use the computer, then they're on their way to many of these microtasking jobs.

► **Tom:**

That's very interesting. You're equipping these young people with technical IT skills, but what about what you refer to as soft skills? What are these soft skills and what are the main benefits of acquiring them?

► **June:**

Yes. Well, the soft skills are just so integrally important to whether you're a freelancer or anything in life these days, any jobs where you're interacting with others. So, for us, it's time management and communication and making sure that the trainees really understand how important it is that when you have clients, you need to communicate with them. And even if it means that you're not going to make a deadline, at least communicate that. The worst thing ever is not making the deadline and not talking to your client as well. And some of this

came back from a lot of why we've revamped and, really, in every level of our training now really implement soft skills training is with our digital alliance agency that formed over the years of graduates coming together to work with both European and African clients. The most common complaint was we really love the work, but the communication and the timely delivery just wasn't there. So that's why we feel it's just so important for everybody to gain these skills.

► **Tom:**

That's very interesting. But I'd like to talk about women now. In some hosts and refugee communities, women aren't allowed to attend school and just a handful will go on to excel in science, technology, engineering, the arts and math, the so-called STEAM disciplines. So are there differences in training for women and men, and if so, how does this affect both their working and personal lives?

► **June:**

Thanks so much for that question. It's really important to me that we make sure that women and girls are getting the chance to have the opportunity to learn these skills. So many have been... if they have had the opportunity to go to school, they don't think that this is something that girls can do. And it reflects in the fact that only one in eight of our applications come from girls. So, we are doing a lot more to promote and let girls know that this is for them as far as allowing girls to come here, because we do live on our campus. So, we do have a safeguarding policy, we have a matron that makes sure that girls' needs are met, and then we are always happy to give reassurance to any parents to allow them to come for our initial training programme that they'll be here for six weeks.

Additionally, to help us with that low application rate, is our organization has built in collaboration with the Kenyan government, a girl's secondary school, which will open in January. This will eventually be a full STEAM school, but as we open, there will be a computer in every desk, and we'll be able to not only teach the Learning Lions curriculum through club programs in the afternoon, but in the morning or during regular classes, the teachers will learn and incorporate using the computers to help make their education even better and really enhance it.

So, these are some things that we're doing. And even the girls in this high school when they graduate, will be able to bypass our first two levels of training. If they don't opt to go off to college or university or trade school, they'll be able to train here and pursue their interest in graphic design, system administration, whichever it would be. But for girls for so long, they just don't think that these jobs in mathematics and engineering are for them. But more and more this myth is being dispersed and they're realizing, "Oh no, we can do this." So, it's really great for me to see as our numbers are growing within our girl community, and we even have a support, well, our group of tech dadas, which dada is sister in Swahili, and they really encourage the other girls and help support them through their journey here at Learning Lions and over at Loropio High School.

► **Tom:**

Well, that's very, very impressive. You mentioned that the Learning Lions are enabling individuals to work remotely for overseas companies and at the same time contribute to growth of the local economy. Can you tell us a bit more about this, and is this what you're talking about when you refer to preventing a brain drain to the cities?

► **June:**

Yes. The brain drain, I mean, the Turkana people being traditionally pastoralists, when they go off to, say, Nairobi or Kitale for school, many times they don't return back to the family. Part of that problem is there's no jobs here for them to do for the education that they've gained. The other problem, or is they get lured in by higher pay in the city and other things. So, we're not bringing those skill sets back here to within the community. Through

Digital Lions, they were able to work with our volunteer community and went out and promoted and we're able to start getting some gigs abroad in both Europe and the States.

But additionally, we do shoot to, I mean, Africa being the fastest growing continent, we need people here have needs to be fulfilled as well with the skill sets that our students are learning. So, by being able to be a freelancer, and in a way it's a good thing after COVID, COVID really shows that people can work outside of the office and be just as productive and produce just as good as work. So that's kind of helped our initiative. People are more accepting now to hire somebody that they've never met face-to-face in person, maybe just on a video call and be able to see their work and really embrace the work and the tasks that they're doing for them, whether it be a webpage or an animation. Yeah.

► **Tom:**

Okay. Well, how in fact, do developmental partners support your model and can it help you to scale up and increase the impact of your work? And also, can you tell us a bit about your partnership with the ILO and overcoming what the ILO would call decent work deficits?

► **June:**

Yes. I mean, for us, having partners to support us has been such a great benefit. For the most part, we were started by donations from the Bavarian State government and individuals in Europe. And for many years, that's how we supported and ran our trainings along with the fact that all of our co-founders work pro bono, and we have a large volunteer pool that helps out both remotely and by coming on site. So that's really helped us be able to scale up and do our program on quite a low budget. In recent years, we started working in different programs with GIZ, with the ILO. And for me, with the ILO, which we've been working with for the past year, they really helped us up our game on our freelancing skills. So, prior to this, we introduced the platforms and the ability to get there, but now we've been able to upscale our program to a very structured understanding of, "All right, step one, here's what you need to do. Here's how you build your reputation. Here's microtasking that you can work on in the meantime while you keep building your skillset and pursuing job."

Unfortunately, in freelancing, there's a lot of rejection before you get that approval. So, helping bridge some of these gaps and give them an intermediate skillset with the microtasking while they're able to build up and then have some of the higher earning jobs in the other specialized areas just has been so important. And so I mentioned the freelancing, the microtasking portion as well. So, we've really started thanks to the ILO and with their collaboration to develop some of these programs and make it available not only to the students that have gone through the program sponsored by ILO, but all of our entire alumni community is now benefiting from this, which is really wonderful.

► **Tom:**

Well, we've covered a lot of ground here. So, to wrap up, June, I'd like to ask you one final question. What is your vision for the future and can decent work be realized in the digital economy and platform work in your experience?

► **June:**

I think that yes, absolutely. People here in Kenya can hone their skills and be a contributing part and a successful part of the digital economy. 25 years ago, India came in, started working call centers around the world and doing different technologically skill sets. They have grown so fast and their skills have grown up that now they actually, it's hard to get somebody from India, because they all have jobs. What we need to do, we're going to fill that gap with Kenyans, and actually even more than Kenyans, hopefully we spread throughout Africa as well, which brings me to our vision.

Our vision is, right now, Learning Lions is still kind of in a prototype stage with our campus and everything. And as we work out some of the problems here, we hope to at least spread to at least two more locations within Kenya. And we have a number of partners that would really like us to come to Uganda and South Sudan and Congolese, and those are just a few of the places. So, hopefully over the next couple of decades, we will slowly grow and expand to these other locations so that we can meet the needs of really the most underserved. We won't be ever basing ourselves in big cities. Our goal is to hit the most underserved people who are off the grid, but in today's world, that we can find these solutions to really help them be part as little or as much as they want with the technology age.

▶ **Tom:**

June, that is really an amazing story, and I want to thank you so much for sharing your really quite eye-opening insights with us today.

▶ **June:**

Thanks, Tom. Anytime.

▶ **Tom:**

So, if you want to hear more from June and other speakers, connect to the [ILO Learning Lab series](#) on decent work prospects for refugees and host communities in the online digital economy. So that's it for now. Stay tuned for our next podcast coming soon. Meanwhile, I hope you found this podcast interesting, and thank you for your time.