

Digital Policy Hub – Working Paper

Envisioning, Designing and Operating a Gig Economies Living Lab

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The Digital Policy Hub working papers are the product of research related to the Hub's identified themes prepared by participants during their fellowship.

Partners

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Key Points

- This working paper is the second in a series exploring the relevancy, urgency and possibilities of a collaborative approach to researching gig economies. A case study approach of living labs in action is used to provide an overview and analysis of possibilities and mechanisms to design, build and operate a Gig Economy Living Lab (GELL) that upholds and reinforces a worker-centred, intersectional and transnational research approach.
- To envision, design, build and operate collaborative living labs, there are several factors to think about, which, namely, fall under strategy and governance. Strategy includes stakeholder engagement and relationship management, as well as identifying and building shared values, and developing mutual goals and objectives. Governance involves aspects such as funding and financial management, leadership and organizational structures, as well as impact assessment and evaluation of research outputs.
- Ultimately, what is disruptive about the GELL is not only its purpose, but also the process of developing a strategy and governance framework that does not marginalize or undermine gig workers in favour of tech companies or “expert” knowledge producers, or reinforce global power hierarchies between the Global North and Global South in terms of funding and leadership roles.
- This process can only be achieved through a dynamic, consensus-based, open, transparent and iterative process, where strategy and governance frameworks are grounded in worker-centred, intersectional and transnational approaches.
- The GELL is not meant to be a one-size-fits-all model, but instead is one that can take various forms depending on the stakeholders involved, the objectives they outline and the governance structure they uphold.

Introduction: Why a GELL?

What does it take to envision, explore and experiment with innovative policies, practices and solutions for emerging challenges in the gig economy? Who would be considered an expert, and whose knowledge would be legitimate when it comes to policy design and implementation? Whose voices will be heard at the table, and who is invited to join that table in the first place? Are there possibilities for alternative spaces to exist and different narratives to be centred? Are there alternative ways to conduct research on global labour market transformations, especially within this digitalized economy?

This working paper is the second in a series that explores the relevancy, urgency and possibilities of a collaborative approach to researching the emerging digital economy. The first paper in the series presented the proposition for a GELL model that potentially serves as a hub and space for multi-stakeholder research, data gathering, cooperation, engagement and innovation. The vision for the GELL model is that it would bring together researchers, academics, policy makers, private sector companies, gig workers, unions, international organizations and government representatives. The involvement of workers, unions, cooperatives and other labour organizations would offer alternative ways of defining and classifying workers and their diverse needs through a worker-centred approach. This approach

also provides the opportunity for using an intersectional lens that considers the various structural barriers, issues, struggles and oppressions faced by workers, along with their lived experiences. Lastly, it creates the space and opportunity for a transnational perspective, whereby stakeholders at various local and global levels can collaborate and connect over issues and initiatives beyond material borders.

Building on the proposition for an alternative research framework, this paper presents an overview and analysis of possibilities and mechanisms to design, build and operate a GELL that upholds and reinforces a worker-centred, intersectional and transnational research approach. The first section begins with an overview of existing literature on the living lab concept, to explain what living labs are, how they are designed and managed, and their contributions to various economic and social issues. The second section of the paper presents two case studies of living labs in both the Global North and Global South context that focus on labour, sustainability and economic development. The case studies demonstrate that to envision, design, build and operate such a model, there are several factors to think about, such as engaging stakeholders and managing relationships while identifying mutual goals and shared values, and developing clear objectives. These factors also include securing funding and managing finances, building non-hierarchical leadership and organizational structures, and developing frameworks to assess impact and evaluate research outputs. These aspects fall under two main realms, namely, strategy and governance.

Overview: What Are Living Labs?

A living lab can be defined as a methodology for applied research and a way to prototype, experiment and validate research in real-life settings (Ballon and Schuurman 2015). Usually, projects are housed in a university institution and involve scholars, researchers, practitioners and various stakeholders including government representatives, private sector actors and policy makers. Living labs are, therefore, meant to provide the space for multi-stakeholder engagement and collaboration based on shared values and mutual goals (ibid.). Due to the dynamic nature of the living lab, research activities are designed to be interactive, innovative, practical, efficient, strategic and inclusive. Considering the various expertise, backgrounds and diverse skills of people participating in a living lab, it becomes a hub for knowledge production, research, innovation, experimentation and ongoing dialogue.

