



► Episode 3

Inclusion is good for business: *Private sector practices to include refugees and host communities in the digital economy*

Guest speaker: Giselle Gonzales, Founder of EqualReach

Podcast host: Thomas Netter

► Tom:

Welcome to the new ILO podcast series PROSPECTS, “Promoting decent work in the digital economy”. I am your host, Tom Netter, and today we are going to talk about emerging practices that can improve access to platforms and working conditions for refugees and host communities. This is very relevant today, in a world where digital technology is creating new opportunities for work, including for forcibly displaced persons seeking a livelihood. But there is also a caveat: Can these new digital jobs and platform work be inclusive, with good labour protection, and fair and decent work? And if this is possible, how do we get there?

The [PROSPECTS Opportunity Fund project “Promotion, inclusion and protection of refugees and host communities in the gig economy”](#), implemented jointly by the ILO and UNHCR, recently addressed this issue in the fourth episode of their ongoing [Learning Lab Series](#). What we learned is that, well, we have a lot to learn about what is meant by emerging practices. We need to find out what works, why it works, who it works for—and who is providing fair work for refugees and displaced persons and their host communities.

So, here to enlighten us on a novel approach to this issue is Giselle Gonzalez, founder, and CEO of the UK-based social enterprise [EqualReach](#) and a recent panelist on the Learning Lab, organized by the ILO in collaboration with UNDP, to highlight emerging practices that are helping to improve working conditions and access to platform work.

Giselle, welcome to the podcast. You have impressive credentials in the private sector in web services with giant companies and have founded the social enterprise EqualReach. So, before we get into [the] particulars of your organization's work, what motivated you to leave the corporate world and get into social impact-driven organizations?

► Giselle:

Well, thanks for having me, Tom. While I spent the last few years working in the corporate world, my work with refugees and social impact began about eight years ago. I was working part-time as a freelancer myself and got tasked to travel Europe's refugee route from Greece to Germany. This was in 2015/2016 during the Syrian crisis, and it was when Germany opened up its borders to a million refugees.

I learned two valuable lessons from that experience. One is that these were highly competent and skilled individuals whose desire to provide for their families was not erased despite their displaced status. And two, that technology was having an increasingly important role in the crisis, with creative entrepreneurs and technologists building solutions to support refugees in their new context. So, fast-forward to four years ago during my master's, my research was focused on the emergence of digital work among forcibly displaced people.

The more I learned, the more I felt like this was a no-brainer. You have digitally native young people with marketable skills who are seeking work and purpose, and yet they face countless invisible barriers, restricted from working locally, unseen, or even barred from participating in the local or the digital economy, due to platform or payment solution access that frankly I often took for granted.

So, when I started working in the corporate world and realized that my team - and even I - had ownership over the very projects that refugees were struggling to access, I knew there was an opportunity to bridge those two worlds.

► **Tom:**

Okay. Thank you for that introduction. Team-based work of refugees and host communities seems to be central to the work of EqualReach. So, why is this so important and how is the private sector engaged?

► **Giselle:**

So, EqualReach is an impact-sourcing hub that connects teams of skilled and vetted tech talent from displaced communities with dignified digital work. So, think of a Fairtrade version of a freelancing marketplace, but for pre-vetted teams with a responsible sourcing framework to prevent exploitation. This ideally makes it easier for companies to send work to refugees and host community talent.

A solution like this is important because there are currently over 117 million forcibly displaced people in the world, over half of which are youth. I see this as a massive untapped talent pool, and, meanwhile, you have rapid digitization that is transforming nearly every industry, driving more and more companies to outsource beyond their local talent pools.

So, I see two sides of the same coin here, and what I am building with EqualReach is to solve one problem with the other. I think the private sector has a role to play because livelihood creation is a unique interception point to systems of conflict. To foster sustainable self-reliance, aid alone is not quite enough. Displaced communities need work opportunities and for that we need the private sector engaged.

There is a focus on team-based work because when you are a refugee, the odds are already so stacked against you. Sometimes someone might have a degree or even a pile of training certificates, but no earnings to show for it because they just need that first opportunity.

Team-based work allows newly trained individuals to gain experience in a safe environment without sacrificing the quality of the overall product. This is because they are working alongside more experienced team members and mentors who provide hard and soft skill support that they need to succeed.

