

# Workers' power and platform capitalism: the embryo towards an alternative

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, there has been an expansion of digital platforms that has reshaped the world of work by introducing platform work. Most of the studies on gig work – platform work – focus on the global North. While there is growing evidence in developing countries, the research on how platform workers in Africa are responding to the platform economy is quite limited. Although platform work is based on freedom and autonomy to work, our research among food courier riders in South Africa, Ghana and Kenya found that this new work order is deepening worker insecurity and undermines worker right. We argue that technology allows platform workers an avenue to bargain for their labour rights, thus contributing to the emergence of self-organised, hybrid forms of union-like associations – associational power – and new partnerships with traditional unions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – societal power. This provides platform workers with the ability to develop collective solidarity and engage in strike action. Ultimately, the rise of the gig economy has led to a new social force which can replace the old one, as evident from the recent upsurge in labour struggles in the platform economy globally as well as in the global South.

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Gig economy; labour process theory; power resources approach; self-organised; union-like associations

## Introduction

There is a widespread view that the individualisation, dispersal and pervasive monitoring that characterises work in the 'gig economy' has deemed gig workers 'unorganisable'. The rapid growth of digital labour platforms and the rise of precarious work, fuelled a growth of worker resistance driven by self-organised groups in various parts of world (Gandini 2019, Joyce and Stuart 2021, Vandaele 2021). While there has been a decline of union membership and density, especially in the global North (Webster with Dor 2023, p. ix), the unionisation rates continue to be low in the global South, and there is a new social force gaining ground in the form of informal unions or associations with the rise of the platform economy. A growing body of research also shows that the gig worker is not a passive victim of technological change (Anwar and Graham 2020, Dickinson 2021), and are using technology to increase their associational power in the UK, Argentina and other countries (Woodcock and Graham 2020, ILO 2021).

Further, in contrast to popular claims that 'gig workers are anomic and essentially unorganisable', Mallett (2020) argues that 'the possibilities for the expression of collective agency and contentious

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politics are to be found in multiple and diverse forms' (Mallett 2020, p. 282). This is evident from the Leeds Index of Platform Labour Protest, a database of platform worker protest events around the world, which has documented 1 271 instances of worker protest between January 2017 and July 2020 (Bessa *et al.* 2022). Furthermore, platform worker protests showed a strong tendency to be driven from below by worker self-organisation, especially so in the global South, although trade unions also had an important presence in some parts of the world (Bessa *et al.* 2022). As documented by Bessa *et al.* (2022), the most common and important cause of these protests actions is over pay, employment status and health and safety. These issues were also common in the case of protests in Johannesburg, Nairobi, and Accra. In Johannesburg the food courier riders, protest actions took place between January 2021 and March 2022 which were solely driven by self-organised groups. Most recently, in Nairobi, as reported by ITWeb Africa in July 2024,<sup>1</sup> e-hailing drivers, and delivery services from Bolt, Uber, Little Cab Kenya and Faras, embarked on protest action, demanding for higher pay and opposed higher taxation, among other things. Meanwhile in Accra on the 17 May 2024,<sup>2</sup> gig workers also embarked on a easter strike for transparent earnings, the pressure of working long hours which leads to widespread exhaustion. This shows that there is a significant increase in platform worker protests which in this instance were fuelled by fee cuts, as an aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and issues of health and safety since most of the food courier riders do not have any health and safety benefits.

In this article, we extend this growing body of research through a much-needed perspective from Africa. We argue that the labour market in the global South differs significantly from the industrialised global North, which has implications for the power resources approach (PRA). Veteran Africanist Henry Bernstein (2007, p. 2) suggests that, instead of clearly demarcated classes of capital and labour, in Africa you have quite flexible 'classes of labour'. 'In practice', he says, 'what you have in African cities is a large group who simultaneously and ambiguously combine employment and self-employment', and categories like 'worker', 'peasant', 'employed' and 'self-employed' are fluid.

The implications of this ambiguous status of the African worker is that precarious workers are experimenting with new hybrid forms of worker organisation, including different types of associations. This blurs the distinction between traditional unionism and informal workers' associations, co-operatives, micro-businesses and savings clubs (see Webster and Dor 2023). However, traditional unions remain crucial to providing support and access to institutional power for the emerging organisations of precarious workers. This is discussed in the case of the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union in Kampala (ATGWU-K) and the Transport and Allied Workers in Kenya (TWU-K). The ATGWU-K managed to expand its members from 5000 to 100 000 members by incorporating informal associations of taxi operators and boda boda (motorcycle) drivers into the union (Webster and Dor 2023).

This articles aims to highlight that through the rise of the gig economy a new social force is being born to replace the old one. This changing nature of work, the deepening oppression of workers and the weakness of the Trade Union are reshaping an extremely precarious workforce in the informal and gig economy. However, through our ethnographic study in Johannesburg, particularly, it shows that the workers are self-organising, which provides them with the ability to develop collective solidarity and engage in strike action.

This article begins by introducing the PRA, a research heuristic approach that identifies different sources of workers' power that have emerged under the conditions of an increasingly globalised economy. We focus our attention on the restructuring that takes place at the workplace level, which we describe elsewhere as 'labour process fixes' (Webster with Dor 2023). Through these labour process fixes, capital ultimately seeks to buy labour power from workers on a more 'flexible' (that is, exploitable) basis. This entails bringing a whole new section of the working class into the economy for the first time. We then discuss the rise of platform capitalism and the platform labour process.

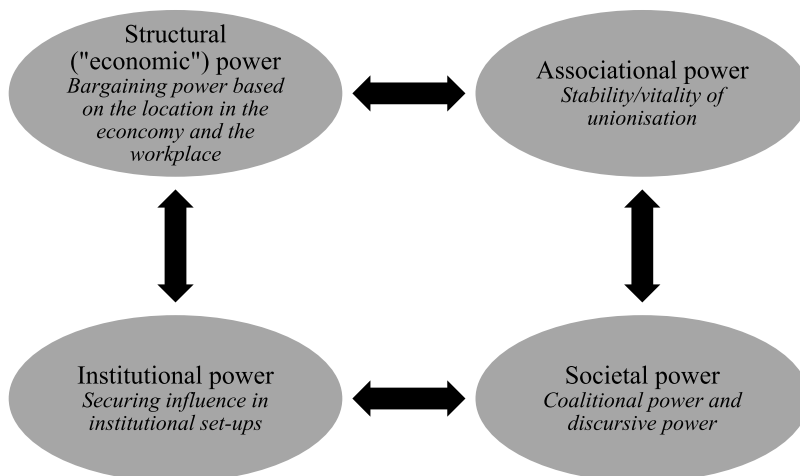
We turn, finally, to who the food courier riders are in order to understand the nature of this type of work, drawing from the findings of our research report titled 'I just want to survive'. We apply the PRA to food courier riders and identify union-like hybrid collectives that offer mutual aid. This opens the possibility of riders developing new forms of organisation and sources of power. However, the food couriers' major limitation is that they have weak marketplace bargaining power. Entry requirements for the job are low and large reserves of unemployed labour from across Africa make riders easily replaceable.

