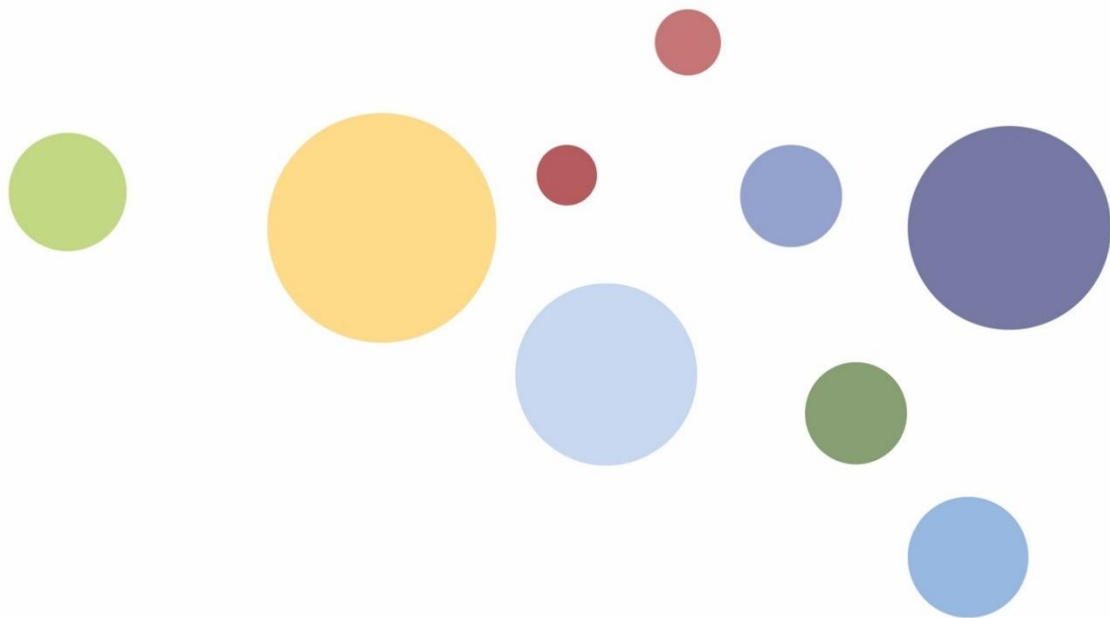


Labour governance as a leverage point in the polycrisis

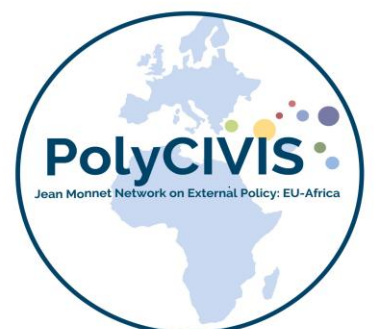
Anticipatory policy innovation for resilient and equitable transitions

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The Polycrisis & Policy Brief Series is coordinated by the *Policy Work Package* which is part of [the PolyCIVIS Network](#). The PolyCIVIS Policy brief series aims to provide actionable insights and recommendations for policymakers, at various levels and to foster dialogue among stakeholders on effective policy responses.



Executive Summary

Contemporary policy and academic debates increasingly frame global instability through the lens of overlapping climate, economic, and technological disruptions—commonly described as a “polycrisis.” While the term is recent, the dynamics are not: historical transformations, from industrial restructuring to earlier waves of labour informalisation, show that economic volatility, technological change, and inequality have long been intertwined. What is new is the scale, speed, and visibility of these interactions, and a growing recognition that labour systems lie at their core.

Labour is no longer simply affected by external shocks; it transmits and intensifies them. The expansion of platform-mediated work, algorithmic management, and informal employment has reconfigured how risks are distributed across societies. Yet governance frameworks have not kept pace. According to the International Labour Organization (2024), over 60% of the global workforce remains in informal employment, highlighting the structural limits of existing regulatory models.

What distinguishes the present moment is not only the convergence of crises, but the institutional failure to govern labour as a systemic domain. Fragmented and reactive responses frequently externalise risk onto the most vulnerable, weakening resilience and amplifying inequality.

This policy brief advocates institutionalising labour foresight, regulating algorithmic management, and building portable social protection to strengthen institutional capacity, worker voice, and equity. By repositioning labour governance as a central pillar of resilience, the brief outlines pathways toward more adaptive and equitable responses to interconnected global crises. It provides policy-makers, social partners, and international organisations with a systemic framework and concrete instruments to put this repositioning into practice.

