



# Reimagining Merchant Training in Colombia

How Financial Services Providers Used Interactive Mobile Messaging to Help Thousands of MSMEs Grow

WHITEPAPER



# Executive Summary

Micro and small merchant training is a critical undertaking in developing nations where these businesses are the biggest drivers of economic growth and job creation.

However, massive gaps in business management skills and financial literacy are limiting their potential. In an ideal world without resource constraints, all merchants would have access to in-person training programs, with dedicated instructors helping them learn and implement best practices.

In reality, these programs can only reach a small portion of the populations that need them. This is why we need a new approach to scaling access to training in developing economies.

In an effort to enable equitable access to entrepreneurial education in Colombia, the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth partnered with Juntos Global to launch an innovative training program involving interactive, long-term mobile messaging powered by Juntos Global's Conversational Account Management (CAM) platform. The program enlisted financial institutions interested in strengthening their small business client bases.



The premise of conversational training is simple: imagine if each person, including those at the 'base of the pyramid,' had a committed relationship manager helping them achieve financial security. Financial institutions around the world are already using Juntos' CAM platform to extend guidance to millions of customers in need of support.

In order to find out what would happen if the same concept was applied to merchant training, 134,647 Bancolombia and Movii customers from micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) were enrolled in the training program. The training was delivered in weekly modules via SMS and WhatsApp, encouraging interaction throughout the learning journey. The curriculum covered a range of topics critical to business growth and financial security, such as record-keeping, pricing, savings, advertising, and digital troubleshooting.

Just 2% of enrolled users opted out of the messaging, meaning that more than 132,000 merchants received weekly tips and coaching over 10 months. Of that group, 15,989 users actively engaged in the conversation, sending 64,603 message responses. Nearly 4,000 of these responses were users sharing specific actions they had taken to improve their businesses as a result of the training. This is likely a fraction of the total number of changes MSMEs made when considering unreported actions.

Further, a clear business case emerged for banks to provide training services for their merchant customers. Program recipients gave Bancolombia an NPS<sup>1</sup> of 69, more than three times the industry average. Many users also thanked Bancolombia and Movii, with one saying “you are training me and motivating me with my business.”

Juntos identified five key learnings and considerations for future programs:

- Framing content around short-term benefits and actionable tips drives stronger program engagement
- Training within the context of a financial product is more effective than generalized education
- Persistent age and gender divides in digital literacy and engagement with mobile messaging need to be intentionally addressed
- WhatsApp has strong potential as a channel for merchant training, especially once near-term

operational challenges are resolved

- Financial institutions stand to benefit significantly from investing in training for their merchant customers if they make content engaging and relevant

The program clearly shows there is an opportunity for financial institutions to scale merchant training via interactive mobile messaging. In the context of available financial products and a functioning business, conversational training allows the merchant to put educational skills to immediate, practical use. Additionally, mobile messaging does not have the same barriers to scale as in-person or even online learning, making education much more accessible.

This conversational training program in Colombia is a valuable launching point for larger efforts around the world. Read the full white paper to learn more.

More than  
**132,000 users**



stayed enrolled in the  
program, receiving weekly tips  
and coaching over

**10 months**

<sup>1</sup>Net Promoter Score = % of Brand Promoters - % of Brand Detractors

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## Isabella's Story



Based in Medellin, Colombia, Isabella<sup>2</sup> runs a small shop selling party supplies. She describes herself as “stressed” every day as she juggles managing the shop, raising her daughter, and taking care of her elderly parents. While she has never received formal business training, she is ambitious, hoping to eventually grow the store to sell a wider variety of products, such as stationary and beauty supplies. However, in the near term, she mostly sees roadblocks.



I don't really save... money goes by quickly. We would like to have someone here helping us out and we would help them too, but it's just too tough [to hire].”

Isabella's story is much like those of thousands of micro and small merchants in Colombia that play a key role in driving economic growth and job creation. Nearly 95% of registered businesses in Colombia are micro-enterprises with fewer than 10 employees, and MSMEs are responsible for [two-thirds of employment](#).

Unfortunately, lack of digital and financial literacy and business management knowledge are among the key factors limiting the financial security and growth potential of Colombian MSMEs, like Isabella's shop.