We divide the article into two parts: the first part examines the platform labour process. The second part explores the new forms of worker organisation emerging in the platform economy through a PRA lens.

## Theoretical framing

The origin of the power resources approach (PRA) was pioneered in Europe by Korpi (1978) in the late 1960s and 1970s and 'demonstrates that the conflicts of interest manifested in the political arenas of the European welfare state could be seen as a form of democratic class struggle' (Schmalz *et al.* 2018, p. 114, Refslund and Arnholtz 2022). In Figure 1 below, we conceptualise the possibility of the use of the PRA in the globalised economy, drawing on the experiences of food couriers in our study. The notions of structural power that arose from labour's position in the economic system, as well as the associational power that resulted from the collective actions of workers' associations, were the starting point for a global debate on workers' power that would lay the foundations for what has become the PRA (Schmalz *et al.* 2018). We extend this beyond formal associations to include informal associations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), micro-enterprises and worker-controlled co-operatives. Chun (2012, p. 7) identified the sources of workers' societal power as alliances or coalitions by labour with other social groups and action to influence public discourse. The concept of institutional power was introduced by researchers from Germany who drew attention to institutionalised labour rights and social dialogue processes as the sources of workers' institutional power (Dörre *et al.* 2009, Urban 2012). See Figure 1 below:

To understand the responses of precarious workers, we draw on the approaches of Silver (2003) and Harvey (2003) by locating changes in the labour movement within broader processes of class formation and restructuring. Silver studies the unmaking of old and the making of new elements of the working class in relation to what she calls capital's technological fixes (Silver 2003, p. 39)



**Figure 1.** Trade union power resources. Source: Expanded chart based on Gerst *et al.* (2011).

and through the relocation of production to low-wage spheres of the world – what Harvey (2003) describes as capital's spatial fixes. We complement that literature by returning to the labour process to examine the making and remaking of the older sections of the working class and the making of new sections in the process (Kenny and Webster 2021, p. 11).

We draw on the PRA to identify different sources of power and the new forms of worker organisation that are emerging among the large swathes of precarious and informal labour in Africa. Often arising outside the established union movement, workers' organisations adopt a hybrid character, forging alliances with progressive trade unions and NGOs in an effort to build associational power and transform the conditions of work.

## Research methods

This study employed several qualitative research methods. Initially, questionnaires were administered, serving as a key data collection instrument. These were followed by in-depth interviews with food courier riders in Johannesburg, Nairobi, and Accra who expressed interest in participating. A total of 150 riders (50 from each city) were interviewed.<sup>3</sup> Riders were recruited using snowball sampling in areas with high concentrations of food couriers, such as shopping centres and malls. In Johannesburg, recruitment began in Campus Square with a member of the Brothers of Melville association, who then connected the researchers with other riders. Subsequent interviews were conducted in various locations across Johannesburg, including Rosebank Mall, Columbine Avenue, Clearwater Mall, and Cresta Shopping Mall. In Nairobi, field researcher Agnes Tsheri administered questionnaires and conducted interviews with 50 riders in and around Nairobi's central business district and Westgate Shopping Mall. Similarly, in Accra, field researcher Karim Saagbuk administered questionnaires and conducted interviews with 50 riders in and around Accra Shopping Mall. Diverse work zones within Accra and Nairobi were targeted to minimise potential bias in the collected data.

The survey was administered in English, the common language among the riders. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 min. Following the initial interviews, ten riders in Johannesburg who expressed a strong interest in further discussion and a desire for improved working conditions were selected for in-depth interviews. An additional in-depth interview was conducted with a female rider in Nairobi, who also provided further details related to the survey. Furthermore, biographies were constructed for two of the ten Johannesburg riders who participated in the in-depth interviews. A two-week diary, documenting the daily routine of one Johannesburg rider, was also collected via WhatsApp voice notes and messages. Finally, participant observation was conducted by attending soccer matches organised by the riders in Johannesburg on public holidays.

Sharing our findings with participants led to the development of an ongoing forum, transforming the research into a form of critical engagement. This approach, as described by Arribas Lozano (2018, p. 107), addresses the complexities of collaborative knowledge production, aiming to create research meaningful for both social scientists and the communities involved. Rather than simply studying social movements, Arribas Lozano (2018, p. 103) advocates for 'working and thinking together with social movement activists' to generate relevant research for both academic and participant communities. This forum provided a structure for riders across different work zones to voice their concerns and collectively seek solutions with relevant authorities. The findings presented here are based on 150 interviews conducted in Johannesburg, Accra, and Nairobi, supplemented by in-depth interviews with selected riders in Johannesburg and one female rider in Nairobi to capture the lived experiences of food couriers.

The riders who participated in interviews are listed at the end of this article. These riders were initially identified through the survey. Of the 11 in-depth interviews conducted, two riders consented to the use of their real names; pseudonyms are used for all others. These in-depth interviews provided richer insights into working conditions and their grievances, and we have presented some of the experiences as quotations in the article.

