

Citizens, States and the Future of Work

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Central aspirations of the United Nations Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals include the promotion of productive and fulfilling work as well as the advancement of social protection policies which can address poverty and inequality. Yet our ability to achieve these goals is potentially constrained by the “Future of Work” – the idea that digital technology and artificial intelligence will increasingly replace workers, particularly in the jobs that are already low-paying and precarious (Balliester & Elsheikhi 2018). Traditionally, full employment was considered an achievable goal particularly in the Northern welfare states. Further, work was seen as bound by a contractual relationship between employer and employee that secured the future for employees in so far as processes for ending the contract and benefits for employees was concerned (Agarwala 2013). However, reality has shown that in developing contexts such as South Africa, structural unemployment and increasingly insecure and precarious employment ensures that this goal is not achievable. Predictions of how work will change further threaten this goal both in developing and developed country contexts. What have citizen and state responses been thus far, and what should they be as we face a reality of increasingly precarious work? This panel will engage with research that has sought to understand worker responses, ideas about how regulations need to change, and what broader social policy responses should be to ensure that the SDGs of decent work, and reducing poverty and inequality are met.