

Stakeholder Consultation on Labour for AI: Southeast Asia | Event Readback

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Context

Technology systems, including AI chatbots and social media safety, depend heavily on human labour. Important work, like content moderation and AI model training, is often [outsourced to workers in the Global South](#), where regulations are favourable for Global North businesses. These ecosystems resemble the platform-driven gig economy. Workers face precarious conditions and algorithmic management while their labour drives valuable tech products and services. Tech companies [thrive](#) from the results of such work, but these workforces remain overlooked in AI governance discussions. Despite recent [advocacy](#) and developments, systemic change requires coordinated policy interventions that address the transnational nature of these forms of work.

The Southeast Asian region is a major hub for this labour in the form of data work and content moderation. Working conditions often remain poorly regulated, workers lack recognition and protections, and cross-border accountability remains elusive. To build upon [ongoing conversations](#) from our previous dialogue focusing on Africa, Aapti Institute and Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ GmbH) convened the second Stakeholder Consultation to focus on the experiences and challenges of digital labour in Southeast Asia. The consultation brought together key stakeholders to share insights, propose pathways to fairer labour conditions, and explore collective strategies to address the transnational and systemic challenges of the AI labour supply chain.

Participants

The consultation brought together a wide range of stakeholders from Southeast Asia and other regions, including digital workers, union organisers, legal experts, researchers, and policy professionals. Organisations such as BIEN Philippines, Foxglove, and Fairwork, alongside representatives from advocacy networks and independent researchers, participated in the consultation. Discussions drew on experiences from sectors such as content moderation, data annotation, and BPO work, covering both frontline realities and broader governance issues. The exchange of perspectives reflected the varied roles and locations of actors involved in the AI supply chain and digital labour ecosystem.

Key Insights

Seeking Data for AI: Working Conditions and Risks

1. While data work is often perceived as flexible and suitable for remote arrangements, many data workers actually face exploitative and rigid conditions. Limited infrastructure

and the necessity for high-speed internet compel them to work from local cybercafes, stripping away the freedom that is typically associated with remote work – a benefit that is frequently highlighted as a key advantage of such arrangements.

2. In some cases, due to the expansion of certain digital labour platforms into other regions of the global south and resulting competition, the pay scale of the workers in the Philippines on this platform has deteriorated sharply, from \$10 per task to as low as \$0.01.
3. Workers often face short-term contracts, unpaid overtime, and a lack of clarity on how their labour is used, who their real employers are, and what rights they have.
4. In content moderation, workers are routinely exposed to violent and harmful material. However, the mental health infrastructure is severely lacking—many interventions seem to be generic, performative, or inaccessible.
5. NDAs (non-disclosure agreements) prevent workers from speaking about their difficult experiences, further deepening isolation and fear of retaliation and legal action. Within content moderation specifically, these NDAs make it harder for them to collectivise and demand their rights.
6. The mental toll of this work can be devastating. Many noted increasing instances of mental health breakdowns, trauma, insomnia, and even suicidal tendencies among former workers.

Algorithmic Management: Monitoring, Surveillance and AI as Manager

1. AI tools are used not just for task assistance but also as management systems that control productivity, track activity, and even initiate worker dismissal without prior intimation.
2. Workers are kicked off platforms without reasons or appeals, often due to opaque performance metrics.
3. Content moderators in Southeast Asia are often monitored, surveilled, and penalised without clear communication or redress. AI systems are used to track errors or flag performance issues without explanation.
4. A key concern among workers is the opacity of these systems—uncertainty about whether tasks come from platforms or BPOs, and on what basis their compensation is determined, especially when accurate work still goes unpaid.
5. Workers rely on each other to understand platform policies, as long and inconsistent protocols add to the confusion.

Transnational Governance of the AI Supply Chain: Outsourcing, Regulation, and AI Supply Chains

1. Content moderation and data work continue to mirror extractive models found in industries like garment manufacturing—placing Southeast Asian workers in low-paid, high-risk roles.
2. Governments in Southeast Asia are actively promoting AI as a development strategy, but the policies largely ignore or render the risks and rights of frontline data workers and content moderators invisible.
3. There is an urgent need for cross-border regulatory frameworks and due diligence mechanisms. Currently, AI firms can deny responsibility for harms by hiding behind outsourcing layers.
4. There is a need to explore the mobility of workers within the supply chain and to question how governments frame such arrangements as opportunities for workers.
5. Experts stress the need to integrate human rights and environmental risk assessments into AI governance—especially as massive data centres are being built in places like Johor, Malaysia, which is now being dubbed the region’s “AI hub.” This raises critical questions about who holds rights, responsibility, and power in such developments. Also, how can policy take into account the resource-intensive nature of establishing data centres while accepting Southeast Asia as a region for an AI hub, and whether policy should accept the permanent positioning of Southeast Asia's land exploitation, water depletion, and displacement?

Reflections

This consultation reinforced the urgent need to centre human labour in AI discourse and policymaking. The devaluation of the labour of data workers is a recurring theme across Southeast Asia. While AI is often portrayed as a symbol of development in countries like the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia, the impact on workers’ well-being is overlooked.

Multiple participants, some of whom were former data workers and content moderators, reflected on how low wages, the impact of continuous exposure to graphic content on mental health, and algorithmic surveillance form a trifecta of precarity for data workers. The insights shared by the speakers underscored that the psychological consequences of this work are long-term, community-wide, and deeply personal—far beyond what most support systems are currently equipped to handle.

Participants also highlighted the importance of transnational solidarity and collective action. Many workers were afraid of retaliation if they were to join unions. This signals the urgent need to build a global community of resistance and knowledge-sharing networks.

Finally, the consultation reaffirmed the need for both short-term protections and long-term structural change. Digital workers in the Global South must be recognised as valued stakeholders in technological systems and not just invisible labour.