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PLATFORM CAPITALISM, MIGRANT LABOR, AND URBAN SPACE

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This brief compiles the conclusions of the meeting "Platform Capitalism, Migrant Labor, and Urban Space," a joint initiative under the auspices of the Horizon Europe projects DIGNITYFIRM and INCA, which is promoted by CIDOB's Migration Area and the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Barcelona. The meeting was held on June 5, 2025, at CIDOB's headquarters in Barcelona. Summarizing the main contributions shared throughout the day, this publication offers material for reflection on the future of the platform economy with the aim of setting common guidelines that would improve current governance models and consolidate a fairer and more sustainable ecosystem.



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The platform economy is revolutionizing twenty-first-century societies, transforming industrial sectors and labor regimes, and even reshaping democratic institutions by altering power relations among public, private and social actors. This model has generated significant opportunities for economic growth, for opening new sectors, and for job creation but it simultaneously poses crucial challenges for the functioning of democracies and protecting core values like equality, transparency, participation, and workplace fairness. The dynamism of these platforms entails inherent contradictions because while energizing the economy, they can also exacerbate inequalities and precariousness. Given its overarching and intense nature, the phenomenon requires responses to first-order regulatory questions from different levels of government (local, national, European). A recent example reflecting the urgency of addressing these challenges through public policy is Directive (EU) 2024/2831 of the European Parliament and of the Council, aimed at improving working conditions in platform work.

In view of this complexity, CIDOB's Migration Area and the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Barcelona organized an interdisciplinary seminar building on the complementarity of two Horizon Europe projects: DIGNITYFIRM, focused on the working conditions of migrant workers in the platform economy (e.g., digital couriers in urban settings and agricultural day laborers in rural areas); and INCA, which analyzes the impact of large technology corporations (GAFAM) on urban life and models of democratic governance. Both initiatives, funded by the European Union, provide interrelating perspectives and comparative empirical data showing the ways in which platform capitalism reproduces inequalities, while also laying the groundwork for exploring solutions to rectify these imbalances.

Drawing on the contributions and results of these projects, an interdisciplinary seminar was convened with the aim of reflecting on the future of the platform economy by enabling discussion among experts, professionals, institutional actors, workers, trade unionists and activists.

This executive brief brings together the conclusions of the meeting of June 5, 2025, at CIDOB's headquarters in Barcelona with the aim of offering a rigorous basis for reflection and proposals. The structure of the document mirrors that of the seminar and is organized into three main thematic areas. First, it addresses the implications of digital platforms for the working conditions of migrants, and examines the inequalities faced by vulnerable groups in the digital labor market, and opportunities offered to them. Second, it analyzes the impact of the platform economy on the urban sphere and how the proliferation of platforms is transforming the functioning of cities, spatial dynamics, and everyday coexistence. Third, it explores alternatives to platform capitalism based on practical cases of initiatives seeking to reconcile technological innovation with social justice. Each thematic section summarizes the key ideas presented by the speakers on the corresponding panels, as well as contributions from the subsequent debates. The document therefore presents a critical diagnosis while also offering forward-looking guidance. Taken together, the conclusions collected here aim to identify general guidelines for improving current models of digital platform governance and to consolidate a fairer, more inclusive, and more sustainable European ecosystem in this sector.

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Platforms, inequality, and immigration

Over the last decade, the home-delivery sector has expanded at vertiginous rate both globally and in Spain. This growth has been driven by the digitalization of urban services, changing consumption habits, and the proliferation of digital platforms such as Glovo, Uber Eats, Urb-it, and Just Eat. Initially characterized mainly by people seeking to top up their income (in ways compatible with university studies or another job), the profile of the rider has progressively shifted toward a majority of migrants for whom delivery work has represented “the best of the worst options” for accessing the labor market, which would otherwise be out of reach due to structural limits, barriers, and/or scarcity of contacts. This shift contrasts with the dominant discourse promoted in Anglo-Saxon contexts, where the figure of the rider was initially presented as an autonomous micro-entrepreneur, a symbol of flexibility and entrepreneurial spirit, thereby obscuring the precarious conditions and exploitative dynamics characteristic of platform capitalism.

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This change is linked to the ease of access to platform work, which offers a rapid, albeit precarious, path to employment for migrants in irregular situations in which the irregularity may be due to lack of a residence or work permit, or absence of a formal contract. Common profiles include overstayers (people who have exceeded their visa duration), asylum seekers waiting for a work permit, and people whose application for international protection has been rejected and who fall into a situation of administrative irregularity. Economic need and the urgency of finding an immediate source of income make platform work an almost compulsory option, especially where other sectors (for example, agriculture) are less accessible and/or more hostile. A common practice among migrant workers is the use of rented accounts, through which they access digital platforms via profiles registered in the names of third parties, thus exposing themselves to greater levels of precariousness, dependency and legal vulnerability.

