The "Useless Class" Across Economic Contexts: AI, Globalization, and Socioeconomic Shifts

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Abstract

The rise of AI, globalization, demographic shifts, and economic restructuring has fueled concerns about the emergence of a "useless class"—individuals displaced from the workforce with little chance of reintegration. This literature review examines how labor displacement manifests differently across economies, shaped by automation, offshoring, financialization, and shifting labor demands. In OECD countries, job polarization due to AI and deindustrialization threatens middle-class employment, increasing inequality and political instability. In non-OECD countries, automation erodes informal and low-skill jobs, while globalization exacerbates economic precarity. Social consequences range from identity crises to mass migration. While OECD nations experiment with UBI and reskilling programs, developing countries face structural constraints. Without proactive policies, economic polarization will deepen, benefiting capital owners while displacing workers. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated global strategies that balance technological progress with equitable labor transitions.

Keywords: AI-driven labor displacement, agriculture sector, economic restructuring, globalization and automation, higher education sector, useless class, workforce reskilling

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Introduction

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI), combined with globalization, demographic shifts, and economic restructuring, has sparked concerns about the emergence of a "useless class"—individuals displaced from the workforce with limited opportunities for reintegration. While technological disruptions have historically led to new employment opportunities, the scale and speed of AI-driven labor displacement raise unprecedented challenges. This literature review explores how these disruptions manifest differently in high-income and developing economies, examining the roles of automation, offshoring, financialization, and shifting labor demands. It also evaluates policy responses such as universal basic income (UBI) and workforce reskilling to assess their effectiveness in addressing growing inequalities.

The concept of the "useless class" was first popularized by scholar Yuval Noah Harari in his book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2016). Harari describes a potential future where AI, automation, and other technological advancements displace vast segments of the workforce (Harari, 2016), leading to the emergence of a new socioeconomic class—individuals who are not just unemployed but fundamentally unemployable due to a lack of necessary skills in an AI-driven economy. Unlike previous industrial revolutions, where displaced workers could transition into new labor sectors, AI-driven automation may permanently render many traditional jobs obsolete, creating large-scale economic exclusion.

The notion of the "useless class" is controversial, as it challenges conventional economic theories that suggest technological disruptions lead to job creation in new industries. While some economists argue that AI will complement human labor and generate new employment opportunities (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014), others caution that the speed and scale of automation may outpace workforce adaptation (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019). Despite growing research on automation's impact on labor markets, literature gaps remain in understanding how this phenomenon manifests across different economic contexts. Most studies focus on OECD countries, where policy responses such as Universal Basic Income (UBI), workforce reskilling, and AI regulation are actively debated (OECD, 2019). However, less attention has been given to how AI-induced labor displacement affects non-OECD economies, where informal labor markets dominate, and institutional support for displaced workers is limited.

Additionally, existing research often overlooks the role of war, conflict, and political instability as compounding factors in labor market disruptions. Armed conflicts and geopolitical tensions not only displace millions of workers but also exacerbate economic fragility in both developing and advanced economies (Stromquist, 2019). War accelerates economic decline, destroys physical and institutional infrastructure, and limits workforce mobility. In conflict-affected regions, labor markets become highly volatile, with automation and globalization further intensifying employment precarity. The intersection of technological displacement and war-induced instability presents a unique challenge that has yet to be sufficiently explored in labor economics.

This study aims to bridge existing research gaps by conducting a comparative literature review of the "useless class" phenomenon across OECD and non-OECD economies. It examines how AI-driven labor displacement manifests differently in diverse labor markets, influenced by globalization, automation, economic restructuring, and geopolitical instability. Additionally, the study explores the implications of AI-driven job losses in two critical

sectors: agriculture, where automation is transforming traditional farming practices, and higher education, where AI and digitalization are reshaping skill demands and the role of academic institutions. A key focus is on assessing the effectiveness of policy responses, such as Universal Basic Income (UBI) and workforce reskilling programs, in mitigating the risks of large-scale labor displacement. Furthermore, this study seeks to identify potential pathways for inclusive economic transitions, ensuring that workers in AI-dominated industries—particularly in agriculture and higher education—can adapt to new economic realities through targeted policy interventions and adaptive workforce strategies.

By synthesizing existing research, this study contributes to the growing discourse on the future of work and highlights the urgent need for global policy coordination to ensure that technological advancements do not exacerbate economic inequalities (Manyika et al., 2018). As AI continues to reshape industries and economies, understanding the structural and regional variations in labor market transformations is crucial to developing equitable and sustainable policy interventions.

