



## What Role for Cooperatives in Asia's Future of Work?

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For "Sowing the Seeds: Platform Cooperativism for Asia" Conference

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Greetings from the International Labour Office to the participants of the "Sowing the Seeds: Platform Cooperativism for Asia" Conference in Hong Kong.

I would like to start by commending the organizers for bringing workers' rights issues to the forefront in this conference. I also appreciate the "sowing seeds" metaphor used as the theme of this conference. In this video message, I want to highlight how seeds of platform cooperatives need decent work standards like they need clean air to help them grow into healthy, robust plants.

We need to create an enabling environment for these new seeds so they have enough sun and water to grow – namely conducive laws and supportive institutions. New regulation that provides the legal support for start-up and growth of new types of cooperatives needs to be developed and adopted with an eye for protection of the rights of workers, members and users of cooperatives. The laws are often running behind on emerging cooperatives like platform cooperatives and we need a whole new crop of legal experts who understand cooperatives and the digital economy. It would also be important that these legal experts are conversant in international labour standards.

In this regard, we may need to think of some cross-pollination to produce a hybrid of legal resource people who can navigate the platform cooperative realm from a decent work perspective. I would think it could start by bringing some labour lawyers working on future of work issues and gig economy worker rights together with legal experts specialized in cooperative laws. Following the principles of open access and creative commons a database of new laws that are conducive to the growth of platform cooperativism around the world would not only help those in Asia, but also in other parts of the world where such seeds need to be sown, like Africa, Latin America and Arab States.

Government institutions that provide support for growth of new types of cooperatives and new approaches to cooperatives are needed to protect these seeds and improve their resilience in the face of adverse conditions. Incubators in relevant departments in universities that recognize the social and institutional innovation involved in platform cooperativism would be needed. In addition, community

organizations, with inputs from those that are literate in navigating the digital economy would be welcome options.

Financing is a necessary fertilizer for platform cooperatives to grow. New finance mechanisms are emerging and expected to continue to emerge in response to the need for increased access to finance and financial services among cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy enterprises and organizations. We may opt for these new funding mechanisms either because of the lack of traditional funding opportunities, or because we prefer to be connected to alternative funding mechanisms. We can think of alternative financing as organic fertilizer.

Examples of these mechanisms, which are based on collective self-organization and cooperative principles, include ethical banking, community development banks, solidarity microfinance, complementary currencies, community-based savings schemes, participatory budgeting, crowdfunding, crypto-currencies, and social impact bonds, among others. These new financing mechanisms may not all be readily available for use by start-up cooperatives due to regulatory barriers or unreliability of the funding sources. We need to train ourselves on how these new funding schemes work so we are informed farmers who use the right kind and right amounts of the organic fertilizers for our seeds to grow.

We need to be cognizant of the diversity in type of platform cooperative seeds that are out there but also in the local and national environments that they grow in. We need to also keep in mind that Asia is one of the most diverse regions of the world. So avoiding a one size fits all approach would be good.

At the ILO we are interested in platform cooperativism in the service of addressing the changes facing the world of work today. How do cooperatives in general and platform cooperatives in particular respond to these challenges? What kind of seeds do we need to respond to these changes that are transforming the world of work like climate change, growing inequalities, technological changes, ageing populations, migration, refugees, and casualisation of work.

In urban areas, cooperatives exist in waste management, particularly among waste pickers who provide much needed services for improved waste management and recycling, but also integrate their members into waste management systems, and improve their access to occupational safety and health, training, and financial services. How can platform cooperativism help advance these workers' rights, negotiation power, and improve their representation and voice in such contexts?

There are good practices we can learn from. Groups of informal economy workers, like taxi drivers, homecare workers and domestic workers, have been devising online applications to eliminate the intermediaries in the platform economy, to share risks and benefits, strengthen representation and

increase negotiation power for better contracts. Gig economy workers are forming their own cooperatives in response to overcome the precariousness that is typical of their jobs. And of course not all seeds will make it into plants. There are valuable lessons to be learned from those that do not make it as well.

We also learn a great deal from individual case studies on platform cooperatives. At the ILO we would welcome research comparing outcomes between cooperative and non-cooperative forms of organization in the platform economy, relationship of platform cooperatives with trade unions and the emerging alliances for social dialogue in the platform economy.

In our research, we have found many cooperatives that provide childcare, elderly care, mental health care, and other care services. In a global mapping of care provision through cooperatives, we found that they encourage beneficiaries to actively participate in care plans that address their physical, mental, and social needs in a holistic manner. These cooperatives also provide better and fairer wages and benefits to workers, especially when they are members of the cooperative. In these cooperatives, women comprised most workers and members. How could the cross-fertilization of these initiatives with platform cooperativism help them grow?

In the light of the ageing populations in parts of Asia, especially in East Asia, such growth is needed. Could care cooperatives engage migrant and refugee populations in the provision of care? For migrant workers, there are cooperative options providing low-barrier entry to formal jobs, entrepreneurship, and access social protection in the host countries. So far there are individual cases and country level experiences on how social cooperatives in host countries work with local governments and international organizations to serve migrants and refugees. These cooperatives provide a range of services like language training, housing, work placement and other social services for integrating refugees.

Construction cooperatives have hired refugees and migrants. Housing cooperatives have made room available for refugees. There are also instances of cooperatives of refugees being established in refugee camps with assistance from aid organizations in generating jobs and income. Refugees have also become members of host country cooperatives and have taken the knowledge and experience back to their countries of origin to rebuild their own communities. What kind of innovations can platform cooperatives bring into these experiences to help improve the resilience of refugee populations?

In overcoming obstacles to women's labour market integration and providing opportunities for improved livelihoods, cooperatives can have a positive impact. We have seen the emergence of women only cooperatives in a number of countries to help overcome social and cultural constraints. Women only cooperatives also emerge in sectors where women are the main producers in terms of

the gender division of labour like home-based workers. What are ways platform cooperativists can collaborate with such initiatives? I know presentations in this session will provide some answers.

Collaborations and solidarity are important and we need to know who is who when it comes to growing the seeds. Who are the farmers and the gardeners, and who are the bees and other pollinators?

At the ILO we welcome the opportunity to collaborate with you all. We congratulate you on the upcoming launch of the Platform Cooperativism Consortium, Hong Kong. We wish you a fruitful and dynamic two-days of exchanges.