► **Tom:**

Well, one of the things that makes your experience so unique is that your background includes working for Amazon Web Services and now founding a social enterprise. So, how does your experience help you realize your goals with platform workers? And, in addition to Amazon, who are some of the other global players who are hiring people for platform work, including refugees and displaced persons?

► **Giselle:**

To your first question, while EqualReach's model was born from research, my experience building impact-sourcing solutions from within the private sector over the last three years helped root that theory in actual impact. It showed me firsthand how sending work to refugees can deliver both social and business value.

And to your second question, there is a growing list of Fortune 500 companies already pledging to employ refugees, but these commitments largely revolve around full-time hires. I just want to reiterate that this is incredible and I want to see more of this, but I also have to hold that full-time employment with a company in another country may only be an option for the 0.001% of those lucky enough to, one, be in a host country where they can formally work for that company, and two, have the networks to even be seen by those companies.

So, EqualReach is filling a unique gap because few companies even realize that sending work to displaced communities for platform or project-based work is an option. For example, when I first met with executive leadership about this model at Amazon with data showing how we are exceeding business targets and enabling

a team of refugees to earn four to six times higher wages than the highest-paying local jobs, the first question that I got was: "Why are we not doing this sooner?"

And for those who do know it is an option, I found that it is really not a lack of interest, but simply not knowing how to do it, because there are very few well-trodden paths for them to follow.

► **Tom:**

Well, I think that leads me to a question: Why Amazon Web Services and other big corporations are engaged in these emerging practices in the first place? What do you think encouraged them to invest in this kind of activity if other big enterprises are not doing it? Is it to show good CSR, get good media coverage, or provide positive things to put in their annual report? And was there a business motivation or model behind it?

► **Giselle:**

I mean, speaking from my own experience, this work did not begin in a boardroom or with the PR team. Rather, it simply came from a real business need that my own team had under my own area of ownership, and a genuine curiosity to discover what would happen if I offered this work to talent that the world often overlooks. So, I collected data on the status quo. I built a pilot in collaboration with the International Trade Center and proved the business and social value of this model within our normal business operations.

For the last three years, this has been providing work to refugee talent in two of the world's largest refugee camps. But this has not been featured in any big campaign media coverage, or CSR PR, well, beyond an annual report from the ITC, because I think it felt less like a CSR initiative than just a no-brainer to the business. It was not a matter of giving something up, but instead, I think it was really received as a win-win for all. That being said, I think we should be talking more about this because I think it represents an important change in how we can think about CSR.

My takeaway overall from working with big companies is that the vast majority of people within these companies want to do good in the world through their work. They just do not necessarily know how or realize that they have the power to. Yet within every large company, there are decision-makers wielding power within their own operational processes and budgets.

And something special happens when you give those decision-makers the same aha moment that I had, that a solid business and social impact could be delivered via the work that is already within their control. I left my senior role at Amazon to build EqualReach because, outside of my day job, I was getting emails every other week from people like this who wanted to use their positions and projects for good.

► **Tom:**

That is very interesting. Can you tell us a bit more about your work in Africa and the teams at EqualReach will be working with including their composition and the demographics?

► **Giselle:**

Sure. So, my research on digital work among refugees began in the MENA region, but I have had the pleasure of working with displaced and host community talent in Africa for the last three years.

EqualReach is currently onboarding our first 10 teams of refugee and host community talent from around the world. But I am excited to be kicking off projects in East Africa, specifically in Kenya and Ethiopia because there are so many great existing partners in this region. We are vetting and working with teams that specialize across a range of low to high-complexity digital skills, from digital marketing to AI training and annotation work to full-stack web development.

And I love that you asked about the team's composition because that is actually also something else we are doing differently. EqualReach is intentionally working with teams comprised of 50 to 70% displaced talent and

30 to 50% talent from the host community. This is because it is important to foster social cohesion and have shared rewards so that one group is not pitted against the other.

We are also asking that teams be comprised of 50% women within the first 12 months. There is this ramp-up period because the reality is that in the context we are working in, there are often fewer women who are already in that upskilling pipeline for digital work. So, I want to be able to incentivize organizations to invest more in the inclusion of women.