The intersection between the extreme flexibility of the platform labor market and the rigidity of the Spanish

This concept, developed by Yann Moulier-Boutang and taken up in recent literature, describes forms of employment that are not fully free, where migrant workers are trapped in labor relations that allow them to subsist but deny them fundamental rights. In this framework, labor and migration legislation do not act in isolation but come together to produce a segmented, vulnerable, and easily exploitable workforce.

Digital platforms have contributed to the production of this irregularity. Through strategies like rented accounts, bogus self-employment, illegal supply of labor, and aided by the evident ineffectiveness of identity controls (facial recognition, for example), they have fostered a system that externalizes legal risks onto workers. These practices are not marginal but structural. They allow platforms to maintain a reserve army of labor without accepting legal or contractual responsibilities. Permissive registration systems and lack of subsequent oversight reinforce this situation.

Platform work shapes a form of segmented integration. It allows migrants to access the labor market and have

an income but without guaranteeing social rights, legal stability, or institutional recognition. Such partial inclusion translates into persistent social exclusion. Riders who work can still be unable to access decent housing, banking services, union protection, or civic participation. In many cases, delivery becomes the only way into the labor market for people in precarious administrative situations.

The precariousness faced by migrant riders, and especially those in irregular administrative situations, is far-reaching and multidimensional. It includes legal insecurity (work without a visa or contract), economic exploitation (income below the minimum wage, irregular payments), lack of social protection, exposure to occupational accidents, discrimination, racism (both institutional and social), and undignified living conditions (overcrowded housing, lack of access to basic services).

Far from being circumstantial, the relationship between immigration and delivery platforms is structural. These platforms not only absorb migrant labor but also shape it into a functional cog in their business model. In both contexts analyzed, Spain and Buenos Aires, platform work appears to be a path to economic integration without social integration, a form of exclusionary inclusion.

In both contexts, however, there is a “temporariness trap” in which platform work is perceived as a stopgap solution but ends up being extended indefinitely. For many migrants, it represents a way to subsist while waiting to regularize their status, though this expectation is often frustrated. Such experiences generate a subjectivity marked by forced entrepreneurship, self-exploitation, and class repositioning which, combined with the migration process, entails implicit racialization. Moreover, migration is not driven by exclusively economic reasons. Discourse on safety, care networks, and transnational family trajectories also plays a central role.

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The resort to account rental, for example, means that many workers must hand over up to 30% of their income to the account holder, a practice described as a “mafia-style exploitation fee.” In this context, the concept of dignity

becomes a central analytical focus because precariousness not only denies rights but erodes human dignity in the broadest sense.

A comparative analysis with the Latin American context—especially Buenos Aires—reveals both similarities and divergences. In Argentina, the platform market shows greater structural informality, with companies such as Rappi and PedidosYa operating under labor regimes even more flexible than those in Spain. Although account rental exists, its motivation and control are different. In Argentina, the arbitrariness of platforms when disconnecting users gives rise to new forms of informality, beyond migration status. Likewise, workers’ subjectivities vary. In Spain, platform work is closely linked to the process of regularization and prospects for the future, whereas in Argentina there is greater decoupling of migration and platform work, with discourse more markedly shaped by competition and exclusion among workers.

This situation poses urgent challenges for public policy, which must go beyond labor regulation and comprehensively address the intersection of migration, work, and rights. This would entail rethinking immigration and asylum frameworks, ensuring real pathways to regularization, and designing policies that recognize the central role of migrant work in the digital economy. Only thus would it be possible to move toward an integration model that is not limited to allowing people to work but that also guarantees decent living conditions, social protection, and effective citizenship.

Platforms, city, and work

Digital delivery platforms are decisively transforming urban space. Streets, squares and sidewalks have begun to function as informal extensions of the workplace where a visible contingent of couriers circulates at all hours, using every available corner to park briefly, to organize packages, to wait for orders, or to take a short break. This phenomenon amounts to an appropriation of urban space for private purposes, where infrastructure conceived for leisure or pedestrian movement is repurposed into open-air offices and improvised logistics points. Places where

couriers organize packages or wait, usually in strategic areas with high densities of restaurants or shops, operate as improvised logistics nodes and, at the same time, spaces for socialization, rest, and mutual support among workers, in the absence of spaces or workplaces provided by platforms. The result is an alteration of everyday urban life.