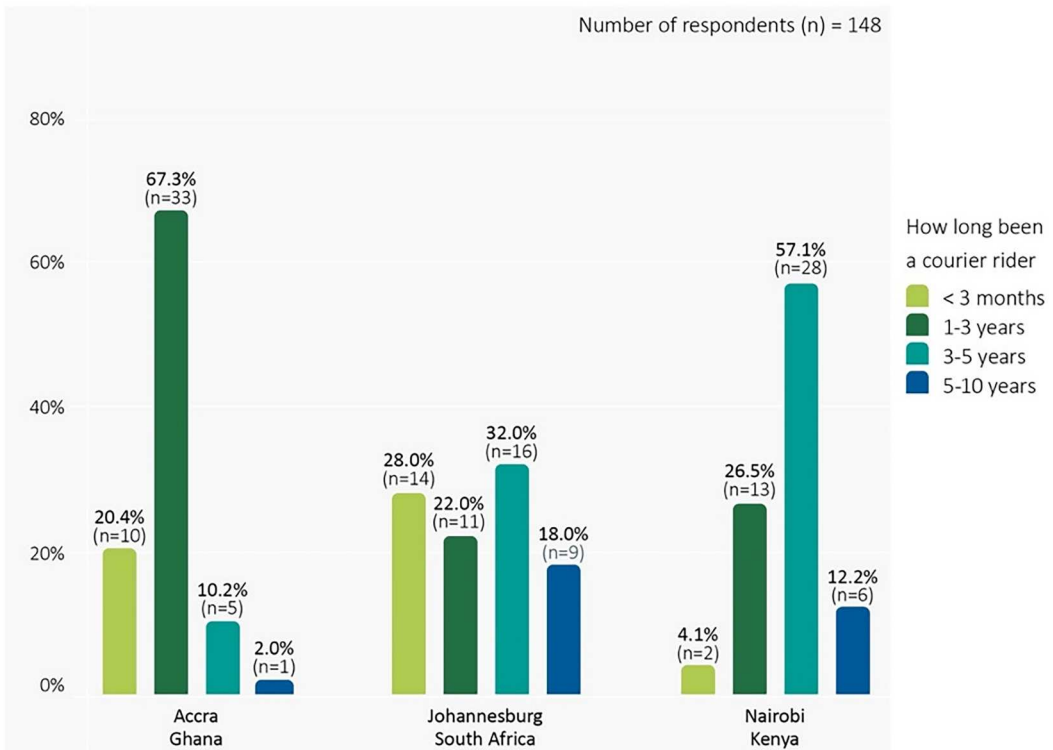
The next two sections present the platform labour process and discuss the possibilities of building sustainable collective organisations.

## The platform labour process

Over the past decade there has been a dramatic expansion of digital platforms. Platform work refers to paid work mediated by a software application (the App) used by the platform, through a new business model that is based on authoritarian algorithmic management (Webster and Masikane 2022). This business model allows platforms, such as Uber, to organise work without having to invest in capital equipment or to hire employees. In essence, the platform company is a labour broker selling labour to the client – in our case, the restaurant – and a service to the customer. The most striking feature of food courier delivery riders in the three cities we surveyed is that they are overwhelmingly men, young, black and relatively well educated (Webster and Masikane 2022, pp. 20–22). However, there are important regional variations. In Johannesburg, 90 per cent of the riders interviewed were cross-border migrants, while in Nairobi and Accra, riders were local citizens with only some internal migrants from other parts of the country. (Webster and Masikane 2022, p. 21). In the case of South Africa, cross-border migrants are more precarious in most cases, as platforms take advantage of their asylum seeker status and use the workers for cheap labour.

Unlike the global North where platform work (e-hailing, rider-hailing) is often irregular and part time (Vandaele 2018, p. 8), our sample of workers showed that this work was relatively stable; and riders remained in the job for relatively long periods of time. Due to the high unemployment rates

### Length of riders' employment as a courier



**Figure 2.** The length of riders' employment as food couriers.

Source: Webster and Masikane (2022).

across the cities, the most likely explanation is that app-based platform work is the best job available to them. As one respondent remarked, 'I just want to survive', and the survey in Nairobi also indicates that 12 per cent of courier riders have over five years of experience, delivering food may indeed be a career (Figure 2).

Food couriers are old-fashioned piece-rate workers; they are only paid when they perform the task of delivering food to a customer. On average, 69 per cent of the riders in our sample waited 30–60 min between calls (Webster and Masikane 2022, pp. 32–33), resulting in long working days with significant unpaid time. According to 46 per cent of the sample, the average workday spanned 12 h, from 9:00am to 9:00pm. As a Ghanaian courier rider remarked, 'I do not have off days. I work all days of the week. I only pause when there is an occasion' (Richard, interview, 2021). Because remuneration is tied to completed tasks, riders strive to make as many deliveries as possible. These long hours are driven by self-imposed earning targets necessary for survival.

When asked about workplace problems, Johannesburg riders most frequently cited crime, while health and safety concerns were paramount for riders in Accra and Nairobi. Specifically, 58 per cent of our Johannesburg sample identified crime as their major concern (Webster and Masikane 2022, p. 34). The high crime rate has rendered certain areas of the city unsafe, effectively normalising the risk for riders. Neighbourhoods like Brixton, Westbury, and Hillbrow are widely recognised as no-go zones.

The labour process is such that, rather than clocking in with a traditional timecard, gig workers log into an app, subjecting themselves to the external authority of an algorithm (Webster and Masikane 2022). Simply put, an algorithm is a process or set of rules followed for calculations or other problem-solving operations, especially by a computer (Maphukata *et al.* 2021). For food delivery riders, the motorbike is the tool, but the smartphone is the workplace. As one respondent in Johannesburg remarked, 'Without my phone, I have no work' (Steven, interview, 2021).

This algorithm translates consumer demand into tasks for riders, specifying where and when those tasks must be performed and directly or indirectly determining how much money workers will be paid for the tasks, regardless of the distance between the restaurant and the customer's home. The app directly or indirectly controls the execution of the work and the worker's performance at work. Essentially, the platform companies perform an intermediation role by integrating reviews, rating systems, global positioning systems (GPS) and electronic payment systems (Vargas and Castañeda 2022).

The platform determines the worker's earnings based on the customer's payment, calculating a percentage based on opaque algorithmic processes hidden from the workers. In many ways, this system is similar to Frederick Taylor's ideas of scientific management,<sup>4</sup> where management leverages its knowledge monopoly to control every step of the labour process (Braverman 1974, p. 12). Platform work could thus be described as a form of 'digital Taylorism' (Brown *et al.* 2010 see also Braverman 1974).

A common feature of digital work emerges here: customer ratings. These ratings translate into a reputational score within the platform – a proxy for trustworthiness – which riders believe influences the amount of work they receive. This system creates constant pressure to perform well and deliver food promptly and in good condition. So, it is also a form of self-exploitation. Riders receive star ratings (from 1 to 5) via the app as feedback on their service quality. These scores accumulate over time, providing both the rider and customer with an overall rating (e.g. a rider might have a cumulative score of 4,000 stars). Riders reported that this system motivates them to improve their service – a process we later term 'gamification'. As Johannesburg rider Josias noted, 'It pushes drivers to comply because they want higher ratings' (Interview 2020).