Key messages

- ❖ Labour governance is a critical leverage point (a point in a system where a small, well-targeted intervention produces large, system-wide effects) in the polycrisis. In this context, labour institutions are the valves that determine how risk is distributed, absorbed, or amplified across the economy.
- ❖ Fragmented governance amplifies systemic vulnerability. Outdated, reactive policies fail to address the interconnected dynamics of platformisation, informality, and inequality, actively reinforcing structural precarity as a default state. Anticipatory, integrated governance offers the most viable path forward.
- ❖ Platform power and algorithmic management concentrate unprecedented control while externalising risk onto workers, demanding new regulatory tools built on data sovereignty and algorithmic accountability.

(1) Introduction

At recent global policy discussions, including those convened by the World Economic Forum, "polycrisis" denotes multiple shocks interacting across systems to generate cascading, often unpredictable effects. These dynamics are not defined by the scale of individual crises, but by their interdependence—where interventions in one domain produce unintended consequences in others.

The concept of polycrisis is not a single, settled idea, and its competing typologies carry different policy implications. This brief draws on the systemic-risk and complexity-science tradition, which treats polycrisis as a set of causal mechanisms linking otherwise separate crises.¹ Other readings foreground polycrisis as a crisis of capitalism and power, cautioning that systems language can depoliticise the distributional question of who bears the costs of crisis and who benefits from the response.² Crucially, this debate has largely taken Euro-American experience as its point of departure, popularised through fora such as the World Economic Forum and framings of cascading, interacting shocks.³ A growing body of Global South and decolonial scholarship contests this framing, arguing that overlapping, compounding crises have long been the normal condition for societies shaped by colonial and neo-colonial extraction, and calling for the concept to be reoriented around Southern epistemologies rather than treated as a recent Northern discovery.⁴

This brief adopts a systems and institutional lens on labour governance while remaining attentive to this critique: governance failures are not evenly distributed, and instruments designed with Northern labour markets as

the implicit default risk reproducing the asymmetries they set out to correct.

Labour systems are deeply embedded within these feedback loops, yet their role remains obscured by aggregate indicators that suggest relative stability. Global unemployment has stayed near 5%, masking deeper pressures: the "jobs gap"—unmet demand for decent work—exceeds 400 million people, and youth unemployment (12%) is nearly triple the adult rate.⁵ These figures point to persistent, widening imbalances, not cyclical disruption.

These are not isolated trends but the consolidation of a new political economy of precarity, in which risk is redistributed downward while returns to capital concentrate at the top. Piketty (2020) argues that capitalism's enduring dynamics of accumulation and inequality are now intensified by technological change and institutional inertia.

At the same time, new vectors of systemic risk are emerging. More than 70% of the global workforce is exposed to climate-related hazards, directly affecting productivity, health, and income stability.⁶ These pressures intersect with the rapid expansion of digital labour markets and algorithmic management, creating layered vulnerabilities—particularly for workers already positioned at the margins of formal protection systems.

In the face of these shifts, governance responses remain fragmented across policy domains and constrained by limited enforcement capacity. This misalignment creates a structural paradox: as labour becomes more central to the transmission of

¹ Homer-Dixon et al., 2023

² Piketty, 2020

³ Tooze, 2021

⁴ Ruwanpura et al., 2025

⁵ ILO, 2024

⁶ *Ibid.*

systemic risk, its governance becomes less capable of managing it.

In this context, incremental reform is increasingly inadequate. Recent frameworks call for anticipatory, integrated approaches: universal social protection, regulatory innovation, and renewed worker participation. Repositioning labour governance within a polycrisis framework therefore implies a broader shift from reactive crisis management toward proactive resilience-building. Therefore, institutional design is decisive in shaping whether economic and technological transformations amplify inequality or enable more inclusive and adaptive systems.⁷

This policy brief addresses two central questions:

- (i) *How can labour governance systems be reconfigured to operate effectively within a context of systemic interdependence and cascading risk?*
- (ii) *What forms of institutional innovation are required to restore labour's role as a stabilising, rather than destabilising, force within the polycrisis?*

(2) Background and analysis

2.1. Labour governance in the polycrisis: a systems perspective

(i) *Beyond sectoral thinking: labour as systemic infrastructure*

Within the polycrisis, labour markets operate as critical infrastructure through which shocks are transmitted, amplified, or absorbed. Economic crises, climate disruptions, and technological transformations materialise through employment relations, income security, and working conditions.⁸ Labour is therefore not a passive domain affected by crisis, but an active structuring force shaping systemic trajectories.⁹