This uncertainty pushes workers into long days of availability, connected to the app for many hours to capture enough orders to subsist. The need for speed in deliveries—valued and demanded by platforms through rating systems and automatic penalties—leads to exhausting work rhythms. This affects health and safety, with the constant stress of meeting delivery times and greater risks of road accidents when trying to shorten distances or skip breaks. This reality also means a transfer of costs and responsibilities from companies to workers

Working conditions imposed by platforms aggravate these challenges. Uncertainty is structural. Couriers do not know how many orders they will receive or how much they will earn at the end of the day, since income depends on fluctuating variables (demand spikes, dynamic fares, opaque algorithmic management).

Given the scale and speed of these changes, some municipal administrations have sought to balance platform growth with fair working conditions through new regulations. At the municipal level, one example is Barcelona City Council's "Special Plan for Uses of Activities Linked to Home Delivery". At the national level, a noteworthy measure is the incorporation of algorithmic transparency clauses into Spanish law (Royal Decree-Law 9/2021, known as the "Rider Law"). Since crucial decisions affecting couriers—among them, order assignment, remuneration calculations, and performance evaluation—

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and the urban environment. In this regard, delivery platforms do not consider waiting time as work, so they maintain an oversized labor overstructure that exceeds real demand and passes market fluctuations on to workers while producing rapid deliveries. This results in a high presence of couriers in public space, especially during hours of low demand. When platforms hire directly and assume these costs, the number of active couriers visible in the urban environment decreases accordingly.

These new dynamics generate tensions and raise questions about the intensive use of urban commons by the platform economy for private ends.

In addition to redesigning the use of space, platforms are reshaping local labor markets. Opportunities for income have emerged for people who otherwise find it difficult to enter the workforce (young people without experience, newly arrived migrants) thanks to the low barrier to entry for these jobs. However, such jobs are marked by pronounced precariousness. Algorithmic work organization fragments the classic labor relationship, and the platform company avoids hiring directly, operating through independent contractors or subcontractors, which blurs social protection and labor rights. In practice, thousands of urban workers are left in a legal limbo, without stable contracts, often without union representation or guaranteed benefits, and competing with one another for each task assigned by a mobile app. Hence, a new digital proletariat is taking shape in the city. It is omnipresent in the urban landscape but is often invisible to institutions as a real labor force.

are made by proprietary algorithms, it is essential to require transparency and auditing mechanisms for their operation. Public administrations at different levels can require delivery companies to periodically assess the impact of these systems on aspects such as average hourly earnings, routes taken, or workers' ratings, and to make this information publicly accessible. By shedding light on the algorithmic "black box" that manages platform work, municipal digital regulation seeks to protect workers from potential abuses hidden behind automated decisions and to lay the foundations for greater accountability by tech companies at the local level.

Another regulatory response focuses on the spatial dimension of platform work, proposing urban interventions that would improve couriers' conditions. A central recommendation is the mandatory creation of micro-logistics hubs for last-mile delivery. These would be small centers distributed throughout the city where couriers could pick up and drop off orders, recharge electric vehicles and access basic services (water, toilets, rest areas). By formalizing support points for this activity, several objectives would be achieved, among them decongesting sidewalks and other public spaces and ensuring greater safety and better working conditions. Some cities have already moved in this direction: Barcelona, for example, modified its Urban Use Plan to require large ghost kitchens and businesses with high shipping volumes to have internal areas for riders, thereby integrating them into the physical service chain. Although full implementation faces challenges ranging from the necessary investment to coordination with companies, these measures represent

a step toward orderly coexistence between the platform economy and the city.

It is important to note that the type of labor relationship directly influences the interaction between couriers and urban space, which suggests additional avenues for municipal action. The more precarious the contractual situation (self-employed without an effective contractual link, employees of subcontractors), the more workers depend on public resources in the city to carry out their activity. In contrast, more formal schemes like worker cooperatives or direct employment contracts tend to come with meeting points or private facilities (for example, being able to wait for orders inside the associated restaurant or shop). While not strictly under municipal jurisdiction, local governments can incentivize improvement in this respect through their contracting power and convening capacity, for example by prioritizing agreements with platforms that meet higher labor guarantees, facilitating dialogue between local unions and companies, and supporting the creation of local delivery cooperatives that compete under alternative models using free and open-source software.