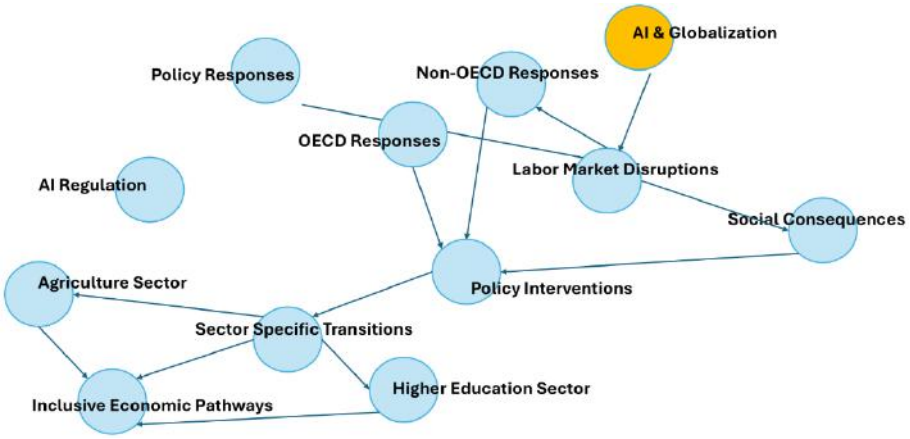
Methodology

This study employs a comparative literature review methodology to analyze how the concept of the "useless class" manifests across different economic contexts. The research synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed journal articles, economic reports, and institutional publications from organizations such as the OECD, World Bank, IMF. The focus is on understanding the macroeconomic trends, labor market dynamics, and policy responses shaping job displacement in both OECD and non-OECD economies.

The data collection and selection criteria for this study ensure a comprehensive and comparative analysis of AI-driven labor displacement across different economic contexts. Literature sources include academic databases such as Google Scholar and JSTOR, as well as policy reports and books by leading economists and sociologists, ensuring a well-rounded foundation of scholarly and policy-based perspectives. The time frame focuses on studies published after 2013, emphasizing recent developments in AI-driven labor transformations and their socioeconomic implications. Key themes guiding the selection process include AI automation, globalization, economic restructuring, war and political instability, social safety nets, and policy interventions, all of which shape labor market dynamics. This study employs a comparative approach, distinguishing between OECD countries and non-OECD countries to evaluate similarities and differences in how labor markets adapt to technological disruptions.

The conceptual framework proposed in Figure 1 illustrates the interplay between AI, globalization, and economic restructuring in shaping labor market transformations across OECD and non-OECD economies. It incorporates the key drivers, labor market disruptions, policy responses, social consequences, and sector-specific transitions that define inclusive economic adaptation.

Figure 1
AI, Globalization and Labor Market (by the authors)



AI and Job Polarization in OECD Economies

In OECD countries, AI and automation are reshaping labor markets by replacing routine and middle-skill jobs, leading to job polarization—a labor market split where high-skill, high-wage jobs and low-skill, low-wage jobs grow, while middle-wage jobs decline (Autor et al., 2013). Automation has significantly impacted sectors such as manufacturing, finance, and administrative services, where repetitive tasks are more susceptible to replacement by AI-driven systems (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019). As a result, middle-class employment has declined, exacerbating income inequality and wage stagnation (OECD, 2019).

High-skilled workers, particularly in AI development, data analysis, and software engineering, are seeing growing job opportunities (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). Meanwhile, low-wage service sector jobs, such as those in caregiving, hospitality, and food service, remain largely resistant to automation due to the requirement for human interaction (Manyika et al., 2018). However, these jobs often offer low wages, job insecurity, and limited career mobility.

Governments in OECD countries have responded with various policy measures. Some nations have experimented with Universal Basic Income (UBI) as a potential solution to widespread job displacement, as seen in Finland's pilot program (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). Other countries focus on reskilling initiatives, emphasizing STEM education, digital literacy, and vocational training to help workers transition into new industries (OECD, 2019). However, challenges remain, as not all displaced workers can easily adapt to high-tech industries, and the effectiveness of large-scale retraining programs remains uncertain (Stromquist, 2019).