From a systems perspective, labour governance determines whether shocks are collectively absorbed or individually externalised. Robust institutions—universal social protection, effective regulation, and strong collective bargaining—function as stabilisers. In contrast, fragmented governance generates self-reinforcing feedback loops: precarity weakens bargaining power, enabling further deregulation and deepening insecurity.¹⁰

Box 1: The Procrustean Bed of labour regulation

Labour governance remains constrained by institutional inertia. (In Greek myth, Procrustes forced travellers to fit an iron bed by stretching or cutting them to size — a metaphor for how diverse forms of work are forced into a rigid employment/self-employment binary). Labour law—designed for standard employment relationships—is applied to platform-mediated work, producing regulatory misalignment. Gig workers are categorised as either employees or independent contractors, obscuring the realities of algorithmic control and leaving significant protection gaps.¹¹ This “Procrustean” approach not only fails to protect workers but inhibits the development of governance models suited to digital labour systems.¹²

⁷ Acemoglu & Johnson 2023

⁸ Homer-Dixon et al., 2023

⁹ ILO, 2023

¹⁰ Rodrik, 2024

¹¹ Prassl, 2018

¹² Rahwan et al., 2019

(ii) Algorithmic management and platform power: the new asymmetry

Platform-mediated work represents a structural rupture in labour governance. Digital platforms increasingly act as de facto employers, exercising control through algorithmic systems that allocate tasks, monitor performance, and shape access to income.¹³ Ride-hailing platforms such as Uber illustrate this asymmetry: drivers face dynamic pricing, opaque ratings, and automated deactivation without meaningful recourse.¹⁴ The result is intensified managerial control without corresponding accountability.¹⁵ A comparable dynamic operates on Amazon Mechanical Turk, where workers compete globally for micro-tasks under extreme information asymmetry while requesters retain unilateral control over approval and payment.¹⁶ This asymmetry is not confined to North American and European platforms. Research on remote gig work across African labour markets documents intensive algorithmic monitoring and constrained bargaining power layered onto pre-existing informality — alongside workers' everyday practices of resistance and renegotiation.¹⁷

Workers are subjected to opaque systems of surveillance and evaluation while remaining legally classified as independent contractors. This institutional gap produces profound asymmetries of power, information, and risk.¹⁸ Within the polycrisis, such arrangements act as accelerants of systemic fragility: the absence of social protection amplifies

vulnerability to shocks, while platform scalability diffuses precariousness across sectors.¹⁹ What emerges is not a marginal phenomenon but a reconfiguration of the social contract of work.²⁰

(iii) Feminisation, informality, and structural inequality

Labour transformations are deeply embedded in existing structures of inequality. Women remain disproportionately concentrated in precarious, informal, and undervalued sectors, particularly care and service work.²¹ This is evident in platform-mediated care and domestic work, where women are overrepresented in low-paid, on-demand services characterised by irregular hours and limited protections.²² These patterns reflect not only historical legacies but ongoing processes of occupational segregation and unequal distributions of unpaid labour.²³ Comparative evidence across 38 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America reinforces this picture: platform-based beauty, care, and domestic work is among the most visible site of women's participation in the gig economy, and also where gender-based discrimination and harassment most consistently persist despite platforms' technical "solutions".²⁴

Informality continues to dominate global employment, especially in the Global South, exposing workers to chronic insecurity and exclusion from formal protections.²⁵ The intersection of gender and informality intensifies vulnerability: crisis conditions amplify care burdens, restrict labour market

¹³ Kellogg et al., 2020

¹⁴ Rahwan et al., 2019

¹⁵ De Stefano & Aloisi, 2022

¹⁶ Cherry & Aloisi, 2021

¹⁷ Anwar & Graham, 2020

¹⁸ Standing, 2023

¹⁹ Doellgast et al., 2023

²⁰ ILO, 2023

²¹ ILO, 2024

²² Fraser, 2022

²³ Rai et al., 2024

²⁴ Fairwork, 2023

²⁵ ILO, 2023

access, and reinforce institutional invisibility.²⁶ These dynamics are not peripheral but central to contemporary labour systems, necessitating governance approaches grounded in intersectional inclusion.

