TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Hidden Labour of Digital Trade: Working Conditions of Last-Mile Delivery Workers in African E-Commerce

1. Background and problem statement

Digital trade is often presented as a largely virtual process involving online marketplaces, electronic contracts, digital payments, data flows and digitally enabled transactions. Yet the trade in physical goods initiated online depends on extensive material infrastructure and human labour. Warehousing, sorting, transport, dispatch and delivery are indispensable to the completion of an e-commerce transaction. The final movement of a product from a fulfilment centre, warehouse, shop or transport hub to the purchaser - commonly described as last-mile delivery - is especially labour-intensive.

David Luke's edited volume, How Africa Trades, situates digital trade and e-commerce within the broader transformation of African trade. Its analysis shows that the COVID-19 crisis accelerated shifts towards e-commerce and digital transactions and reinforced the importance of digital trade to Africa's evolving trade architecture. The volume nevertheless concentrates principally on trade patterns, institutions, market development and policy. It gives limited attention to the workers whose physical labour completes transactions initiated digitally. This omission points to an important labour-research gap: the expansion of African e-commerce is increasingly visible, while the employment relationships and working conditions underpinning its last mile remain comparatively hidden.12

This gap has become more significant following the adoption of the AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade. The Protocol defines digital trade to include digitally enabled transactions in goods and services that may be delivered digitally or physically. More importantly, Article 11 expressly addresses "Logistics and Last-Mile Delivery". It encourages State Parties to improve the regulatory environment for logistics services, streamline licensing, coordinate transport systems, facilitate multimodal transport, promote competition and strengthen addressing, postal and related

1Kulani McCartan-Demie and Jamie MacLeod, “How the Covid-19 Crisis Affected Informal and Digital Trade,” in How Africa Trades (2023), 177–208, doi:10.31389/lsepress.hat.g.

2David Luke, ed., How Africa Trades (LSE Press, 2023), doi:10.31389/lsepress.hat.

infrastructure. These measures can expand e-commerce and demand for delivery services across African markets.3

Article 11, however, approaches last-mile delivery primarily as a trade-facilitation and logistics service. It does not address the employment status, remuneration, working time, work-related expenses, occupational safety and health, social protection, freedom of association or collective bargaining rights of the workers who provide that service. Neither does it address the labour consequences of subcontracting or the growing use of algorithmic systems to allocate deliveries, calculate earnings, monitor performance, apply customer ratings or suspend workers. The Protocol therefore recognises and facilitates the service but leaves its labour dimension largely outside the regulatory frame.

This omission matters because digital labour platforms and platform-mediated services can generate income and lower barriers to labour-market entry, while simultaneously transferring commercial risks and operating costs to workers. International research identifies recurring concerns relating to ambiguous employment status, unpredictable earnings, long or fragmented working hours, limited social protection and constrained access to representation and remedies. African evidence further shows that platform work is differentiated by location, sector and gender, confirming the need for grounded, worker-centred analysis rather than assumptions derived from other regions.456

At present, there is insufficient comparative evidence on whether the growth of AfCFTA-enabled e-commerce is producing decent employment in last-mile delivery or expanding insecure and weakly protected work. Official labour statistics rarely isolate e-commerce delivery as a distinct category. Workers may be directly employed by an e-commerce enterprise, engaged through a logistics contractor, classified as independent contractors, or allocated tasks through a digital platform. These arrangements can coexist within the same city and even within the same delivery chain.

The proposed study will address this evidence gap through focused empirical research in two African cities. It will make visible the workers behind digital transactions, analyse the employment arrangements and systems through which their work is organised, and develop practical recommendations for governments, trade unions and relevant AfCFTA stakeholders. The study is not intended as a general review of the Protocol on Digital Trade or of the entire platform economy. Its analytical point of departure is the labour dimension missing from Article 11: whether the

3African Union, AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade (2024), arts. 1 and 11, https://au.int/en/treaties/protocol-agreement-establishing-african-continental-free-trade-area-digital-trade.