The decline in middle-class jobs has also led to political and social instability, with increasing support for populist movements and anti-globalization rhetoric (Stiglitz, 2018). As AI continues to reshape the labor market, OECD nations must balance technological progress with social equity to prevent further economic polarization.

Globalization and Labor Displacement in Non-OECD Economies

Non-OECD countries face distinct labor market challenges as AI-driven automation intersects with globalization, economic dependency, and informality. Many developing economies have

historically relied on low-wage manufacturing and agricultural sectors, which are increasingly affected by automation and outsourcing (Rodrik, 2018). The shift in global supply chains has also led multinational corporations to relocate production, prioritizing technologically advanced automation systems over human labor (Autor et al., 2013).

A key issue is the lack of formal labor protections. Unlike OECD countries with structured employment regulations and social safety nets, many developing economies depend on informal work, where job displacement is harder to track and mitigate (Stromquist, 2019). As automation replaces repetitive and low-skill tasks, informal workers—who often lack digital literacy or access to retraining—face increasing economic precarity (Manyika et al., 2018).

Another major factor is global financialization, where the dominance of global capital markets influences labor structures. The expansion of digital platforms and gig-based employment has provided new economic opportunities but has also exacerbated income volatility and employment precarity (Krippner, 2005). As AI and algorithmic management become more prominent, workers in developing countries increasingly find themselves in low-wage, unstable gig work without benefits or long-term security (Venkataiah, 2025).

Additionally, war, political instability, and migration pressures further complicate labor market conditions in many non-OECD nations. Conflict-ridden regions suffer from economic destruction, weakened institutions, and forced displacement, limiting workforce adaptability (UNDP, 2020). War-driven migration often results in labor oversupply in urban areas, leading to wage suppression and heightened competition for already scarce jobs (Stromquist, 2019).

Specific cases illustrate the varied impacts of globalization and automation in non-OECD economies. In Vietnam, the garment and textile industry—a major source of employment—has seen increased automation, threatening thousands of low-wage jobs (Lan, 2020; Stromquist, 2019). Despite government efforts to promote digital literacy, many workers lack the skills needed for AI-driven manufacturing. In Bangladesh, automation in the ready-made garment sector has led to declining employment, with experts warning of an impending crisis if workers are not reskilled (Hillol Saha, 2024; Manyika et al., 2018). Ethiopia, which has positioned itself as an emerging manufacturing hub, faces similar challenges as global brands increasingly automate production to reduce costs (Gelan et al., 2022; UNDP, 2020). Meanwhile, in Argentina, economic instability and currency fluctuations have intensified labor precarity, with automation accelerating job losses in agriculture and logistics (Gasparini et al., 2020).

Governments in non-OECD countries face constraints in implementing policy solutions to mitigate labor displacement. Unlike OECD nations that experiment with UBI and workforce reskilling programs, developing countries often struggle with budgetary limitations, inadequate education systems, and corruption (OECD, 2019). Without international support and investment in AI literacy and vocational training, these economies risk falling further behind in the global labor market.

Social and Psychological Consequences of Labor Displacement

Beyond economic consequences, widespread labor displacement has profound social and psychological impacts. In OECD countries, the erosion of stable middle-class employment has contributed to rising mental health issues, social alienation, and political polarization. Studies show that long-term unemployment and underemployment correlate with higher rates

of depression and anxiety (OECD, 2019). The loss of stable jobs also leads to social fragmentation, where communities that once relied on industrial or middle-class service work struggle to redefine their identity in an AI-dominated economy (Manyika et al., 2018).

In the United States, regions formerly reliant on manufacturing have experienced a surge in opioid addiction and mental health crises, partly due to economic stagnation (Case & Deaton, 2020). Similarly, in France, AI-driven job losses in traditional industries have fueled growing distrust in political institutions, reflected in the rise of populist movements and widespread protests (Guiso et al., 2024; Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022).

In non-OECD countries, economic precarity leads to different but equally severe challenges, including higher crime rates, forced migration, and deteriorating living conditions (Stromquist, 2019). The lack of strong social safety nets means that workers displaced by automation face immediate income loss without retraining options (Hillol Saha, 2024).