(iv) Erosion of worker voice: the collapse of systemic feedback

A defining feature of current labour transformations is the decline of collective representation. Union density and bargaining coverage have diminished, while new forms of work often exist outside established institutional frameworks.²⁷ For instance, platform workers are frequently excluded from collective bargaining mechanisms due to their classification as independent contractors, while attempts to organise—such as app-based driver strikes—face structural barriers including fragmentation and algorithmic control.²⁸ This erosion represents not only a political shift but a systemic failure.

Worker voice functions as a core feedback mechanism within labour systems, providing information on policy impacts, enabling negotiated adaptation, and constraining concentrated power.²⁹ Its weakening renders governance systems brittle and unresponsive.³⁰ At the same time, state regulatory capacity has been eroded by globalisation, austerity, and the transnational nature of digital platforms, creating enforcement gaps that exacerbate asymmetries.³¹

These three dynamics—algorithmic control, gendered informality, and the erosion of worker voice—do not operate in isolation. In many Global South platform economies they compound within a single job: the same courier or care worker navigating algorithmic monitoring and unstable income is also

typically excluded from statutory protection and lacks a collective channel through which to contest either. Treating these strands together, rather than as separate policy problems addressed section by section, is a precondition for governance design that does not simply generalise a Global North default to the rest of the world.

2.2. Labour governance as a critical leverage point

These dynamics position labour governance as a high-impact leverage point within the polycrisis. Interventions in labour systems can generate system-wide effects by reshaping underlying feedback loops. For instance, universal social protection acts as an automatic stabiliser, reducing volatility and supporting aggregate demand.³² Strengthened collective bargaining enhances adaptability and compliance, while regulating algorithmic management reshapes incentives across the digital economy.³³

Unlocking this potential requires moving beyond fragmented approaches toward integrated, anticipatory governance.

(3) Historical depth and the politics of framing labour

The current crisis is not historically unprecedented. The Great Depression constituted a comparable convergence of economic, social, and political breakdowns, prompting the creation of modern labour governance institutions.³⁴ However, contemporary dynamics differ in scale and speed. Globalisation, climate change, and

²⁶ Elson, 2017

²⁷ Baccaro & Howell, 2017

²⁸ Doellgast *et al.*, 2023

²⁹ Rodrik, 2024

³⁰ Homer-Dixon *et al.*, 2023

³¹ Piketty, 2020

³² Rodrik, 2024

³³ Rahwan *et al.*, 2023

³⁴ Tooze, 2021

digitalisation accelerate and interconnect risks in ways without historical parallel.³⁵

Labour governance is also shaped by competing narratives. Framing platform workers as “entrepreneurs” obscures relations of control, while discourses of

“flexibility” often mask precarity.³⁶ Such narratives are performative: they legitimize specific policy choices and distributions of risk.³⁷ Dominant framings frequently reflect the perspectives of powerful actors, marginalising the experiences of informal workers, women, and migrants (Fraser, 2022).

Box 2: Why we fail to act on labour precarity

Barriers to reform are not only institutional but cognitive and political. Short-termism, loss aversion, and techno-solutionism discourage structural change (Kahneman et al., 2021). Policymakers often prioritise immediate, visible outcomes over long-term resilience, while overreliance on technological fixes diverts attention from underlying power imbalances (Rahwan et al., 2023). Overcoming these barriers requires aligning political incentives with long-term systemic stability.

3.1. The governance paradox: when policy exacerbates complexity

Labour governance systems can inadvertently intensify the complexity they seek to manage. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), identifies three dimensions of this complexity: substantive (contested definitions of labour and employment status), strategic (a proliferation of actors with competing interests), and institutional (overlapping, incoherent regulatory frameworks).³⁸ The result is fragmented governance, characterised by ambiguity, duplication, and limited adaptability.

This fragmentation is particularly evident in the governance of digital labour platforms. Over the past decade, the number of digital labour platforms has increased fivefold globally, fundamentally reshaping how work is organised and regulated.³⁹ Yet regulatory frameworks remain misaligned with this transformation. Platform work often falls simultaneously under labour law,

commercial regulation, and data governance—without being fully governed by any of them. This creates persistent classification disputes (employee vs. self-employed), which directly affect access to rights, protections, and social security.

At the firm level, the rapid diffusion of algorithmic management widens these gaps further. An OECD–ILO survey of over 6,000 firms across six countries found algorithmic systems already widely used to allocate tasks, monitor performance, and evaluate workers, often without clear accountability structures.⁴⁰ Such systems can improve efficiency, but also bring opacity in decision-making, difficulty contesting outcomes, and limited transparency in how work is controlled.