4B. A. Mehdar et al., “Gendered Inequalities of Platform Work in Africa,” Platforms & Society 2 (2025), doi:10.1177/29768624251323332.

5ILO, Realizing Decent Work in the Platform Economy, Report V(1), International Labour Conference, 113th Session (Geneva, 2025).

6ILO, World Employment and Social Outlook 2021: The Role of Digital Labour Platforms in Transforming the World of Work (Geneva, 2021).

facilitation of logistics and last-mile delivery is accompanied by conditions consistent with decent work.

2. Purpose of the assignment

The purpose of the assignment is to undertake an academically rigorous and policy-relevant study of the employment arrangements and working conditions of last-mile delivery workers serving e-commerce businesses in two selected African cities, and to identify measures required to ensure that the expansion of digital trade under the AfCFTA contributes to decent work.

3. Specific objectives

- Map the principal employment and contractual arrangements through which last-mile e-commerce delivery work is organised in the selected cities.
- Assess workers' earnings, working time, employment-related costs, occupational risks and access to social protection.
- Examine how subcontracting and algorithmic management shape job security, workplace control, access to remedies and the exercise of labour rights.
- Develop evidence-based policy and trade-union recommendations for integrating decent-work considerations into the expansion of e-commerce and the implementation environment surrounding Article 11 of the AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade.

4. Research questions

1. What types of employment are being created for last-mile delivery workers through the expansion of e-commerce?
2. What are their actual earnings, working hours, employment costs and occupational risks?
3. How do subcontracting and algorithmic management affect their job security and ability to exercise labour rights?
4. What policies and trade-union strategies are required to ensure that AfCFTA-driven e-commerce creates decent work?

5. Scope and delimitations

The study shall be deliberately limited to last-mile delivery workers who fulfil orders for physical goods placed through e-commerce channels. It shall cover workers engaged directly by e-commerce businesses, through third-party logistics or delivery contractors, and through digital delivery platforms where these workers serve e-commerce transactions.

The study shall be conducted in two African cities selected in consultation with ALREI. Selection should seek reasonable variation in e-commerce maturity, labour-market regulation and delivery models, while remaining feasible within the available time and resources. The study shall not cover ride-hailing workers who do not undertake e-commerce delivery, online freelancers, micro-task workers, general freight transport, or the full spectrum of digital trade.

6. Conceptual and analytical framework

The consultant shall locate the research at the intersection of digital trade, labour-process analysis and the ILO Decent Work Agenda. The analysis should distinguish between the commercial facilitation of last-mile delivery and the employment outcomes generated through that process. It should examine how contractual form, control over work, allocation of costs and risks, algorithmic management and access to collective representation influence job quality.

At a minimum, the assessment of working conditions shall address employment status; gross and net earnings; working time and work intensity; worker-borne costs; occupational safety and health; social-protection coverage; grievance and appeal mechanisms; freedom of association; and access to collective representation.

7. Methodology

The consultant shall propose a coherent qualitative or mixed-methods design capable of answering the four research questions. The final methodology must be agreed with ALREI during the inception stage and should include the following components:

- Focused literature review covering African e-commerce, last-mile logistics, platform-mediated delivery, job quality and relevant decent-work standards.
- Mapping of the e-commerce delivery ecosystem in each city, including e-commerce firms, delivery platforms, logistics contractors, worker associations, trade unions and relevant regulators.
- Semi-structured interviews with last-mile delivery workers as the principal source of evidence. The sample should capture different contractual arrangements, genders, age groups and lengths of experience.
- Key-informant interviews with trade unions or worker associations, e-commerce companies, logistics or delivery contractors, platform operators where relevant, and labour or transport regulators.
- Collection of sufficient information to distinguish gross earnings from net earnings after fuel, vehicle rental or finance, maintenance, insurance, mobile data, commissions and other work-related costs.
- Comparative analysis of the two cities, identifying shared patterns as well as differences arising from regulation, market structure and business models.

The consultant shall justify the sampling strategy and proposed number of interviews in the inception report. Worker interviews must be sufficient to reach thematic saturation within the defined worker categories. Where reliable quantitative data are unavailable, the study shall avoid unsupported population estimates and clearly state the limits of inference.

