

Panel 1: Collaborative economy and platform capitalism

Participants:

- Arthur de Grave, OuiShare
- Alain Petitjean, Groupe Alpha
- Harald Wiedenhofer, EFFAT
- Ronald Janssen, TUACOliver Roethig, UNI Europa

Discussant: Gabriele Bischoff, EESC

Moderator: Odile Chagny, IRES

Reporter: Sara Lafuente Hernández, ETUI

The panel addressed the question of collaboration and collaborative economy within platforms.

There was general consensus about the idea that the digital economy is a complex phenomenon and embraces different kinds of platforms which may have different (social) effects. Simplistic “umbrella” concepts mixing all situations together (i.e. “sharing economy”, “collaborative economy”, or “uberisation”) do not help to better understand the phenomenon. More data and information is needed, and effort to distinguish and better knowledge on how different types of platforms actually work in their operations and functioning (ie. Sectors affected, how they control products and prices, work and work statutes and qualifications they promote, type of workers involved, level of economic dependency from platforms). This would allow defining more precisely the challenges ahead and offer adequate solutions. However, these platforms share some common features, at least “selling their services at their marginal price”, be “capital intensive” to invest in high development and marketing costs, and therefore avoid in principle other fix costs such as assets, taxes and social welfare costs (Alain Petitjean, Groupe Alpha).

The moderator raised the question whether platform economy should be seen as an evolution or rather a revolution for work organization, in terms of social effects.

The panelists agreed on the fact that some challenges of platform economy are actually not new, such as tax evasion, casualization of work, work-on-demand, outsourcing strategies or self-employment. These old techniques are however expanding in different sectors of the economy and in a greater scale, leading platforms to become “a new disguise for an old model of exploitation of people” (Gabrielle Bischoff, EESC).

Indeed new and concrete challenges are introduced, as was discussed by the panelists. Harald Wiedenhofer (EFFAT) put forward the example of Airbnb as a digital tenement agency that does not comply with social or environmental standards, and whose operations translate into unfair competition with traditional hotel sector, impact on long-term rental market in urban areas (i.e. Barcelona), use of self-employment and avoidance of social security obligations. Platforms may also potentially replace the functions of employment agencies in labour markets, introduce new forms of “implement subordination” through rating and

manipulation (Arthur de Grave, from Ouishare), and may increase the effects of work casualization and new forms of precarious work, which urges to reflect on a new definition of “worker” and of “employer” that takes into account these complex realities. According to Alain Petitjean, platform economy would be an “attempt of a libertarian revolution against the welfare state”.

Synthesizing the different perspectives, the platform economy could be seen as an “evolutionary revolution” (Ronald Janssen, TUA).

How to address these challenges, and what would be the first key priorities?

- If we want to address the challenges of platform economy, then we should “tackle all types of casual work” (Ronald Janssen, TUAC). At least, it is our task to create the linkages between aspects that should not be decoupled, use the different paths available (i.e. debate on the Social Pillar).
- The European legislator has a key role, since the platform economy is not organized at the national level. The question, as Gabriele Bischoff argued, is “what kind of platforms do we want” and how we can anticipate and shape them from European policy. In that sense, the panelists welcomed that the European Commission took stock, but regretted that key elements and proposals were missing in its Communication on collaborative economy, which requires legislative innovation.
- Mechanisms to rule on prices, so that platforms need to sell quality services at fair price, to avoid social and competition problems (Alain Petitjean).
- Mechanisms of requalification of relationships into employment relations was one of the solution proposed by some of the panelists
- New definition of worker and employer, and settle some legal clarity on the statutes of the different intermediaries. The definition of worker is a key issue for the debate on the pillar of Social Rights (where are the thresholds to be settled?).
- Organize workers on the basis of unemployment benefits, following the successful example of some member states such as Belgium. And organize self-employers.
- Protect workers with collective agreements is a priority (Harald Wiedenhofer, EFFAT). But for that we need to organize these workers, which are often self-employed.
- Tackle the issue of responsibility of the platforms as well (e.g. insurances, legal information).