These dynamics contribute to what can be understood as “policy sedimentation” (the accumulation of overlapping rules without resolving underlying inconsistencies).⁴¹ In the case of platform labour, this results in dense but ineffective governance architectures. For

³⁵ Centeno et al., 2022

³⁶ Standing, 2023

³⁷ De Stefano & Aloisi, 2022

³⁸ OECD, 2024

³⁹ ILO, 2021

⁴⁰ ILO, 2024

⁴¹ Bégin-Caouette, *et al.* 2021

example, despite increasing regulatory attention, many platform workers continue to experience income volatility, unilateral account deactivation, and limited access to collective representation.⁴² Such outcomes are not simply market failures but are actively produced by regulatory misalignment.

Crucially, these governance failures are compounded by data limitations. Even basic measurement of platform employment remains contested, with different methodologies producing divergent estimates and hindering effective policy design.⁴³ This lack of statistical clarity undermines enforcement, enabling practices such as misclassification and regulatory arbitrage to persist across jurisdictions.

(4) From fragmentation to polysolutions: reframing labour governance

Addressing the polycrisis requires moving beyond fragmented interventions toward polysolutions—integrated policy designs that target interdependent risks across labour, digital, social, and climate domains.⁴⁴ Existing governance failures illustrate the need for such a shift: despite expanding regulatory activity, only 38% of the global population is effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit, leaving the majority exposed to compounded shocks.⁴⁵

Polysolutions imply three interrelated transformations. First, a shift from reactive to anticipatory governance, embedding foresight, data integration, and scenario planning into labour market institutions.⁴⁶ Second, a move from sectoral fragmentation to integrated policy design, aligning labour regulation with digital governance, climate transition strategies, and social protection systems. Third, a transition from protection to

resilience, ensuring that institutions not only mitigate risk but enhance the capacity of workers and systems to absorb, adapt, and transform under conditions of uncertainty.

Reconceptualised in this way, labour governance becomes a central infrastructural pillar of systemic resilience—shaping how risks are distributed, managed, and transformed across the polycrisis.⁴⁷

(5) Policy recommendations: anticipatory labour polysolutions

Effective intervention in a polycrisis depends on acting at institutional leverage points — sites where small, well-designed changes can realign entire systems. Labour governance is one such point, and the recommendations below translate this insight into operational, enforceable measures.

These recommendations are not all equally urgent or equally demanding. Recommendations (i)–(iii) and (vii) form a minimal, high-impact intervention set — technically feasible in the short term and not dependent on the others for effect — while recommendation (v) contains more advanced, longer-horizon measures, such as co-governance boards and digital labour tribunals, that the foundational measures are designed to enable. (see Table 1).

(i) Institutionalise anticipatory labour governance

- Governments should establish statutory Labour Foresight Units — linked to national statistical offices and central banks — to produce biannual Labour Risk Outlooks from administrative data, platform data-sharing agreements, and climate exposure modelling.
- Labour impact assessments should be legally required ex-ante for major digital and climate policies, mirroring fiscal

⁴² ILO, 2021

⁴³ OECD, 2023

⁴⁴ Homer-Dixon et al., 2023

⁴⁵ ILO, 2023

⁴⁶ OECD, 2024

⁴⁷ Acemoglu & Johnson, 2023

impact rules, with public disclosure and parliamentary review.

- Scenario tools (e.g., stress-testing sectors for automation or heat stress) should trigger automatic responses, such as activating reskilling funds once displacement thresholds are reached.

(ii) Regulate algorithmic management with enforceable standards

Adopt binding Algorithmic Accountability Standards for Work:

- Right to explanation and contestation for automated decisions on pay, task access, or termination.
- Annual independent algorithmic audits by regulator-certified auditors.
- Data minimisation and purpose limitation in workplace surveillance
- Create Digital Labour Inspectorates with forensic tech capacity (API access, audit logs), require large platforms to provide secure regulator APIs for real-time compliance checks, and introduce joint liability across platforms and subcontractors to prevent responsibility-shifting.

(iii) Build universal, portable social protection (UPSP)

- Implement individual social protection accounts that are fully portable across employers and platforms, with pro-rata contributions per transaction (micro-levies embedded in payments).
- Mandate platform contributions indexed to gross value generated, rather than employment status.
- Ensure interoperability across borders (e.g., regional agreements) to cover transnational gig work.
- Use auto-enrolment by default, with opt-out only under strict conditions, to close coverage gaps.