The irruption of platform work in today's cities requires rethinking governance frameworks at multiple levels. The transformations it entails for urban space and local labor markets are profound, but their most negative effects are not inevitable. The measures described here, from algorithmic transparency to the provision of specific urban infrastructure, show that it is possible to channel platform growth so that it does not undermine urban coexistence or labor rights. Ultimately, it is about constructing a new balance in which the efficiency and convenience provided by digitalization coexist with protection of the commons and the dignity of work. Cities, where the advantages and dysfunctions of this digital economy first become manifest, have a pioneering role to play as their policies can inspire broader national and European regulations that would steer the evolution of platform capitalism toward a fairer model centered on labor rights.

Alternatives and platforms

Barcelona is home to several urban delivery cooperatives, among them Les Mercedes and Mensakas, which are feasible alternatives to the hegemonic model of delivery platforms. Les Mercedes (founded in 2020) is a non-profit, women-led cooperative devoted to sustainable logistics, providing last-mile deliveries with 100% electric vehicles (bicycles and tricycles). Mensakas (created in 2018 out of the Riders x Derechos union platform) is a cooperative self-managed by its rider-members, many of them former platform workers, that offers ethical delivery services using its own app. Also noteworthy is Som Ecològica (launched in 2017), a second-tier cooperative that groups several small cycle-logistics cooperatives across Catalonia to coordinate urban distribution with cargo bikes. Born

in contexts of labor precariousness and economic crisis, these initiatives share the mission of dignifying delivery work and reducing environmental impact, while also presenting an alternative model to the digital platforms that dominate the delivery sector.

Compared with traditional platforms, the cooperative model of these initiatives stands out for three pillars: democratic ownership, fair working conditions, and socio-environmental commitment. First, worker-members operate in keeping with horizontal structures. In Mensakas, all workers are also members, and in Les Mercedes, not all workers are members, though the great majority are. In these cooperative models, strategic decisions (for example, shift organization or client selection) are made collectively according to the well-being of workers and the local community, and not in response to demands of external investors and algorithmic governance. Second, this participatory model facilitates more stable jobs. Unlike conventional platforms, which engage riders as bogus self-employed people, cooperatives like Les Mercedes and Mensakas hire their members, who then contribute to social security and enjoy fundamental rights inherent to an employee relationship, including sick leave and paid holidays. They also have an explicit vocation for social inclusion. Through the ACOL line of the Catalan Government's Work and Training Program, for example, Mensakas has been able to regularize a foreign rider and intends to do the same this year with two more people. Thanks to one-year work contracts, migrant workers in irregular situations can obtain residence permits and economic stability. Hence, the cooperative model not only creates jobs but does so equitably, extending opportunities and rights to groups that platforms tend to marginalize or exclude. Third, the cooperatives show a strong environmental commitment and local roots.

All the cooperative initiatives orient their operations toward zero emissions. For example, deliveries are made by bicycle or electric vehicles, thus minimizing urban pollution. Through Som Ecològica, for example, several cooperatives share a cycle-logistics fleet with which they make thousands of deliveries per month in the Barcelona metropolitan area without using polluting vans, thus avoiding significant CO₂ emissions and reducing congestion. At the same time, the cooperatives are embedded in their territories' socio-economic fabric. They collaborate closely with local businesses, agro-ecological producers, and municipal administrations, which allows them to tailor services to local needs. This embeddedness contrasts with the centralized focus of large platforms and reinforces their legitimacy as actors committed to the city's sustainable development.

Adding to these difficulties, there is a lack of clear, decisive institutional support, which exacerbates consolidation problems. Although local administrations acknowledge the value of the social economy in their discourse, public policies have so far been insufficient to level the playing

field. The late or partial implementation of the Rider Law and the lack of real incentives for green logistics (such as strict low-emission zones, levies on polluting deliveries, or preferential treatment for social enterprises in public procurement) maintain competitive advantages for less responsible models. Finally, internally, these projects must manage the balance between their social mission and economic sustainability. Their goal is not to maximize profits, but they must generate sufficient income to reinvest and grow moderately. This requires decisions that are sometimes difficult: moderating founders' salaries; rejecting certain lucrative contracts that would compromise principles; or taking on multiple internal roles due to staff shortages (with the consequent risk of overload).