There are some in-person workshops and training courses that have proven to be quite effective in helping MSMEs. For example, [TechnoServe](#), which has led training programs for more than 8,000 merchants around the world, reports improving micro-retailers' growth [by 30%](#). However, one of the main challenges with traditional training programs is they are difficult to scale. That's why a new approach is required to make entrepreneurial training more accessible and affordable for MSME owners like Isabella.

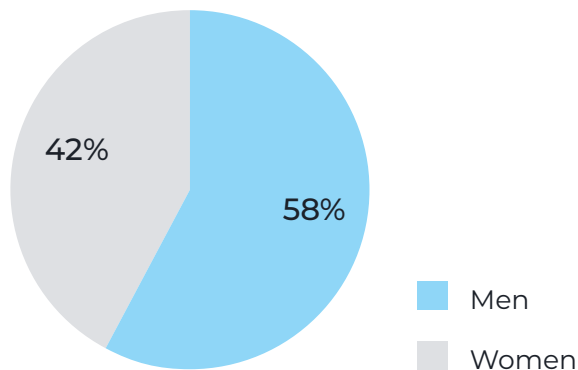
<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym for a recipient of the training program interviewed during User Research

# Conversational Training: A New Way to Empower MSMEs

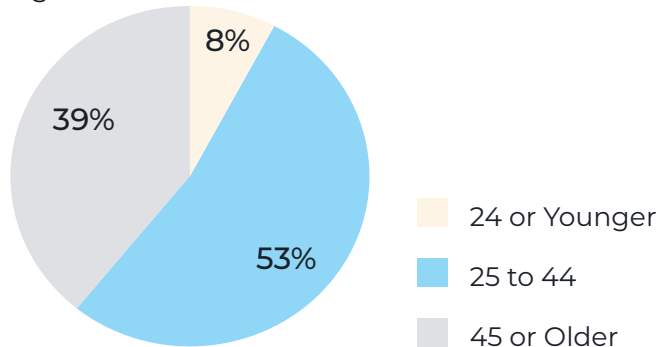
The Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth partnered with Juntos Global to launch an interactive merchant training program via SMS and WhatsApp in an effort to scale entrepreneurial skills in Colombia. Mastercard and Juntos used two-way messaging to educate merchants on key financial and managerial concepts and strategies to grow their businesses.

## User Demographics

Men vs. Women



Age



As part of the initiative, major Colombian bank Bancolombia and neobank Movii provided Juntos with lists of small merchant customers to proactively message. The merchants had similar profiles to Isabella, in that most were micro merchants based in urban areas with limited formal business training. By collaborating with Bancolombia and Movii, Juntos and Mastercard were able to scale the conversational training program to 134,647 users and 8 million educational touchpoints over a period of 10 months.

Message content was designed to encourage interaction, allowing users to ask and respond to questions and customize their learning journeys. Rather than simply delivering information, the interactive messaging helped merchants take actions to improve their business.

The training program focused on topics across four key dimensions towards achieving financial security<sup>3</sup>:

- Improve cash flow management
- Increase earnings
- Increase savings
- Access and manage debt

<sup>3</sup>To learn more about the four key dimensions of financial security, see research by Common Cents Lab: <https://advanced-hindsight.com/commoncents-lab/>

While this was Juntos' first deployment focused on MSME training, programs like these typically have an 8% to 15% response rate, and 50% to 70% of responders send multiple replies, depending on the market and user base.

Overall, for this deployment, 15,989 merchants actively engaged in the program, representing an overall response rate of 11.9%. Nearly 6 out of 10 responders replied to the service multiple times, bringing the total number of messages received by Juntos **to over 64,000**. Additionally, those who did not reply to the service would still benefit from seeing the messages. For example, in other Juntos deployments, banks found evidence of non-responders taking actions that the messages encouraged (e.g. mobile transactions), even though they did not actively engage in the conversation. Just 2% of users opted out of the service.

**2.0%**  
Opt Out Rate



**11.9%**  
Positive Response Rate

**6 in 10**  
Responders sent  
Multiple Messages



# Content Learnings: Short-Term Payoffs Drive Higher Engagement

Messages providing specific actions for users to take on their MOViiRED account or Bancolombia PYME app generated more engagement than general tips.