(iv) Embed gender equality as system design

- Adopt care as critical infrastructure, with multi-year investment plans and binding coverage targets for childcare and long-term care. Introduce gender-responsive

wage-setting via sectoral agreements in care, retail, and hospitality, backed by enforcement units.

- Require intersectional impact assessments and pay-transparency dashboards, and tie public procurement to gender-equality compliance.

(v) Rebuild worker voice as governance infrastructure:

- Extend collective bargaining rights irrespective of employment classification, and legalise platform-based unions.
- Establish co-governance boards giving workers a voice over algorithm design, data use, and scheduling.
- Create fast-track digital labour tribunals with 30-day resolution targets, and link public subsidies and tax incentives to collective agreement coverage.

(vi) Integrate labour into climate and digital transitions

- Make Just Transition Compacts legally binding, with sector roadmaps covering job-quality metrics, reskilling guarantees, and income bridges.
- Align industrial policy with employment conditionalities (e.g., subsidies contingent on training and job standards).
- Build state-firm co-financed lifelong learning accounts that activate automatically during sectoral shocks, and integrate labour data into climate risk systems for place-based interventions.

(vii) Strengthen state capacity and coordination

- Upgrade labour inspectorates with digital audit tools, higher inspector-to-worker ratios, and cross-border enforcement protocols.
- Create inter-ministerial Labour Transition Councils (labour, finance, digital, climate) with shared KPIs and pooled budgets.
- Standardise measurement of non-standard work through mandatory platform reporting and harmonised definitions.

Table 1: Recommendations at a glance

Recommendation	Key instrument(s)	Lead actors	Tier	Time horizon
(i) Institutionalise anticipatory labour governance	Labour Foresight Units; biannual Labour Risk Outlooks; ex-ante labour impact assessments	Labour ministries; national statistical offices; central banks	Foundational	Short-term
(ii) Regulate algorithmic management with enforceable standards	AAS-W; independent algorithmic audits; regulator APIs; Digital Labour Inspectorates	Labour/digital regulators; data protection authorities	Foundational	Short-medium-term
(iii) Build universal, portable social protection (UPSP)	Portable protection accounts; per-transaction micro-levies; auto-enrolment	Social security institutions; finance ministries; platforms	Foundational	Short-medium-term
(iv) Embed gender equality as system design	Sectoral wage-setting; pay-transparency dashboards; procurement conditionality	Labour ministries; equality bodies; sectoral social partners	Complementary	Medium-term
(v) Rebuild worker voice as governance infrastructure	Extended bargaining rights; co-governance boards; digital labour tribunals	Social partners; labour courts/tribunals; platforms	Advanced	Medium-long-term
(vi) Integrate labour into climate and digital transitions	Just Transition Compacts; lifelong learning accounts; industrial policy conditionality	Labour, industry, and climate/energy ministries	Complementary	Medium-long-term
(vii) Strengthen state capacity and coordination	Upgraded inspectorates; Labour Transition Councils; harmonised platform reporting	Labour inspectorates; inter-ministerial councils; statistical offices	Foundational	Short-term

5.1. Implementation pathways

These measures do not require a standalone governance vehicle — they can be anchored in instruments policymakers already use. At national and EU level, they map onto National Reform Programmes, European Semester employment guidelines, national employment strategies, Just Transition Plans, and climate/digital transition financing (e.g.,

National Energy and Climate Plans, Recovery and Resilience Plans). At multilateral level, the foresight and reporting instruments proposed here align with ongoing ILO and OECD workstreams on platform work measurement — a ready-made entry point for pilot implementation rather than a wholly new architecture.

(6) Conclusion: labour governance as the foundation for resilient futures

Previous crises have historically driven institutional reform; recent disruptions—including the COVID-19 pandemic and the expansion of digital labour markets—have not, reflecting fragmented institutions, uneven enforcement, and regulatory misalignment.⁴⁸ Overlapping pressures from technological transformation, climate transition, and inequality are now straining governance systems and slowing progress toward broader development objectives, including those set by the UN.

Addressing this requires scaling up governance capacity: expanding social protection coverage, strengthening enforcement, and improving institutional coordination, alongside integrating foresight tools, data-driven monitoring, and cross-

sectoral alignment.⁴⁹ Equally important is inclusive, participatory governance — stronger worker representation, better access to labour market data, and support for local and sectoral institutions — informed by reliable, timely evidence.

Overall, in the face of the polycrisis, enhancing labour governance systems represents a key component of broader efforts to strengthen resilience and support inclusive and sustainable development.

⁴⁸ ILO, 2023

⁴⁹ OECD, 2024

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