► **Tom:**

Well, in that context and elaborating on that, in terms of platform work and refugees, we are beginning to see some emerging practices such as facilitating access to work, reducing work-related risks and costs, and improving the quality in terms of work, and providing people with opportunities to acquire these skills and expertise. So, how do these practices help address income disparities, enhance digital skills, and improve social inclusion and protection? What has been your experience in this area?

► **Giselle:**

I mean, it is a complex question and there is a quote that I love that goes, "For every complex problem, there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong." I know many skilled economists and researchers have dedicated their careers to answering that question. But to synthesize maybe my clear, simple, and wrong summary of how that all fits together, I like to picture it in the context of a flywheel.

So, the more digital and economic inclusion you unlock for displaced and host communities, the more income and experience-based upskilling is generated. This then fosters self-reliance with jobs created and funnels a pipeline of diverse talent to the private sector, which in turn, bolsters regional economies.

All of this activity incentivizes new companies and international organizations to start sending digital work to displaced and host communities. And then governments are incentivized to invest in their upskilling and digital inclusion. So, this brings us back to the start of the system where the more work that is funnelled to these marginalized communities, the faster this flywheel spins.

To root this in a real-world example, the earnings from some of the digital work projects that we have done over the last few years have given displaced talent in Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps enough to not only pay for their children's education and plan for their future but also to invest in computers and internet packages to be self-reliant.

Many of them have even started their own businesses like internet cafes, where they are now teaching others in the camp how to access digital work. Other team members have leveraged their experience to secure work locally, yet still participate in some of these digital projects to supplement their income.

► **Tom:**

So, has addressing these emerging practices allowed you to scale up your activities?

► **Giselle:**

Yeah. I mean, working with stakeholders across the public and private sectors over the last few years has allowed me to see several versions of this model play out, and it has given me a clear understanding of which approaches truly benefit displaced and host communities, though I know there is still plenty to learn.

There are so many great organizations applying these practices as they work to upskill, support, and prepare talent for the digital economy. But what EqualReach is doing is then building the market connections to funnel work to these teams, because the demand is already there with a growing list of projects from the private sector.

I am simply trying to build as fast as I can to now connect these teams with these opportunities at a global scale. I am looking at non-equity funding routes to help expedite our growth with the expectation that EqualReach is built to be self-sustaining.

► **Tom:**

There have been some recent developments in Kenya, a country where you started work with refugees a couple of years ago involving the ability to purchase SIM cards. Do you see this as a game changer for displaced people, refugees, and others?

► **Giselle:**

Yeah. So, to my understanding, there have long been informal workarounds to this, but the real game changer here is the formal recognition, because the more you bring these practices into the light, removing digital inclusion barriers with proper backing from governments and legal structures, the easier it is for businesses to say yes to working with refugees.

► **Tom:**

Thanks for that. So, let us conclude. Taking a sustainable approach that transcends social-oriented initiatives translates into something described as showing that big is not good unless big does good. Would you care to elaborate on that phrase? Is this, doing good for refugees and displaced persons and their host communities, part of your vision for the future?

► **Giselle:**

Yes. So, the plight of forcibly displaced people is arguably the biggest humanitarian crisis of this century. And with rising global conflict and the impacts of climate change already being felt around the world, I think we need every stakeholder to have a seat at the table and use their position, scale, and power for good. Big is not good unless big does good, and this means businesses, governments, academia, funders, and more.

I guess the point that I want to drive home is that every one of us is in a seat of power, but we have to first recognize the opportunity within our own worlds to drive change, to lean in with curiosity, and actually do something about it.

One of the ways big does good is by disrupting systems of conflict and poverty through sustainable livelihood creation. This means empowering the private sector to source impactfully with trust while providing life-changing income opportunities to displaced and host communities. That is my vision for the future.

► **Tom:**

Giselle, I am afraid that is all we have time for today, but this was really fascinating, and I want to thank you for your very valuable insights. And I just want to say that it is going to be on my mind the next time I place an online order for books and other items.

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 Giselle and other speakers on decent work prospects for refugees and host communities in the digital economy, connect to the ILO Prospects Series podcasts at www.ilo.org/gigeconomypodcast.

Meanwhile, stay tuned for our next podcast coming soon. I hope you found this podcast interesting, and I thank you for your time.