More broadly, content focusing on short-term benefits tended to elicit more responses than topics with longer-term payoffs. For example, tackling barriers to financial product usage with content on digital troubleshooting tips provided users with immediate value, making it more convenient and efficient to run their businesses. If a merchant is unable to reset their PIN or download the app, they cannot realize the benefits of key digital tools. By helping MOViiRED customers access and use their app, which offers top-up and bill payment services, Juntos enabled merchants to increase sales.

As record-keeping and savings content was the first to be delivered to Bancolombia and MOViiRED customers, they garnered the highest engagement, despite having more long-term benefits than short-term benefits. In Juntos' experience, the first modules sent to users often generate the highest response rates. As financial institutions and other merchant training providers plan their approaches, they should consider the key capabilities they want their clients to develop and then lead with that content first.

For detailed engagement results by content topic, see the table on the next page.



# Merchant Engagement by Training Topic

Rank Ordered by Relative Response Frequency

Topic	Financial Security Theme	Number of Touchpoints	Response Frequency Index <sup>4</sup>
Savings Coaching <small>*First topic for Bancolombia users</small>	Increase Savings	700,103	1.6
Technology Troubleshooting & Product-Specific Digital Training	Increase Earnings	850,910	1.1
Record-keeping <small>*First topic for Movii users</small>	Improve Cash Flow Management	1,583,890	1.0
Credit Fundamentals	Access and Manage Debt	368,483	1.0
Business Investments	Increase Earnings	407,492	0.6
Digital Payment Acceptance & New Technology	Improve Cash Flow Management	1,857,790	0.5
Promotions and Advertising	Increase Earnings	2,290,791	0.4

<sup>4</sup> Response Frequency Index = [(Number of Received Messages) / (Number of Sent Messages)] \* 100

Response Frequency Index is displayed to normalize results across topics that had different volumes of outbound messages. Response rate, which conveys the percentage of users that respond at least once to a topic, is inevitably higher for topics that had more messaging. Across all topics for the training program, Response Frequency Index = 0.8.

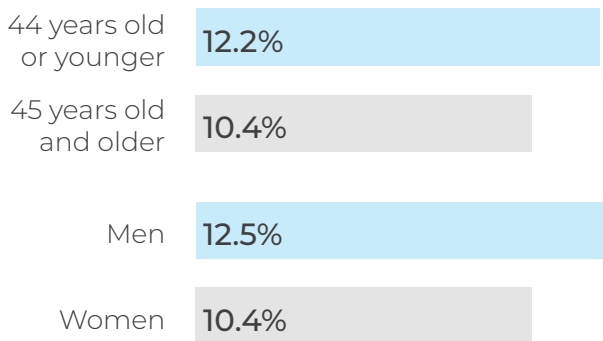
# Breaking Down Persistent Gender and Age Gaps

Engagement with the program was greater among younger demographics. The response rate among users 44 years old or younger was 12.2%, compared to 10.4% for users aged 45 and older. This is a persistent trend across Juntos' deployments, as younger people use mobile messaging more frequently than those in older age brackets.

Women were less responsive to the mobile training service than men. Overall, 10.4% of women replied, compared to 12.5% of men. Additionally, women responded less frequently, with 57.1% of women replying multiple times, compared to 59.5% of men.

On the surface, these differences may seem small, but they are significant and worthy of attention. One possible explanation for these differences is that [gaps in digital trust and literacy between men and women](#) impact engagement with mobile messaging, even if the messaging is intended to shrink those very gaps.

## Response rate



Women who responded to Juntos, for example, were significantly<sup>5</sup> more likely than men to:

- Prefer phone calls and in-person visits to their customers over WhatsApp messages
- Sell in physical spaces (stores, kiosks, or from home) rather than online
- Ask questions about the MOViiRED app and report problems with the service
- Prefer SMS as a channel for the training program, rather than online training on a desktop

The findings show more needs to be done to close the gender divide in digital training. In past projects, Juntos adapted messaging to be more relevant to women, but found that the approach didn't perform any better than the more generic content delivered to all users. However, this may have been due to inaccurate gender data or unique dynamics to those customer bases. For future merchant conversational training programs seeking to target women-led businesses, content that chips away at technology gender barriers should be considered.

