

Reimagining labour at the dawn of 4IR

By [Thando Gobe](#)

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Before the industrial revolution of the 1780s, most of Europe's population served as indentured labour for a small group of nobles and royals that owned the land. The advent of mass mechanisation changed that picture by creating a new mechanism to share wealth beyond the top stratum of society.



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The birth of electricity in the second industrial revolution and the advent of the computer age in the third, helped to create wealth and share prosperity even more widely across society. Thus, we have seen dramatic advances in living standards and working conditions for much of the population over the past 250 years.

Progress wasn't always easy and the working class in many instances fought hard for rights such as paid leave and fair remuneration. We, today, live in a world with strong labour rights and a deep appreciation for workers' contributions. There are still battles to be won — around gender equity, for example — but humanity has come a long way since the mills and factories of Victorian England.

Fourth industrial revolution: prosperity or inequality?

Yet, as we stand on the cusp of the fourth industrial revolution, we cannot be complacent. Rapid advances in artificial intelligence, genetics, biotechnology, nanotechnology, the Internet of Things, and quantum computers have the potential to usher in an age of unprecedented prosperity.

But there is also a danger that they could displace hundreds of millions of workers, through automation as well as entrench inequality by allowing the top 1% to accrue more of the world's wealth. This challenge is particularly poignant and acute in South Africa, which is yet to redress the bitter legacies of apartheid and colonialism.

Most of the rich world used industrialisation to drive social and economic progress. But South Africa's economy was not structured to share the riches of industrialisation with the majority. Instead, it was primarily designed to use the labour of a migrant workforce to extract the wealth from the ground for the benefit of a few.

The result is that vast parts of our country have yet to catch up with the standards of living, education and healthcare enjoyed in Western Europe, North America, or the richer countries in South East Asia. At a time when we have yet to fully realise promises of the first three industrial revolutions, the gains we have made to date are under threat.

For the reason, it's deeply concerning to hear business leaders and politicians speak superficially about the fourth industrial revolution. They need to engage deeply with what the shift towards ever higher levels of automation will mean in a country with such high levels of joblessness and think about how we will prepare our children for this new world.

The question is taking on new urgency during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has shut down large sections of our economy. With GDP expected to contract sharply and many businesses lacking the working capital to weather the crisis, Covid-19 could cost us millions of jobs by the end of the year.

Covid-19 shows the fault lines in society

The reality is that as damaging as the virus is in its own right, it also highlights the multiple social and economic crises we have chosen to live with. It's not right or sustainable that so many of our people in the informal economy are a week's wages away from needing food packages to survive, or that businesses do not have enough cash in reserve to stay afloat in a crisis.

Apartheid may be over, and workers' rights may be entrenched in our laws, but much of our economy remains exploitative and extractive in nature. As long as this approach is entrenched, organisations will look to drive 'efficiencies' using tools such as automation when they face a crisis such Covid-19. The high human cost and rise in inequality are not hard to imagine.

For this reason, we believe that this Worker's Month and the context of Covid-19 should propel us to a national and international dialogue about the fourth industrial revolution and the definition of labour in today's world. We should debate how to embrace this revolution in a way that makes sense for humanity, and make sure it is working for all of us and not just a privileged few. We should engage openly about what skills will be critical five years from now, and transform what and how we teach and train.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has announced a bold R500 billion fiscal stimulus package to help small businesses, municipalities and poor people navigate the crisis; many corporations and rich South Africans have made generous donations, too. But we should see interventions such as this as the beginning of a comprehensive reimagining of how we do things in our country and our world.

Let's invest in fibre, TV white space and other digital tools to empower all children to participate in the digital economy. Let's treat our valuable human capital as a more significant part of the corporate capital structure and allocate it a larger share of the profits. And let's unite behind using the fourth industrial revolution as a vehicle to drive a fairer and more prosperous economy that shares its fruits with all.

We should not waste the Covid-19 crisis – it is an opportunity to transform our world to the benefit of all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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