Riders believe that customer ratings directly impact their income, motivating them to work harder. When asked about the importance of driver ratings, riders explained that high ratings were crucial for maintaining access to the Uber network and, consequently, protecting their income stream. Only 37 per cent of the total sample respondents reported earning enough to cover their monthly expenses. The highest proportion of riders who earned enough was in Accra

(48 per cent), followed by Nairobi (39 per cent) and Johannesburg (25 per cent). While 32 per cent stated they couldn't cover their expenses, a significant portion (31 per cent) answered 'don't know'. This high uncertainty likely stems from the unpredictable nature of rider income, which depends on the fluctuating number of orders received each month. As one Accra rider explained, 'I live within whatever income I am able to make in the month [enough that] I am able to pay rent and utilities' (Yussif 2021). However, for many riders, work provided a precarious hand-to-mouth existence, as illustrated by these comments: 'Some deliveries are calculated based on distance, so the income is not adequate' (Ali 2021, Accra); and 'My salary is not enough. I have siblings in school and parents to take care of. My dependents are more than my salary' (Emmanuel 2021, Accra).

Each city in Uber's global network has a minimum driver rating requirement for remaining active on the platform (Uber 2016). This gives riders some control over their income while reinforcing the perceived 'flexibility' of the work. However, it also highlights the precarious nature of their employment, as the company can deactivate accounts for unsatisfactory performance. This precarity is further amplified in Johannesburg, where 90 per cent of the riders are migrant workers, some lacking legal work documentation.

By introducing competition through rating and displaying performance metrics like personal bests (PBs),<sup>5</sup> Uber encourages couriers to 'play the game'. Sarah Mason (2018) calls this 'gamification' and is central to the Uber business model. Mason, who took a job as an Uber driver to study the work model, described it in this way (Mason 2018, p. 4):

Simply defined, gamification is the use of game elements – point-scoring, levels, competition with others, measurable evidence of accomplishment, ratings and rules of play – in non-game contexts. Games deliver an instantaneous, visceral experience of success and reward, and they are increasingly used in the workplace to promote emotional engagement with the work process, to increase workers' psychological investment in completing otherwise uninspiring tasks, and to influence, or "nudge" workers' behaviour.

Most participants believed that customer ratings were crucial because they influenced their chances of attracting clients. Johannesburg driver Joseph (Interview 2020) explained:

When you get poor ratings from clients, Uber Eats deactivates your account. When it [your rating] is as low as 85 they [Uber Eats] send you a message warning you about your ratings. If there are no improvements, they deactivate your account.

This section has demonstrated how the technological innovations of platform work coexist with outdated organisational practices. As Ravenelle (2019, p. 11) observes, it represents a 'movement forward to the past and working conditions that resemble the early industrial age'. Platform work mirrors traditional task-based piecework, with extended periods of unpaid labour, significant risks of accidents and harassment, and a lack of basic occupational health and safety protections from the platform companies. Algorithmic management could be considered a form of 'digital Taylorism', granting management unilateral control over fragmented tasks. Furthermore, the customer rating system encourages self-exploitation and gamification. Vandaele (2018, p. 9) succinctly captures this dynamic:

The 'mumbo jumbo' of digital labor platforms about 'rebranding work' ... in a move towards an increasingly 'fissured workplace' ... is simply part of the recommodification of labor in the core countries of the capitalist system experienced from the 1970s onwards.

We turn now to examine through a power resources approach (PRA) lens the possibilities and limits of organising platform workers. What power, we ask, do food couriers have to challenge this unequal work relationship?

### Emerging forms of worker organisation: through the PRA lens

In the above section where we discuss the platform labour process, we identified a range of characteristics of the platform labour process. To guide us in our examination of platform work, we apply

the power resources approach (PRA) to examining institutional, structural, associational and societal power. Our assumption is that power resources are not sufficient to build organisations; strategic capabilities are required – that is, the capability to detect power resources in order to make use of them. Lévesque and Murray (2010, 2013) identify four such capabilities: the ability to learn from the past (learning capability); the ability to resolve conflict and build consensus (intermediation capability); the ability to develop new strategies and establish an autonomous agenda (framing capability); and the ability to adapt organisational traditions to changing policy needs (organisational flexibility). We deal now with each power resource, beginning with institutional power.

### ***Institutional power***

Institutional power embeds past social compromises through the incorporation of structural, associational and societal power into the law bargaining arrangements and labour market institutions (Schmalz *et al.* 2018). Importantly, this source of power continues to be applied during ongoing economic cycles, even when power relations within society may have changed.

The first step in the direction of institutional power was the passing of the National Transport and Safety Authority Regulation no 48 2022 in Kenya. These regulations do not allow for sectoral collective bargaining but do lay the foundations for the establishment of a nation-wide tripartite body (Castel-Branco *et al.* 2023). However, in our study we found that the food couriers were organised through WhatsApp groups, which allowed them to communicate efficiently about accidents, informal savings groups and soccer matches that happen on public holidays. This level of organisation allowed the riders to participate in strike actions in 2020 and again in 2022 in Johannesburg, where the riders collectively logged off. Due to lack of institutional power, these strike actions were not effective and the demands of the riders were not met. It is very evident that there is a need for trade unions to collaborate with the food couriers and find effective ways to assist this growing pool of workers.

### ***Structural power***

As illustrated in Figure 1, workers have the potential to exercise structural power in the form of market-based bargaining power and workplace bargaining power. Market-based bargaining power depends on the skill level required of the worker, the degree of unemployment and the extent to which the worker has access to non-wage income. Workplace bargaining power, on the other hand, rests on your location in the heart of the production or distribution process and your capacity to disrupt through direct action.

The marketplace bargaining power of the riders we researched was constrained by a number of factors: the job has low entry requirements, companies can easily disconnect ‘disorderly’ riders, there are large reserves of labour making riders easily replaceable and, in Johannesburg, riders were especially vulnerable as the majority were undocumented cross-border migrants. However, because the work is performed locally and supplied in person, food couriers do have potential workplace bargaining power. Thus we can perhaps draw on Pons-Vignon argument, that the PRA is significant in as far as it enables strategic thinking about unions and worker strategies however, it does not tackle the tactics deployed by employers to weaken workers. Pons-Vignon suggests that workers should not limit themselves to ‘union bargaining power such as wages, and working hours – structural power will not be sufficient’ – instead workers should think about ‘ownership and control over the labour process’.