<sup>5</sup> Statistically significant difference (90% confidence interval)

# Thousands of Signs of Business Improvement

Looking beyond response rates, there is evidence that the interactive training program helped users improve their financial security.

During the mobile conversations, merchants reported taking **3,931** actions directly linked to improving financial security<sup>6</sup>. There were likely many more message recipients who took actions but did not proactively share them back to Bancolombia and Movii through Juntos' service.

Financial Security Theme	Number of Actions Shared	Details of Shared Actions
Improve Cash Flow Management	2,601	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1,325 merchants separated their personal and business incomes</li> <li>• 738 merchants calculated profits with Juntos</li> <li>• 384 merchants adopted a new digital technology (e.g. Bancolombia Pyme / MOViiRED app, online banking, etc.)</li> <li>• 154 merchants introduced new digital payment acceptance options for their customers</li> </ul>
Increase Earnings	889	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 332 merchants implemented a new bundling pricing structure</li> <li>• 259 merchants made a plan to invest in their business</li> <li>• 177 merchants designed an advertisement with help from Juntos messages</li> <li>• 121 made changes to increase sales</li> </ul>
Increase Savings	441	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 441 merchants set a savings goal or personal spending goal using Juntos' instructions</li> </ul>
Total	3,931	

<sup>6</sup> Methodology: Juntos conversations encouraged users to confirm changes they had made to their businesses based on the training they received by sending letter responses and/or free-form messages. Juntos then tracked the number of responses from users confirming these actions across topics.

# Starting with the Basics

Initial messages focused on teaching merchants the basics of record-keeping, as these skills are critical for merchants to grow their businesses.

Without tracking revenues, expenses, inventory, and other key metrics, it's impossible to make informed decisions, particularly for businesses operating on very thin margins. Thus, the conversational journey started with helping merchants separate their personal and business incomes so they could calculate profits.



## Sample Conversation (Translated from Spanish):



**BANCOLOMBIA:** A goal is one step to saving. Set separate goals for personal and business expenses. Send 1 for personal and 2 for business.

USER: 1



**BANCOLOMBIA:** Personal expenses include home, food, education, transportation and savings. Take a salary from your earnings for these expenses.



**BANCOLOMBIA:** Add what you spend on personal expenses together to set a savings goal. Do you know how much you need for personal expenses? Send YES or NO.

USER: No




**BANCOLOMBIA:** Record your personal expenses with pen and paper or on your phone. Write what you bought, when and how much it cost.





**BANCOLOMBIA:** These records can help you set goals in future seasons. Set a limit for expenses to have more money to achieve your savings goal.


Overall, 1,325 merchants reported that they separated their personal and business incomes following Juntos' instructions, while 738 merchants reported using Juntos' steps to calculate profits.


**Sample Conversation:**


 **MOViiRED:** A business is successful when it earns more from sales than it spends to function. Send C to calculate how much your business earns.


**USER:** C 

 **MOViiRED:** First, check your accounts and note how much money you receive for sales each month. If you don't have accounts, you can make an approximate calculation.

 **MOViiRED:** Then write down how much you spend on supplies, wages, equipment, rent, taxes, and bills. If you don't have accounts, do a rough calculation.

 **MOViiRED:** If you have money left after paying expenses, your business is profitable. If it is not, you can offer more products, increase prices or reduce expenses.


 **MOViiRED:** To find out your earnings, subtract the expenses from the money that comes into your business.


**USER:** 100.000 


As merchants were guided through content on pricing, promotions, advertising, investment, credit, technology, and digital payment acceptance, they reported taking further actions to strengthen their financial security.


More than **800** merchants indicated that the interactive SMS training service from Juntos was providing useful information or was helping them demonstrably improve performance.