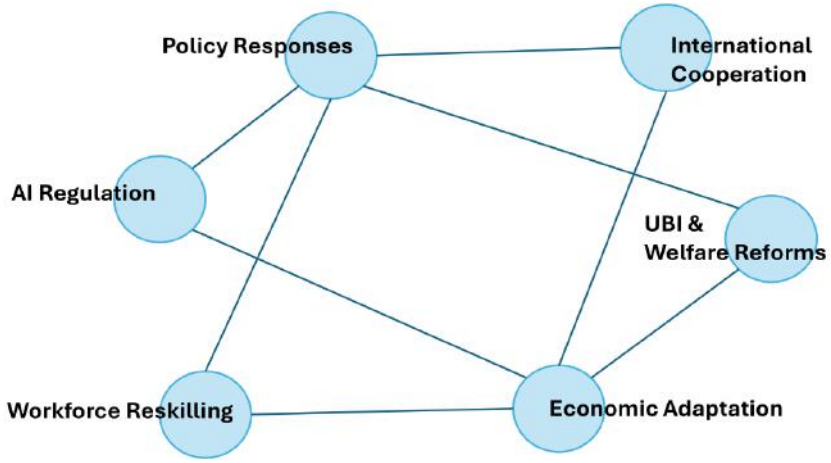
In South Africa, where youth unemployment is already high, automation threatens to deepen social inequality, leading to increased violent crime and social unrest (UNDP, 2020). In India, studies have linked the rise of digital gig work to mental stress and burnout, as workers experience job insecurity and algorithmic control over their labor conditions (Venkataiah, 2025).

Addressing these social consequences requires a broad policy response, including mental health support for displaced workers, investments in digital literacy, and stronger community networks to prevent social alienation. Without such measures, labor displacement caused by AI and globalization risks not only economic inequalities but also long-term societal instability.

Policy Responses and Future Considerations

Addressing the challenges of labor displacement requires coordinated policy efforts that consider both short-term economic disruptions and long-term structural transformations. Governments across OECD and non-OECD countries have adopted different strategies to mitigate the risks of AI-driven job losses, automation, and globalization. However, the effectiveness of these measures varies based on economic capacity, political stability, and institutional frameworks (OECD, 2019). Figure 2 draws the policy responses and future considerations necessary to address AI-driven labor displacement. It highlights four key strategies: Universal Basic Income (UBI) & Welfare Reforms, Workforce Reskilling & Education Reform, AI Regulation & Worker Protections, and International Cooperation & Economic Adaptation. These approaches serve as short-term interventions to mitigate job losses while also contributing to long-term structural transformations in the labor market.

Figure 2
Policy Responses and Future Consideration (by the authors)



One of the most debated solutions is Universal Basic Income (UBI), a policy that provides all citizens with a guaranteed financial stipend regardless of employment status. UBI pilots have been implemented in countries like Finland, Canada, and Spain, with mixed results (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). In Finland, a two-year UBI experiment showed that while recipients reported higher well-being and reduced stress, there was little measurable impact on long-term employment rates (Manyika et al., 2018). In developing countries, direct cash transfer programs, such as Brazil's Bolsa Família, have proven effective in reducing extreme poverty but do not fully address structural unemployment caused by automation (Stromquist, 2019).

Many OECD governments emphasize reskilling and lifelong education as key policy tools for adapting to AI-driven changes in labor markets (Autor et al., 2013). Countries like Germany and Singapore have successfully implemented vocational training programs and public-private partnerships to equip workers with digital skills. In Singapore, the SkillsFuture initiative exemplifies a comprehensive approach to fostering a learning society through strong collaborations between public and private sectors, facilitating continuous skills development and adaptability in the workforce (Fung et al., 2021). Similarly, Germany's vocational education and training system has effectively integrated digital competencies, enhancing social inclusion and employment opportunities through digital transformation initiatives (Busemeyer, 2019). In contrast, many non-OECD economies struggle with limited access to technical education, making it difficult for displaced workers to transition into new industries (UNDP, 2020). In India, for example, AI and automation threaten millions of jobs, yet only a small fraction of the workforce has access to reskilling programs (Kuriakose & Deepa, 2018).

As AI increasingly dictates labor conditions, governments are beginning to regulate algorithmic decision-making to ensure worker protections and fair wages (Stiglitz, 2018). The European Union’s AI Act is one of the first comprehensive efforts to regulate AI technologies, including employment-related algorithms (OECD, 2019). In France, policymakers have proposed legislation to increase transparency in AI-driven hiring and workplace surveillance, acknowledging concerns over bias and discrimination (Guiso et al., 2024). In developing economies, however, regulatory oversight is often weak, allowing large corporations to exploit gig workers with low wages and precarious contracts (Stromquist, 2019).