Living labs are prevalent in the European context, and much of the existing literature explores their emergence and evolution over the past few decades (Hossain, Leminen and Westerlund 2019). The concept of a living lab builds on legacies of cooperative design, social experiments and field trials, and digital city initiatives in European countries (Ballon and Schuurman 2015). There is no one clear definition or structure of a living lab; instead, there are various types that exist and different methodologies and processes used to operate and govern them (Leminen and Westerlund 2019). The phenomenon of living labs remains a practice-driven model, with more research and analysis needing to be done regarding its theoretical and methodological underpinnings (Ballon and Schuurman 2015). Despite being historically centred in European cities,

living labs are becoming more global, especially with the expansion of multi- and cross-regional partnerships and initiatives. There are various examples of living labs, especially in urban cities of the Global North, with many of them focused on sustainable urban development, environmental and energy research, agricultural development, technology and innovation, health care and poverty alleviation.

Some of the literature discusses the ways in which the impact of living labs is measured, in terms of direct and indirect outputs on the researchers, policy makers and communities involved (Schliwa et al. 2015). Direct impacts include job creation and financial indicators, which are mostly economic-based results and are easier to measure than indirect impacts such as long-term social and environmental transformations that are harder to capture or quantify (ibid.). Another indirect impact of living labs is the transfer and mobilization of experiential and multi-stakeholder knowledge across and beyond their own network (ibid.). Ultimately, it remains challenging to measure and account for the impact and success of living labs in producing disruptive research, but with the evolution of the living lab model, there are growing insights on how to develop effective evaluation frameworks.

Methods: Case Studies of Living Labs in Action

To explore the feasibility and relevance of living labs in the context of gig work, this paper uses a case study methods approach to provide a critical analysis of the living lab model. The case studies are chosen to explore the mechanisms, structures, processes and outputs that would be useful and applicable when envisioning, designing, building and operating the GELL. For the purpose of this paper, two living labs were chosen on the basis of specific selection criteria, to ensure their relevance, adaptability and proximity to the proposed GELL model. The selection criteria focused on the living lab's main objectives, the main research approach utilized in their practice, and the geographic location of their stakeholders and projects.

Considering that the GELL focuses on economic and social issues related to labour markets, employment, poverty, workers' rights and global technology innovations, it was important to select living lab case studies that had economic and social issues as their main focus areas and objectives. In terms of the research approach, the GELL model is meant to highlight workers' needs and amplify their voices and stories in policy realms; therefore, the case studies selected were of living labs that used a human-centred research approach and involved diverse stakeholders and community members. Lastly, with the proposition that the GELL is to be a transnational model that disrupts global hierarchies, the living labs chosen had to be regional or global in scale and represent not only the Global North but also the Global South perspective.

There were two living labs that fit this selection criteria. The first is the Platform Work Inclusion Living Lab (P-WILL), which aims to "build a pan-European interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary multistakeholder network including policymakers, industry leaders, civil society organisations, designers, researchers, and the main initiatives happening at the international level, to foster the upsurge of alternative scenarios in the

frame of platform work.”¹ The second living lab is the Project Urban Living Lab (PULL) in India, which is a joint initiative between India and Denmark that is supported and funded by several government agencies. PULL’s objective is “to co-create, design and test people-centric, sustainability solutions to help create cities that we want to live in.”²

Living Lab Models: Strategy and Governance Frameworks

Strategy and governance emerge as two key factors to consider when envisioning a living lab model. Both case studies demonstrate the importance of upholding a strategy to engage and build collaborative relations among multiple and diverse stakeholders as a means to identify mutual goals and outline objectives and outputs. In order to achieve these strategic objectives and engage stakeholders, the case studies highlight the significance of governance frameworks that secure funding for the living lab, manage its finances, institute leadership and organizational structures for operating it, and develop mechanisms for measuring its outputs.