Despite their strengths, these cooperatives face considerable obstacles to consolidating long-term

opportunities. The case of Som Ecológica is illustrative. By federating around eleven local cooperatives under a common structure, it has created a network capable of covering wide geographical areas. Most of its members share unified logistics software, coordinate routes between different cities and distribute market segments, thus achieving economies of scale without losing local autonomy. In addition to horizontal cooperation, they seek alliances with the public sector and institutional leverage. In specific contexts and territories, convergence between their goals and public policies for decarbonized mobility has fostered participation in government programs that finance green jobs and labor inclusion. Several cooperatives, for instance, have obtained grants to acquire electric vehicles and cargo bikes, or to hire workers at risk of exclusion (as in the regional program that enabled Mensakas, together with three other cooperatives in Som Ecológica, to employ

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economic viability. The greatest structural challenge is asymmetrical competition with large delivery platforms. Thanks to major funding rounds, tax avoidance, and labor fraud, these platforms, together with other multinationals in the sector, have pushed the market price below minimum profitability thresholds. In this situation, cooperatives, which operate with limited financial resources, struggle to invest in technology development and find it difficult when they need to quickly expand their fleets and geographic coverage, and to pay above the minimum wage. Insufficient scale plays out in a market shaped by rivals that have imposed standards of immediacy and low prices, which are hard to meet without making staff precarious. The public has become accustomed to near-instant deliveries at minimal rates, without seeing the hidden costs of the model (unstable work, high carbon footprint). Cooperatives must contend with this dominant perception and focus on attracting users and shops that value ethical criteria over mere convenience. Low visibility and limited consumer awareness of these alternatives reduce their customer base, which further entrenches the dominant platforms.

To overcome these obstacles, delivery cooperatives are applying innovative strategies that strengthen their viability and open prospects for gradual growth. A central tactic is inter-cooperation whereby, rather than operating in isolation, they cooperate to share and pool resources and jointly pursue larger business

and regularize migrant riders). They also explore direct collaboration with city councils. Some cities have provided spaces for cooperatives to establish micro urban distribution hubs, integrating them into pilot plans to reduce van traffic in city centers.

These synergies with the public sector not only provide resources and demand stability but also legitimize cooperatives as recognized actors within the local logistics system. Beyond deliveries for local shops, takeaway food, corporate courier services between municipal offices, distribution of agro-ecological products, and last-mile logistics in general, service diversification has been another key response to broaden income sources, which include road-safety training and learn-to-ride courses, mechanical workshops, training, consulting, and feasibility studies, and distribution of cargo bikes. This diversification reduces dependency on a single market dominated by multinationals and demonstrates the versatility of the cooperative model. Through strategic collaboration, institutional integration, and diversification, these cooperatives are consolidating an alternative model in the field of the social and solidarity economy, cycle-logistics, and the platform economy. The cases of Les Mercedes, Mensakas, and Som Ecológica demonstrate in practice another way of organizing the delivery and urban distribution of goods, thus setting an innovative precedent for moving toward more just, people-centered economic models.

Transversally, the proposed plan emphasizes several fundamental priorities. One is to improve the transparency of labor data generated by platforms, and to promote the use of free, open-source software with the aim of improved underpinning of regulatory action and monitoring of working conditions. Another is to promote fair and legally enforceable employment contracts, so that platform companies fully assume their labor and social-security obligations. It is also crucial to incorporate algorithmic accountability in the management of digital work, and also public auditing of task-assignment and performance-evaluation systems to avoid biases and arbitrariness. Finally, it is important to support the development of platform cooperatives and other social-economy initiatives as a way of introducing greater equity and democratic governance into this sector.

Achieving this paradigm shift will require adapting each context's institutional and social realities to existing tools and regulations, recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Conclusions

The path toward a fairer system of digital platform work requires a structural paradigm shift. This process will take time and sustained collective effort, but several key dimensions can already be identified that outline the strategy to be adopted.

To begin with, it is essential to strengthen labor protection and regulation of platform work at all levels of government with particular attention to guaranteeing the safety and rights of the most vulnerable workers (for example, migrants in precarious situations). Meanwhile, municipal policies must innovate in their ordering of urban space and promote other economic models, so that cities like Barcelona can take the lead in offering a range of other cooperative initiatives as an alternative to the hegemonic model of large digital corporations. Likewise, there is a need to construct new alliances between trade unions, cooperatives, the public administration, and academia in order to co-design evidence-based interventions that comprehensively address the challenges identified.

Achieving this paradigm shift will require adapting each context's institutional and social realities to existing tools and regulations, recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Even so, the dimensions highlighted here provide a clear frame of reference for moving toward a more balanced platform economy, and one in which technological innovation coexists with social justice, labor rights, and decarbonized urban mobility.