Given the global nature of AI and labor market transformations, international cooperation is crucial to ensuring that technological progress does not deepen existing inequalities (Rodrik, 2018). Organizations like the ILO and the UNDP advocate for cross-border collaboration on AI ethics, digital education, and fair trade policies (UNDP, 2020). For example, the G20 AI roadmap encourages knowledge-sharing among nations to promote responsible AI adoption in both advanced and emerging economies (Manyika et al., 2018).

Looking ahead, governments must balance innovation with social stability. Investments in public education, mental health support, and universal healthcare will be critical in mitigating the social consequences of labor market disruptions (Case & Deaton, 2020). Additionally, policymakers must consider taxation models that redistribute AI-generated wealth, such as robot taxes or data dividend programs, to ensure that economic gains from automation benefit society as a whole (Piketty & Goldhammer, 2014). Without proactive intervention, AI-driven labor displacement will likely accelerate social polarization, economic inequality, and political instability. Governments must act swiftly to build adaptive labor markets that can withstand technological disruptions while fostering inclusive economic growth.

Inclusive Economic Transitions in Agriculture and Higher Education

The integration of AI and automation in various industries presents both challenges and opportunities for economic inclusivity. Two key sectors that require adaptive transitions are agriculture and higher education, both of which face significant AI-driven transformations that impact employment structures and workforce skill requirements.

Agriculture has historically been labor-intensive, but AI-driven innovations such as automated harvesting, precision farming, and drone-based monitoring are rapidly reducing the need for manual labor (Stromquist, 2019). While these technologies improve efficiency, they also threaten employment in regions heavily dependent on agricultural labor, particularly in non-OECD countries such as India, Nigeria, and Brazil (UNDP, 2020). Without intervention, millions of small-scale farmers risk displacement. To ensure inclusive economic transitions in agriculture, governments and institutions must implement targeted strategies that empower farmers to adapt to AI-driven advancements. This involves investing in digital literacy programs to equip farmers with the skills needed to adopt AI-based agricultural tools, enhancing productivity and sustainability. Additionally, promoting agritech entrepreneurship by supporting startups focused on AI-driven solutions for smallholder farms can foster innovation and economic resilience. Developing policy frameworks for AI integration in rural economies is also essential to ensure that technological benefits are not limited to large agribusinesses but also reach small-scale farmers. Furthermore, encouraging AI-assisted cooperative farming models can facilitate shared access to automation resources, reducing costs and preventing individual displacement while fostering community-driven agricultural sustainability. Case studies from China's smart agriculture initiatives (Li & Nanseki, 2022) and Brazil's AI-supported precision farming programs (Cao et al., 2025) show that integrating AI with farmer training and cooperative ownership models can mitigate labor displacement while improving productivity.

The higher education sector is experiencing a fundamental shift due to AI-powered automation in teaching, research, and administrative functions. Universities are increasingly incorporating AI-driven personalized learning platforms, automated grading systems, and virtual tutors, which reshape the role of educators (Jian, 2023). While these advancements can improve educational accessibility, they also pose risks to faculty employment and the

traditional model of higher education. To ensure an inclusive transition in higher education, policymakers and academic institutions must take a comprehensive approach. This includes redesigning curricula to integrate AI and data science as fundamental competencies across disciplines, equipping students with essential skills for an AI-driven economy. Additionally, workforce retraining programs should be expanded to help educators adapt to AI technologies, enabling them to work alongside automation rather than being displaced. Establishing ethical AI policies within universities is also crucial to regulate the extent of automation in academic settings, ensuring that AI enhances rather than replaces human instruction. Finally, strengthening international collaborations will facilitate the exchange of best practices for AI integration in education, promoting a balanced approach that leverages technology while preserving the critical role of human educators. Countries like Singapore and Finland, which have pioneered AI-driven education reforms while retaining strong human-centric teaching models, demonstrate that higher education can evolve alongside AI without eliminating the need for human educators (Lake, 2023).

Conclusion

The emergence of a “useless class” is not an inevitable consequence of AI and globalization, but rather a challenge that requires proactive intervention. While OECD countries struggle with job polarization and wealth concentration, non-OECD nations face economic precarity and migration pressures. Without deliberate policy measures to balance technological progress with labor market adaptation, economic disparities will continue to widen. A human-centered approach to AI integration, coupled with equitable economic policies, is essential to ensuring that technological advancements serve all members of society rather than exacerbating existing inequalities.

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