Riders come together daily in what we call work zones to connect with their tech company. There are, for example, about 30 work zones in Johannesburg. Through face-to-face interaction, the riders create worker-driven messaging apps and chat groups on which they share information, develop a shared identity and announce local direct action. This contributes to their self-organisation into informal union-like groups. We described how these groups function and the solidaristic role they

play in Webster and Masikane (2022): ‘Groups, such as the Brothers of Melville (BOM), have rules and regulations. If a rider does not agree with them, they are free to leave’. These groups function as support groups. They contribute money and share valuable information. For example, they each contribute R100 (US\$6.40) when something happens, such as when a member is involved in an accident, dies or is the victim of robbery. They also collect R20 (US\$1.20) every Sunday for informal savings and split the money between them at the end of the year. There are about 20 people in each group. One of the members of BOM said, ‘These groups help us. When you are alone, you cannot go far, especially in South Africa; you always need support from people. It is better to be part of these groups’ (Alex 2020, Campus Square; Webster and Masikane 2022, p. 37).

Platform workers have workplace bargaining power. For instance, in December 2020, in response to an announcement to lower the commission rate paid to couriers, roughly 2000 courier riders across Johannesburg collectively logged off the Uber Eats platform, forcing the company to halt operations across the city. Scores of couriers in other large cities – Tshwane, Durban and Port Elizabeth – also collectively logged off (Webster and Masikane 2022, p. 40–41). The strike organisers were able to overcome the platform’s attempts to isolate them by using WhatsApp groups. They set up communication networks and channels from which they could spread messages and communicate across multiple WhatsApp groups. Although the strikers were unable to achieve their demands because Uber Eats was unwilling to engage with them, they demonstrated their ability to overcome the hyper-individualised identities that platforms imposed on them. The companies’ ‘technological fix’ turned out to be a double-edged sword. While it extended control over platform workers, just as the Fordist assembly line did for an earlier generation of workers, it also increased their workplace bargaining power by linking them together technologically.

Interestingly, about 79 per cent of the riders from the survey in Johannesburg, about 67 per cent in Accra and about 56 per cent in Nairobi said the purpose of their WhatsApp groups was to share information about work. 59 per cent in Johannesburg, 48 per cent in Accra and 60 per cent in Nairobi said the purpose of their whatsapp group was to share information about working conditions. About 20 per cent in Johannesburg joined for sharing information about informal savings which was the reason mentioned by 11 per cent of the sample. These groups, called ‘stokvels’ in South Africa, allow the workers to save money monthly and get the lump sum at the end of the year or through rotation among the members of the group from month to month (Irving 2005). Of the Nairobi cohort, 25 per cent mentioned informal savings. This is the result of the widespread formalisation of saving groups through the Savings and Credit Cooperative (SACCO).

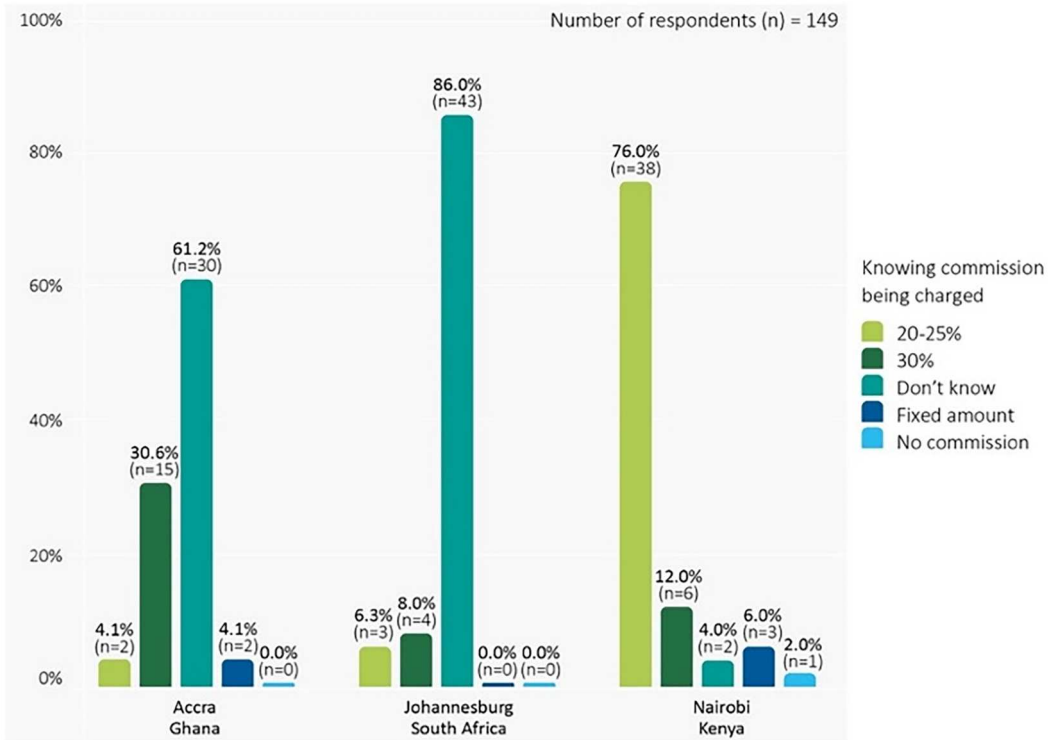
In our follow-up research in April 2023, we conducted a focus group with the Mgadi Road Zone, a SACCO organisation in Nairobi. It has a membership of 80 drivers and riders who are members of the Mgadi Road Zone co-operative but are also affiliated with the Transport and Allied Workers’ Union of Kenya (TAWU-K). The union provides a political platform for collective demands such as the rates companies charge, harassment of drivers by police and the insecurity of their contracts with the tech companies.

The Mgadi Road Zone is registered with the Ministry of Cooperatives and is allowed to receive deposits and provide loans to its members. The members contribute KES 350 a week as shareholders of the co-operative. At the end of the year, they receive a dividend based on how much income they make from the loans and investments in their various developmental ventures, such as car washing outlets or petrol stations, and in assisting their members with loans to buy a house, a car or to pay school fees.