In the case of P-WILL, while the living lab is Europe-based, its membership extends beyond Europe and involves various international experts from other regions. Forming, building and launching P-WILL involved conducting a stakeholder mapping exercise to identify the actors and institutions associated with the emerging platform economy. These stakeholders were organized into four main categories: platform users, organizations and non-governmental organizations supporting workers in formal or informal collectives, policy regulators and platform companies. Other stakeholders include the media, which shapes the mainstream narrative on platform work, as well as academics and researchers whose expertise and inquiries shape knowledge on the platform economy. This inception process and the subsequent goals, outputs and governance structure were all outlined in a memorandum of understanding (MoU) shared across the membership and on the organization’s website.

P-WILL’s main objectives are to respond to the questions and challenges of defining platform work in an inclusive and holistic way that captures ongoing economic, social and technological transformations. The organization’s expected deliverables are mapped out across several years and are connected to its core strategic objectives, which are outlined on its website:

- To discuss and critique current elements of the discourse on platform work, incorporating an intersectional feminist approach and proposing a richer and inclusive definition of the phenomenon.
- To favour an interdisciplinary social and technical approach to PE [platform economy].
- To develop a deeper understanding of the impact of the expansion of the PE connected to COVID-19 on traditionally excluded collectives.
- To foster transdisciplinary PE action-oriented evidence-based outcomes closing the gap between society, science, industry and policymaking through co-creation

1 See <https://pwill.eu/what-is-p-will/>.

2 See <https://urbanlivinglabindia.org/>.

of novel, bottom-up ideas to challenge and improve policymaking institutions recommendations, alternative platform design models and technical design guidelines.

- To establish grounds for further research development heeding The European Pillar of Social Rights and SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals], strengthening European research and innovation capacities.³

In the case of PULL, the activities of the living lab are supported by several locally and globally based organizations, including Oxford Policy Management, which is a global policy think tank that works with low- and middle-income countries on policy solutions for economic growth and poverty reduction; and the Energy and Resources Institute, which is another locally based non-profit organization dedicated to offering green and clean energy solutions. PULL also received knowledge support from Ramboll, a global engineering, architecture and consultancy company that offers expert solutions to governments and companies worldwide. Through an MoU between these multiple stakeholders, PULL was founded in 2019 as this collaborative effort, and since 2022 has been operated by Transitions Research, a local research organization that focuses on the interplay between technology, society and sustainability in transition processes.

PULL's strategic objective, as outlined on its website, is to test socio-technical innovation to co-create solutions with urban communities. Its main goals are to:

- work towards helping cities address sustainability and liveability by integrating global and local solutions[.]
- bring global solutions to Indian cities using the sandbox approach [and]
- enable the smooth implementation of the Smart Cities Mission.⁴

Its core functions involve learning about and creating knowledge around urban issues using multi-disciplinary approaches; reviewing, designing and customizing global solutions to the needs of governments, private actors and policy institutions; engaging residents to participate in urban planning processes through co-creating collaborative spaces; and testing local and global solutions by experimenting through a sandbox. The sandbox is a model designed to help stakeholders identify, design, cater, apply, test and adjust solutions according to local demands and urban issues at hand.

In both cases, implementing these strategic objectives requires governance frameworks that include securing stable and long-term funding to provide financing and resources for research activities and knowledge mobilization. In the case of P-WILL, it is supported through COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology), which is a funding agency for research and innovation networks under the umbrella of the European Union. There are several grants dedicated for various activities done by the living lab, with funding also available for website design and external communications, among other items in the budget. With many of the stakeholders involved being from Europe, P-WILL was able to secure EU funding that seeks to support regional-level development.

³ See <https://pwill.eu/what-is-p-will/>.

⁴ See <https://urbanlivinglabindia.org/>.