**Sample Conversation:**

 **BANCOLOMBIA:** Do you have new ideas to promote your business now? Send YES or NO.

**USER:** Yes 

 **BANCOLOMBIA:** Wonderful! We are happy to hear that. Please tell us how our promotion tips have helped you.

**USER:** You are training me and motivating me with my business 

 **BANCOLOMBIA:** Thanks for sharing! What other topics would you like to receive information on?

# The Promise and Pitfalls of WhatsApp

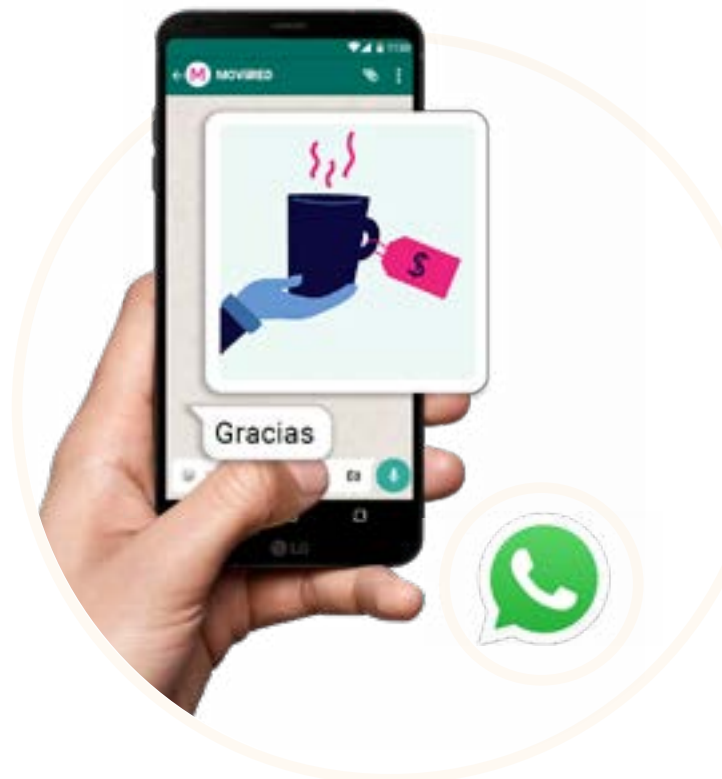
WhatsApp penetration in Colombia is massive, with [75% of Colombians aged 16-45](#) using the Facebook-owned messaging service every day.

Some of the key advantages of using WhatsApp over SMS include that:

- It better supports multimedia, allowing messages to be more engaging
- It's used more frequently than SMS by younger, tech-savvy users
- It's faster and more reliable than SMS

While most of the content in the training program was delivered via SMS, MOViiRED decided to experiment with WhatsApp. Unlike SMS, WhatsApp requires proactive user opt-in to receive messages. As such, Movii launched email and SMS campaigns encouraging merchants using MOViiRED to sign up for educational content on WhatsApp. The campaigns generated **732** opt-ins.

Engagement with the content among this group was extremely high – more than **63%** responded to Juntos messages in WhatsApp and **82%** of the active participants responded multiple times. Some of the messaging in WhatsApp was accompanied by images and animated GIFs, designed to make the content more engaging. In fact, four out of five of the conversational modules that generated the most responses were accompanied by these images or GIFs.



Training success was limited, however, by operational restrictions and shortcomings unique to WhatsApp. In order to prevent 'spam' marketing from overtaking WhatsApp, like it has SMS in many markets, Facebook crafted strict messaging templates for enterprise customers. Even though the training program was purely educational, many messages were rejected by WhatsApp, causing only 42% of intended messages to be delivered successfully.

Existing operational controls set by WhatsApp were not designed with this use case in mind. However, given the high response rates and depth of engagement from merchants, WhatsApp has great potential as a channel for interactive merchant training.

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# The Business Case for Merchant Training

Financial institutions have much to gain from investing in financial education for their customers.


The benefits are twofold. First, merchants with a better understanding of a financial institution's products are more likely to use them to grow their business. Juntos' messages helped merchants learn how to establish savings habits, accept digital payments, use mobile and online banking services, and build their credit histories. These outcomes present win-win opportunities for both merchants and the financial institutions serving them. Every financial services provider wants to increase account balances, migrate transactions to digital channels, and responsibly grow their loan portfolios with customers that will repay. Programs like this help banks achieve those goals.


The second benefit is longer-term and more valuable. Financial institutions that demonstrate they are trusted partners in their customers' financial lives, rather than self-interested behemoths pushing products, will build stronger, more loyal, and ultimately more profitable customer relationships than their competitors. This is particularly important because financial services is by far the least-trusted industry in the world, according to the [Edelman Trust Barometer](#). Investing in initiatives, like merchant training, that build trust with the customer will help banks stand out from their peers.