### ***Associational power***

The classification of platform workers as ‘independent contractors’, that is, self-employed, hampers their collective representation because traditional trade unions see this status as incompatible with union membership. Importantly, our research revealed that the majority of riders saw themselves as ‘self-employed’. As can be seen in Figure 3 below, 76 per cent of respondents in Accra and 79.6 per cent in Nairobi saw themselves as self-employed. Only 18 per cent of riders in Johannesburg

Riders and their knowledge about how much commission they were being charged



Source: Webster and Masikane (2022)

Figure 3. Riders and their knowledge about how much commission they were being charged.

described themselves as ‘self-employed’ but 56 per cent of the riders described themselves as ‘partners’. When exploring this further, we interpreted their understanding of the term ‘partners’ as being similar to self-employed. This would mean that 74 per cent of the riders in Johannesburg saw themselves as self-employed.

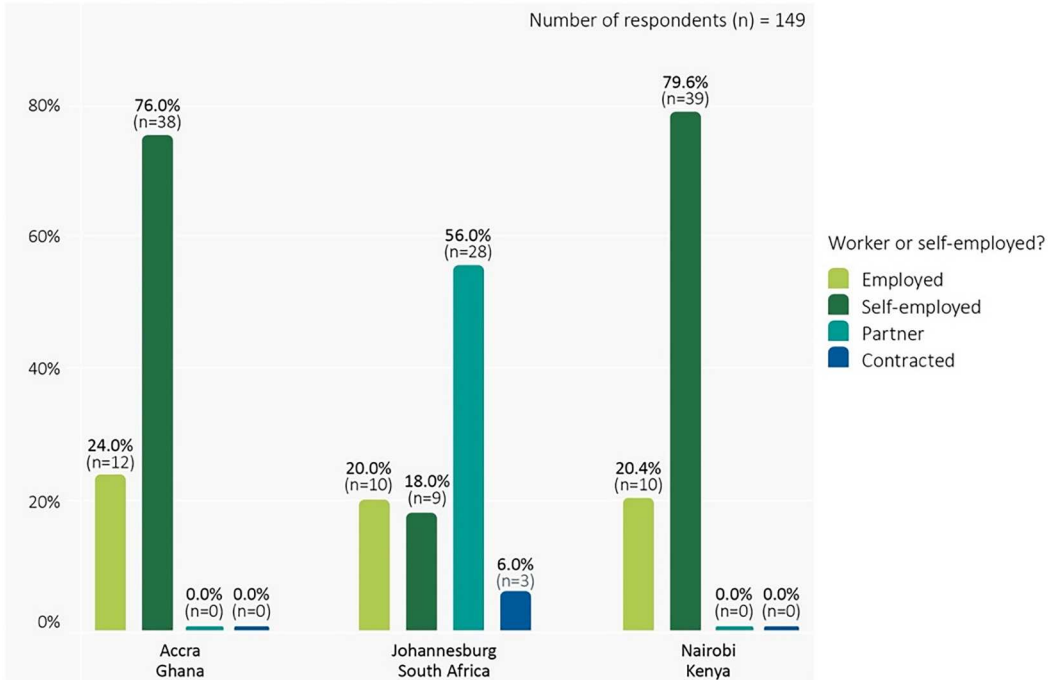
Ultimately, what has become clear is that associational power is the strongest among the food couriers even though structural and societal power are present. However, without institutional power, the gains cannot be consolidated. We have mentioned earlier that the food courier riders have gone on strike but their demands were not met.

The attraction of self-employment, partners with Uber or independent contractors,<sup>6</sup> is expressed in the following comments. In Accra, a rider explained that the nature of his employment was ‘not under any control of an employer’ (Abn 2021). Another rider remarked, ‘I am not accountable to anyone’ (Bright 2021, Accra). A third rider said he was happy that ‘Jumia (platform company) gives you freedom to do other work!’ (Webster and Masikane 2022, p. 25).

Instead of attempting to organise this new layer of platform workers, established unions are focusing on those workers in stable jobs and ignoring platform workers; they are reproducing the dualities in labour markets. The effect of this is to buttress capital’s dualised workplace regimes, which also eventually leads to the marginalisation of these unions. This is what Jelle Visser calls dualisation (Visser 2012).

Self-organised hybrid union-like associations have emerged as a result of a representational gap among platform workers and the reluctance of traditional unions to organise these ‘self-employed’ workers (see Figure 4).

## Riders' perception of self: a worker or self-employed partner?



**Figure 4.** Riders' perception of their employment status. Source: Webster and Masikane (2022).

In Figure 4 above, Webster *et al.* (2021) identify five different types of informal workers' associations or organisations that form part of this new hybrid form of organisation.<sup>7</sup> These organisations cover self-organised networks, such as the associations that emerged among food couriers in Johannesburg; NGOs sponsoring informal worker organisations, such as the Casual Workers' Advice Office (CWAO), East of Johannesburg; co-operatives such as the SACCO in Kenya; traditional unions reaching out and recruiting informal workers such as the TAWU in Kenya; and, finally, micro-business associations, such as the Kampala Metropolitan Boda Boda Entrepreneurs (KAMBE), with a membership of 64 000 that joined the Amalgamated General Transport Workers Union (AGTWU) in Kampala, Uganda (Figure 5).

The last two organisations, TAWU-K and AGTWU, are distinctive as they represent successful examples of traditional unions that have 'crossed the divide' between formal and informal work. In the process, they have revitalised a declining traditional union, and are an example of coalition building, which is one of the defining features of societal power.

### Societal power

There are two parts to societal power: one part is discursive power through influencing public discourses around issues of social justice and the other is coalition building with social movements.

#### Discursive power: influencing public discourse

If we take the discursive power, the food courier strike in Johannesburg in December 2020 failed to persuade management to engage with the demands of the strikers. However, the strike action received extensive media coverage, including being televised on a television news platform. This provided the strikers with an opportunity to debunk management's narrative and win public



**Figure 5.** Hybrid forms of worker organisation. Source: Webster *et al.* (2021).

sympathy for their demands. Included in the response was the creation of a highly professional photo essay on the striking workers that was published initially by the Guardian and was titled *Ghost Riders: the invisible lives of Johannesburg food couriers* (Oatway 2022). As Vandaele (2018, p. 16) observes:

Discursive power exercised via direct action has the potential to be translated into rulemaking and institutional power, when the state takes on responsibility for regulating employment relations in the platform economy, for instance by setting minimum standards on, for instance, wages and social protection. Discursive power can thus partly compensate for platform workers' lack of other power resources.