In the case of PULL, funding for the lab came from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Royal Danish Embassy in New Delhi under the Green Strategic Partnership between Denmark and India. PULL is hosted by the Imagine Panaji Smart City Development Limited, a government-owned company created by the state of Goa to bring about the development of smart urban infrastructural facilities/projects for Panaji, the state capital.⁵ This is an example of transnational partnerships among governments of different states, and collaborations between Global North and Global South entities toward achieving global SDGs.

To manage the finances of a living lab, as well as its regular operations, both P-WILL and PULL instituted clear organizational structures with leadership roles. For instance, P-WILL is governed through a multi-scalar network involving leadership positions such as chair and co-chair, grants and communications managers, and international experts. Part of the governance body is a management committee that oversees the work of the leadership team and working group leaders, and an international team of experts who serve as consultants. There are also five working groups, which members can choose to join, with each one having its own focus and proposed outputs. Each of these working groups is led by a leader or two, and they decide their own workplans, activities, and internal communication and reporting processes. The first working group is focused on “platform work inclusive holistic framework exploration”; the second one on “organisational and platform work models”; the third on “digital technologies and data models”; the fourth on “mobilisation, regulation and policy strategies”; and the fifth on “transdisciplinary outcomes and impact evaluation.” The working groups collaborate with each other in research, mapping, literature review, design, implementation and evaluation activities. As for PULL, the core leadership team that manages and oversees its activities consists of representatives from all its stakeholder institutions, one of them being the director of transitions research.

Having a leadership model is not only useful for operating the living lab, but also for assessing outputs and evaluating impact. For example, on PULL’s main website and also on the Transitions Research page for the PULL initiative, there are reports, videos and success stories shared on PULL’s impact. Part of the model designed, implemented and shared by PULL involves evaluation and learning, and measuring the applicability, durability and usefulness of the model. Some of the significant impacts included creating liveable smart cities that integrate global solutions, enabling the delivery of projects by providing learnings from innovative experiments, and building knowledge on global practices for sustainable cities to be applied at a local scale.

P-WILL and PULL both present strategy and governance frameworks that are relevant and applicable in the context of envisioning, designing, building and operating a GELL. Both organizations had strategies that aimed to foster a space for multiple stakeholders to collaborate, discuss, think through and implement innovative solutions for contemporary social and economic issues and challenges. They both aimed to incorporate the knowledge of participants who were directly impacted by these policy experiments, such as the platform workers in the case of P-WILL, or the urban citizens in the case of PULL. The two living labs also aimed to provide critical, innovative and intersectional research that was inclusive of their participants’ and stakeholders’ diverse experiences and outlooks. In both cases, the collaboration that existed between globally and locally based organizations and

⁵ See <https://imaginepanaji.com/>.

representatives resulted in diverse networks, and the expansion and transfer of their outputs and impact through communities they worked with and beyond.

Applications to the GELL

To what extent is the living lab model, as analyzed through the case studies above, applicable, relevant and useful for envisioning, designing, building and operating the GELL? As outlined in the first paper in this series, the purpose of the GELL is to work toward:

- integrating workers' voices, knowledge and experiences, specifically those who are marginalized within global governance frameworks and mainstream definitions of gig work;
- using an intersectional lens to account for gender, racial and material hierarchies among workers in various societies; and
- bridging the global divide in data and analysis by decentring the Global North and incorporating the knowledge, experiences and realities of the Global South and marginalized communities within the Global North.

Ultimately, the GELL is disruptive in both its purpose and its process of developing a strategy and governance framework that does not marginalize or undermine gig workers in favour of tech companies or “expert” knowledge producers, or reinforce global power hierarchies between the Global North and Global South in terms of funding and leadership roles. This can only be done through a dynamic, consensus-based, open, transparent and iterative process, where strategy and governance frameworks are grounded in worker-centred, intersectional and transnational approaches. In practice, this requires time, commitment, patience and dedication on the part of stakeholders. The GELL is not meant to be a one-size-fits-all model, but instead is one that can take various forms depending on the stakeholders involved, the objectives they outline and the governance structure they uphold.