8. Research ethics and quality assurance

- Obtain informed consent from all research participants and ensure that participation is voluntary.

- Protect the anonymity and confidentiality of workers, particularly where disclosure could lead to retaliation, loss of platform access or termination of contracts.
- Store interview records securely and avoid transferring identifiable data without appropriate safeguards.
- Disclose methodological limitations, conflicting evidence and potential researcher or respondent bias.
- Use consistent definitions and provide a transparent account of sampling, coding and analysis.
- Submit all major outputs to ALREI's academic and technical review process and respond systematically to comments.

9. Tasks of the consultant

- Prepare an inception report refining the conceptual framework, city-selection rationale, methodology, sampling plan, interview instruments and workplan.
- Undertake the literature review and map the last-mile e-commerce delivery ecosystem in both cities.
- Conduct and document worker interviews and key-informant interviews.
- Analyse the evidence comparatively and prepare a full draft research report.
- Present preliminary findings at an online validation meeting convened by ALREI.
- Revise the report in response to academic review and stakeholder feedback.
- Prepare a final research report and a concise policy brief directed at trade unions and policymakers.

10. Expected deliverables

Deliverable	Minimum content	Indicative timing
1. Inception report	Framework, methodology, sampling, ethics, interview instruments and detailed workplan	End of Week 2
2. Fieldwork completion note	Interview coverage, emerging issues, constraints and mitigation measures	End of Week 6
3. Draft research report	Complete comparative analysis, findings, conclusions and recommendations	End of Week 9
4. Validation presentation	Presentation of preliminary findings at an online stakeholder meeting	Week 10
5. Final research report	Revised, academically referenced report	End of Week 12

	incorporating review comments	
6. Policy brief	Concise worker-centred recommendations for unions and policymakers	End of Week 12

11. Indicative report structure

- Executive summary
- Introduction, context and research problem
- Literature review and analytical framework
- Methodology and limitations
- E-commerce and last-mile delivery ecosystems in the two cities
- Employment arrangements and worker profiles
- Earnings, working time, costs and occupational risks
- Subcontracting, algorithmic management and labour rights
- Comparative discussion
- Conclusions and recommendations for policy and trade-union action

12. Required qualifications and experience

- An advanced university degree, preferably a doctorate or research-based master's degree, in labour economics, industrial relations, sociology of work, development studies, trade and development, public policy or a closely related field.
- Demonstrated record of academic or applied research on labour markets, digital labour, platform work, logistics, e-commerce or trade and employment.
- Strong qualitative or mixed-methods research skills, including experience conducting interviews with workers and analysing sensitive employment information.
- Good knowledge of African labour markets, international labour standards and the AfCFTA policy context.
- Evidence of high-quality analytical writing and the ability to translate research findings into actionable policy and trade-union recommendations.
- Ability to work in the relevant languages of the selected cities or to arrange competent research support and translation.

13. Management and reporting arrangements

The consultant shall work under the overall supervision of the Executive Director of ALREI or a designated research lead. ALREI will approve the final selection of cities, methodology and interview instruments; facilitate relevant trade-union contacts where feasible; convene the validation meeting; and coordinate technical review. The consultant shall remain responsible for research quality, fieldwork management, ethical compliance, analysis and timely delivery of all outputs.

14. Ownership and publication

All data, interview instruments, anonymised research materials and outputs produced under the assignment shall be submitted to ALREI. Publication, attribution and dissemination arrangements shall be determined by ALREI in accordance with the consultancy agreement. No identifiable interview material may be published without explicit consent.

15. How to Apply

Interested applicants should submit:

- **A concise technical proposal demonstrating understanding of the assignment and proposed methodology.**
- **A workplan and confirmation of availability.**
- **A curriculum vitae highlighting relevant country and thematic experience.**

Submission email: alrei@ituc-africa.org

Email subject: Application – *The Hidden Labour of Digital Trade*

Deadline: November 02, 2026