We turn now to examining coalition building and the decision of the AGTWU to 'cross the divide'.

### ***Coalition building: organising platform workers in different country contexts***

Uganda's ATGWU faced a near collapse of its membership in the 1980s when liberalisation undermined the public transport sector through the introduction of structural adjustment programmes and privatisation. This led to the unmaking of the traditional sectors of the working class through the informalisation of public transport and the emergence of mini-taxi drivers and motorcycle taxi riders (known locally as *boda boda*) throughout the country.

A crucial feature of these *boda boda* riders was that they were already organised, not into a trade union but through credit and savings cooperatives, informal self-help groups, community-based organisations and, most importantly, associations (see Webster with Dor 2023, pp. 133–135). Instead of trying to recruit individual workers, the AGTWU undertook a process of discussions with these associations, eventually affiliating each association as a whole into the union. The union had to find new ways to respond to informal workers whose status and identity ranged between being a worker to being self-employed or a small business holder (Webster *et al.* 2021, p. 6). A female informal driver explained her ambiguous work status as an employee during the week and, over the weekend, self-employed (ATGWU member, interview 2019):

I am a taxi driver, a minibus of 14 car seaters. I drive for the whole day, from Monday to Friday. The boss, who works for an insurance company, owns the minibus. On Saturdays, I drive a boda boda to make some extra money. I also own a minibus taxi on a loan. I have a driver for the taxi, a fellow colleague that I am employing.

The unionisation of the boda boda drivers had a dramatic impact as seen in a reduction in police harassment, substantial gains through collective bargaining, reduced internal conflict within the associations, improved visibility and improved status for informal transport workers (Spooner and Mwanika 2018).

The rapid growth of the ATGWU from 5 000 members to over 100 000 members in just over five years raised new challenges for the union. This new large, fully integrated formal – informal organisation needed to learn how to reform its democratic processes and accountability, and how to maintain solidarity between informal and formal workers (Webster *et al.* 2021). This, we argued, demanded considerable structural and procedural change within the union (Webster *et al.* 2021, p. 7):

With much debate and discussion, both within and between the associations and the union, the structures were adjusted to ensure that the informal workers were included in the governance and management of the union itself. As a consequence, the 2018 ATGWU Congress agreed to drop the terminology distinguishing between “informal” and “formal” workers, and instead simply refer to “workers” and “members” throughout the union’s activities, irrespective of employment relationships. It also agreed to move from payments of affiliation fees from the associations towards individual dues payments and [to] ensure that all members have the right to directly stand for election to ATGWU positions. Congress elections resulted in equal informal–formal representation on the union’s National Executive Board.

We turn now to compare a similar process of crossing the divide and union revitalisation in Kenya. The decision of TAWU-K to recruit members among platform workers was influenced by the experience of AGTWU, although the trigger to recruit among platform workers was more direct (TAWU-K 2021). ‘The entry of Uber into the taxi business in 2016 in Nairobi opened the market’, a TAWU-K official observed, ‘leading to strikes and chaotic violence all over the city’ (Interview 14 April, 2023). After the Uber business model disrupted the traditional taxi labour market in 2018, under the direction of its digital organiser Bill Mutoro (2023), TAWU-K began to organise drivers in the platform economy. ‘It became clear’, Mutoro argued, ‘that the drivers needed representation, voice and collective bargaining’. Initially, TAWU-K’s experiences were similar to that of AGTWU. After conducting a survey, TAWU-K discovered that the drivers had already organised themselves into associations and a variety of societies, similar to that noted by the rider in Johannesburg.

In the follow-up discussion with TAWU-K in April 2023, it was decided by TAWU-K to focus on the sector rather than the company level. Because many riders have multiple platform-based apps and are often working for different companies, it was decided to develop collective bargaining at a centralised sector level for all platform workers. Because Uber and Bolt denied that they were transport companies and claimed to be service companies, it became clear that changes in the Kenyan legislation would be necessary. Furthermore, these companies argued that they were not subject to national law, because their headquarters were abroad (Castel-Branco and Chukunzira 2023).

Despite the limitations, platform worker mobilisation has resulted in the regulation of the e-hailing sector in Kenya. In June 2022, the government approved National Transport and Safety Authority Regulation no 48 2022, which regulates the relationship between platform companies, owners, drivers and passengers (RoK 2022). The regulations establish a cap on commissions at 18 per cent of total earnings, define minimum health and safety standards and outline the process in the case of deactivation or suspension. Significantly, the regulations do not challenge the classification of platform workers as independent contractors.

## **Conclusion: building workers power under algorithmic management**

This article demonstrates how digital technologies are being contested by platform workers in three African cities, leading to various forms of collective action and organisation. First, food couriers have

initiated strikes to protest unilaterally imposed and altered commission rates. Second, riders, particularly in Johannesburg, face harassment, theft of their motorcycles, and numerous road accidents, prompting demands for improved working conditions, including health, life, and accident insurance, and access to social security. Third, couriers are demanding job security and a basic income, as they are currently paid only per delivery. This has led to demands for recognition as 'workers' rather than 'independent contractors' or 'partners'.

Platform workers are drawing on diverse power sources, resulting in the emergence of various hybrid worker organisations. Established unions like TAWU-K are also expanding their reach to recruit platform workers in Kenya and boda-boda riders in Uganda, bridging the formal-informal divide and creatively adapting to the unique characteristics of African labour markets. For instance, while WhatsApp groups are common globally, their use as saving schemes is primarily seen in developing countries. Another distinction is the longer job tenure of riders in these contexts, which has significant implications for successful worker organising and potentially differentiates them from their Global North counterparts. The number of reported strike participation rates seems to be significantly higher in the global South from countries in the global North.

South Africa presents a unique case compared to Accra and Nairobi. In Johannesburg, 90 per cent of food couriers are cross-border immigrants – a significant finding given South Africa's history of migrant labour struggles. The situation of Johannesburg's couriers underscores the ongoing challenge of protecting migrant worker rights, a legacy of colonial and apartheid policies, and, more recently, neoliberal economic policies.

However, trade unions still have capacity to use their resources and power to advocate for migrant workers rights. They can take an advocacy role and ensure that the government agencies responsible for labour and employment, adopt an agnostic stance on immigration status and rigorously enforce the law to protect all workers equally.

