

Comments on:

Andrés Ortega, Francisco Andrés Pérez, and Yarik Turianskyi (2018). Technological justice: A G20 agenda. Economics Discussion Papers, No 2018-58, Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

<http://www.economics-ejournal.org/economics/discussionpapers/2018-58>

To: Editors

From: Andy Hira, SFU

Date: Sept. 14, 2018

Article reviewed: Technological justice: A G20 agenda

Relevance, Significance, and Innovation

The authors of the paper have put their finger on a very important set of issues, namely whether the accelerating revolutions in digitization and automation are likely to reduce the possibilities for developing countries to close the gap and improve their living standards.

The authors propose to use the term “technological justice” to encapsulate their diagnosis and aims. However, their definition, “a situation in which technologies don’t create new social gaps and deficit, but on the contrary lead to a smart world...” seems rather incomplete and partial. The definition doesn’t grapple with any of the complex terrain of how to define justice itself, eg equality of opportunity vs. outcome; the golden rule of reciprocity vs. compassion etc. It does capture, as the authors put, the “Janus face” of technology that has long been noted, namely that it can be used for both good and ill purposes.

There is a mismatch between the authors’ theoretical intentions and their empirical discussion. They really focus more in terms of their evidence upon automation and its potential to wipe out (labour-intensive) jobs in the developing world. These points are well-taken, though the authors also need to note more clearly that projections of automation are just that, and fraught with speculation. The authors don’t say enough about the potential positive sides besides mentioning the celebrated case of m-pesa at the outset. It could be that the movement towards services lowers the barriers to entry for emerging industries in the developing world, as seen by the IT services explosion in south India. However, they note particularly importantly that lack of access to high speed internet itself poses a huge barrier.

Do the recommendations and vision rest on serious foundations

I find the idea that the G-20 is the appropriate vehicle to tackle this issue quite curious. The group’s main mission is to discuss economic and security issues; it is not known as a development vehicle. I would also question the extent to which there rests enough goodwill in the North to provide serious and significant development aid. This has never been the case; as is well known, almost no countries meet their standard pledge of 0.7% of GDP, and much of aid is tied to Northern interests. It is hard to see how they would start developing competitors in the emerging knowledge-based industries in the South when there is so much disarray at home, as reflected in the populist movements throughout the West and ongoing recession in Japan. The authors evoke a Global Society 5.0 without explaining what this is, or what the previous versions were. They also mention the need for a “smart society,” a latent term that needs much greater explication. For my part, I have argued in many pieces for the need for the South to adopt a pro-active industrial policy that will allow for catch-up a la China, and for the gradual

movement towards a global welfare state that would move us beyond the very state-centric vehicles of the Westphalian tradition towards a greater sense of collective global action. Only when justice is perceived through the lens of global citizenship can a collective sense of responsibility, including a safety net and redistribution to improve mobility occur. This, in turn, requires a recognition that many problems, including the one the authors mention (or climate change for another example), are so global in scope that inter-state groups are unable to cope with them.