The conversation logs from Juntos' merchant training program reveal customer appreciation for their financial services providers that is rarely seen.





### Sample Conversations


 **BANCOLOMBIA:** Celebrate and share your business promotion stories to help other merchants like you. Tell us about your successes and challenges.


**USER:** Bancolombia is the best. 


 **BANCOLOMBIA:** Thank you for your message! We love to hear from entrepreneurs like you!


**USER:** Thanks a lot for being a huge support for me. 

 **BANCOLOMBIA:** Send A - I bought something with my savings, B - I was able to pay for an unexpected expense, C - I invested in a business or education.

**USER:** Hello Bancolombia. With all my savings, my company is improving every day. We work together so I will never separate from you. 

 **BANCOLOMBIA:** You are welcome. We are happy to help! Please let us know if you need anything else.

 **MOViiRED:** We are inspired by your success! Please, tell us how MOViiRED or our merchant training have helped you in your business.

**USER:** Those tips are very useful, I hope you will send me more and faster messages. 

 **MOViiRED:** Thank you!

Holistically, Juntos discovered that the training program was delivering exceptional customer satisfaction and brand perception for Bancolombia. As part of the conversational experiences, Juntos included a Net Promoter Score (NPS) survey to elicit feedback on how likely customers were to recommend Bancolombia to a friend or relative. On a scale of -100 (every customer is a detractor of the brand) to 100 (every customer is a promoter of the brand), the industry average score is **roughly 21**. Merchants that engaged with the Juntos training program gave Bancolombia a score of **69**, more than three times industry average. Given the established correlation between NPS and long-term loyalty, more financial institutions should consider investing in financial and business education for their customers.

**NPS score of 69**  
More than 3x industry average

# Scaling Training from Thousands to Millions of Customers

Micro and small merchant training is a critical undertaking in developing nations where these businesses are the biggest drivers of economic and employment growth.

However, lack of education about simple or accessible business management practices is holding merchants back from achieving their full potential. In an ideal world without resource constraints, all merchants would have access to in-person training programs with dedicated instructors helping them learn and implement best practices. In reality, these programs can only reach a small portion of the populations that need them the most. This is why new solutions are needed to improve access to training. Even if the quality and depth of learning is shallower, they can serve as an entry point to further education.

Merchant training delivered via interactive mobile messaging has clear value and untapped potential. Bancolombia, Movii, and Juntos have demonstrated they can quickly expand access to entrepreneurial education to more than 132,000 people and elicit program engagement from over 15,000 small merchants.

Millions of merchants, like Isabella in Medellin, have potential that can be unlocked with basic, foundational entrepreneurial education. Highly scalable conversational training programs can serve as small but important first steps towards a better future for merchants, and subsequently the economy.

To find out more please visit

[www.juntosglobal.com](http://www.juntosglobal.com)

[www.mastercardcenter.org](http://www.mastercardcenter.org)

# About Juntos Global and the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth

## Authors



**Jack Parker**  
Juntos Global



**Luz Gomez**  
Mastercard Center  
for Inclusive Growth

This white paper was made possible with support from the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth. It was created in partnership with Bancolombia, the largest bank in Colombia by assets, and Movii, a Colombian fintech that serves customers through a mobile financial solution and large network of MOViiRED agents and retailers.

## About Juntos Global

Financial Institutions around the world use the Juntos Conversational Account Management (CAM) platform to proactively engage their customers at scale.

Juntos combines advanced technology with human intelligence to create engaging, one-to-one, long-term conversations with consumers in high-impact digital channels like WhatsApp, SMS, and Facebook Messenger. Banks across four continents have used Juntos to power Conversational Account Management with millions of customers in 26 languages, driving increased uptake and retention of financial products. The Juntos mission is to build enduring and trusted relationships between banks and their customers to make financial services simpler, warmer, and more successful.

## About the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth

The Center for Inclusive Growth advances equitable and sustainable economic growth and financial inclusion around the world. The Center leverages the company's core assets and competencies, including data insights, expertise and technology, while administering the philanthropic Mastercard Impact Fund, to produce independent research, scale global programs and empower a community of thinkers, leaders and doers on the front lines of inclusive growth. For more information and to receive its latest insights, follow the Center on Twitter @ [CNTR4growth](#) or [subscribe to its newsletter](#).