Currently, existing labour structures primarily apply to public and private sector workers. South African constitutional and labour laws do not adequately cover digital platform workers due to their misclassification as independent contractors or partners, leaving them vulnerable to unlawful management and disciplinary practices. Labour laws must explicitly expand the definition of 'worker' to include platform workers within the private sector, holding digital platforms accountable to the existing constitutional and legal framework.

The findings of the study also has broader implications for future research and policy. Conceptually, future studies should re-evaluate the definition of 'worker' in the context of the platform economy. We identify four key areas:

1. Income and wages for food courier rider; we recommend that a standard daily fee should be paid to the workers, which takes into consideration the waiting time between orders or requests, with an 8-hour workday. This will allow the riders to, at least, meet their monthly target which will enable to pay rent, petrol, data, car/motorbike service and for those who have hired the car or motorbike to. Additional work should be classified as overtime and compensated accordingly.
2. Working hours and paid leave; the number of hours worked could be regulated to a standard 8-hour day with day and night shifts, a maximum 48-hour workweek, and a minimum 12-hour daily rest period. Weekend shifts should be considered overtime. A minimum guaranteed wage and and paid leave, including sick leave, for every 120 h worked, to mitigate work-related stress and illness, should be introduced.
3. Social protection; we propose that the Unemployment Insurance Fund as a social protection mechanism be made available to South African digital platform workers. Digital labourplatforms should be legislated by the South African Labour Law, mandating contributions from digital platforms to the Unemployment Insurance Fund for workers regularly assigned tasks. This would provide short-term income support in case of job loss.

4. Occupational health and safety; platforms should provide protective gear, comprehensive training, and driving lessons for all workers, enabling access to insurance coverage, including medical expenses and death benefits in case of accidents. Platforms should also provide work injury and death insurance for self-employed workers. Furthermore, regarding algorithmic management and disciplinary action, no worker should be unfairly dismissed based on low ratings without proper justification. Workers should have the right to challenge unfair dismissals and receive compensation for lost income.

Finally, our research suggests that platform workers are exploring new forms of power and hybrid worker organisations. This experimental trend requires further investigation to understand the unique characteristics of platform worker responses in the global South.<sup>8</sup>

However, the scale of the informal economy and the large reserve army of labour in Africa pose challenges to building sustainable worker organisations. Work precarity and worker replaceability hinder the development of a workforce willing and able to pay regular union dues. The result is collective action without enduring organisational structures. While grassroots struggles remain essential, without formalisation, regulation, and institutional support for platform workers, the nascent worker organisations identified in this article may not survive.

## Notes

1. <https://itweb.africa/content/WnpNgq21p5pMVrGd> (accessed 30 October 2024).
2. Reported by the Platform Cooperative Consortium: <https://platform.coop/blog/no-longer-taken-for-a-ride-emerging-front-of-gig-workers-organizing-in-ghana/> (accessed 30 October 2024).
3. The findings presented here draw from two initiatives. The first is a report, 'I just want to survive': A comparative study of food delivery couriers in Johannesburg, Nairobi and Accra," co-authored by Edward Webster and Fikile Masikane (2020–2022), supported by the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. The second is a follow-up research project on platform work in Africa, including research in Uganda and a research visit to Nairobi in April 2023 by Dr. Ruth Castel-Branco and Professor Edward Webster. This visit included focus group discussions with TWU-Kenya (hosted by Bill Mutoro) and the Mgadi Road Zone Savings and Credit Cooperative (SACCO). Due to COVID-19 restrictions, local field researchers Karim Saagbuk (Accra) and Agnes Tsheri (Nairobi) assisted with data collection in 2020/21. The research proposal was formally approved by the University Ethics Committee in June 2020. Participant anonymity was guaranteed throughout the data collection and publication process.
4. See also Vandaele (2018, p. 9), 'Organisational work practices of the platforms are not genuinely novel ... For instance, breaking up jobs into small, low-skilled tasks is simply old wine in new bottles'.
5. PBs are used to stimulate and reward workers. These forms of control make the management invisible; they become hidden and inaccessible (Gandini 2019, p. 15).
6. The three terms were used as descriptions by the different food courier riders. All of these descriptions fall under the same category of how the food courier riders understand as being self-employed.
7. See Webster and Dor (2023) for more detail on hybrid worker organisations.
8. We agree with Basualdo *et al.* (2021, p. 12) that analyzing worker struggles, bottom-up collective identity formation, and various worker associations is crucial, rather than solely focusing on 'established' unions.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Fikile Masikane** is a social scientist, researcher and lecturer of sociology at the University of Pretoria. She is currently completing her PhD in Industrial Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her research interests include labour studies and Black intellectual thought.

**Edward Webster** This paper started with Edward Webster in 2023. After his sudden passing in March 2024, he continued with the work in honour of this project that he so passionately believed in. May his precious soul continue to rest in peace.

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## In-depth interviews

1. Abn, 26 June, 2021, Nairobi Central
2. Alex, 17 March 2020, Campus Square, Johannesburg (the first person we interviewed in Nandos Camous square Johannesburg)
3. Ali, 26 June 2021, Nairobi Central
4. Brian, 17 March 2020, Campus Square, Johannesburg (real name – diary entry)
5. Bright, 21 June 2021, Ahafo Region, Accra
6. Brothers of Melville, 17 March, 2020, Campus Square, Johannesburg
7. Chris, 17 March 2020, Campus Square, Johannesburg
8. Emmanuel, 26 June 2021, Nairobi Central
9. Josias, 18 June, 2020, Rosebank Mall, Johannesburg
10. Joseph, 19 June, 2020, Campus Square, Johannesburg
11. Lovemore, 21 March, 2021, Pieter Roos Park, Johannesburg (From the soccer match games, we interviewed him separately, initially part of the in-depth interviews)
12. Makena, 23 June, 2021, Nairobi
13. Michael, 23 June, 2021, volta volo, Accra
14. Musala, 23 June 2021, James Town, Accra
15. Paul, 17 March 2020, Campus Square, Campus Square
16. Richard, 24 June 2021, Tema, Accra
17. Ronald, 18 June, 2020, Columbine, Johannesburg
18. Steven, 20 June, 2021, Clearwater, Johannesburg
19. Yussif, 25 June, 2021, Madina, Accra