Envisioning a GELL model — and ultimately designing, building and operating it — creates space for disrupting how the gig economy is researched globally and whose knowledge is legitimized or invisibilized. In order for the GELL to become a site for alternative research and policy design, it is important to form a worker-centred network and ground it in strong relationalities among all stakeholders involved. To do so, and to maintain these relationalities, there needs to be consensus on core values and strategic objectives. This foundational grounding work would make it easier to form a non-hierarchical structure, where local hubs within the GELL function co-dependently and collaboratively rather than compete over resources or governing power. Designing and building a GELL on the basis of these relationalities, grounding foundations and collaborative structure, has the potential to disrupt global divides in research on technology and labour in an ever-growing digital economy.

Recommendations

- **Multi-level stakeholder networks:** Due to the global, flexible and fluid nature of gig work, GELL stakeholders would include gig workers (broadly defined), labour groups or unions, non-profit organizations, private sector companies, researchers

and scholars, government representatives and global governance experts. Similar to other living lab models, the GELL would be hosted by a university or research institute that acts as an umbrella organization, and would consist of a global network of researchers/participants. A global think tank with multi-regional offices, operations and partnerships would open up the possibility for involving stakeholders from both the Global North and Global South. Alternatively, there are many universities that have research institutes focused on the future of work and they often partner with international scholars, researchers and organizations.

- **Diverse funding model:** Having a diverse stakeholder network potentially helps to secure multiple sources of funding and creates a safety net for the living lab by limiting dependency or reliance on specific funders. Funding for living labs, like other research organizations or think tanks, is usually provided by government bodies, regional or global aid agencies, or international financial institutions. In the case of P-WILL, it is the European Union that provides funding, and in the case of PULL, it is the Foreign Ministry of Denmark, which is similar to many other models that are funded primarily by Global North institutions. It is important to consider how global divisions and hierarchies in power and prosperity between Global North and Global South actors would be reinforced when it comes to applying for grants and the conditionalities potentially attached to the funding. In order for the GELL model to have fair, equitable and non-hierarchical funding, it becomes necessary to have a diverse funding model whereby multiple funders exist and there are clear boundaries that limit interventionist approaches.
- **Collaborative hub governance structure:** Being grounded in shared goals ultimately calls for a collaborative and cooperative governance and leadership model that brings together the various stakeholders, utilizes their diverse skills and expertise, and challenges mainstream hierarchies in knowledge production and policy-making spaces. As was clear in the case studies, living labs require a structure that involves strategic leadership, expert consultants, working group leaders, communication coordinators, funding managers and other roles as required. In the context of the GELL, having a global leadership team that is representative of both Global South and Global North stakeholders, along with working hubs led by local regional leaders, would encourage a more cooperative structure. In that sense, local hub leaders would be responsible for their own teams but would all share the strategic objectives and vision of the GELL, and would not feel pressured to compete or conform with other hubs. This hub model is similar to the working group models presented by P-WILL and would not just be centred on outputs and themes, but would also consider regional issues and contexts.
- **Societal impact evaluation frameworks:** All stakeholders, at different levels of engagement and responsibilities, are to be held accountable since it is important to have clear guidelines and pillars to measure the performance of the living lab and the impacts of its research outputs. As seen in the case studies, data and qualitative assessments are published in the form of reports or videos to demonstrate the living labs' interventions and innovations when it came to economic, social and technical issues. In the case of the GELL, impact evaluation would need to include short- and long-term outputs, the experiences of participants as well as communities involved, and overall contributions to societal justice in the emerging gig economy.

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About the Author

Laila Mourad is a Ph.D. candidate at York University where she is exploring how home-based labour in the gig economy can inform and shape our understanding of the evolving notions of “work” in the digital economy. She applies an interdisciplinary approach to her research of gender, labour and international development, and examines how existing and emerging technologies transform the ways in which household economies and social relationalities are envisioned, as well as their role in development. She is the co-founder of SWANA Collective, a group that aspires to cultivate alternative decolonial spaces in academia and beyond. During her fellowship with the Digital Policy Hub, Laila will examine how existing and emerging technologies transform economic activities.

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