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WORKING PAPER

From Children's Voices to Action

A youth-led roadmap to realize the best interests of children in the digital environment

March 2026

Executive summary

This paper presents both the perspectives of children—captured through direct consultations—and the insights of adolescents and youth—generated through a participatory foresight process, all conducted by UNICEF. Together, these complementary voices highlight not only what children are saying about their futures, but also how young people analyze, interpret, envision, and contextualize these futures.

The findings

Many youth participants were struck by the clarity, honesty, and awareness evident in the reflections of children from around the world on the digital environment. Across regions and age groups, children demonstrated profound insight into how the digital world works—and how it doesn't work for them. This is shaping a generation of children who are growing up with these technologies in profound and unforeseen ways.

The present system

Children and young people alike expressed high levels of frustration with an illusion of control in digital spaces. Issues like limited user choice, data exploitation, inappropriate content, gaps in age verification, and more were exacerbated by a widespread lack of rights awareness and a failure of institutions to prioritize the protection of children. The systems currently in place often fail to protect, support, or empower them. Yet what also emerges is a strong current of awareness, reflection, and resolve—from both children and youth.

The digital environment children wish for

When asked to envisage preferred futures, children imagined a digital world that is inclusive, safe, and empowering. Through youth-led synthesis of child consultation data, a shared vision emerged—one in which technology is not only accessible but designed around the best interests of the child; where wellbeing became a design principle; where a culture of shared responsibility between children, parents, teachers, corporations and governments had emerged; and both privacy and safety standards were made clear and understandable to all.

The innovations and disruptions with potential

Youth saw great potential in digital literacy becoming a foundational human right; in platforms being reclaimed for self-expression and advocacy for social change; in emerging technologies at the community level that promote inclusion and equitable access, and in rebalancing responsibility for safety with children and young people included as co-governors and co-designers.

To bring this preferred future about, youth recommended the following steps:

Recommendations

1. Transform digital education through rights-based literacy

Education systems must shift from basic technical skills to a comprehensive understanding of digital rights, data use, and ethical engagement. Education systems need to implement digital and AI literacy programmes that are co-created with children and youth, moving beyond mechanics to foster a deep understanding of data ethics and digital rights. This educational mandate must be supported by coherent, harmonized legislation at both government and regional levels, clearly defining the responsibilities of platforms, regulators, and media.

2. Ensure transparent, age-appropriate platform communication

Platform communication must be transparent and age-appropriate, replacing complex legal jargon with clear, engaging language. We must hold developers accountable for effectively explaining the implications of engagement, thereby empowering children to make informed decisions about their online presence. This requires decision-makers at national, regional, and global levels to establish and enforce strict communication guidelines. Furthermore, platforms must redesign user interfaces to prioritize informed consent, ensuring that these standards are regularly evaluated and adjusted in collaboration with the children they are meant to protect.

3. Combat AI-generated harm through comprehensive safeguards

Implement comprehensive safeguards that protect children's rights to privacy. As deepfakes and deceptive content proliferate, children are left vulnerable while parents are ill-equipped to respond. We need mandatory labeling of all AI-generated content to prevent confusion and mitigate harm before it spreads. This must be backed by a judicial system that adapts proactively to technological shifts, ensuring global equity in protection resources. Crucially, we must enforce strong legal consequences for those who use AI to exploit children, ensuring that the technology's positive potential is not overshadowed by unchecked abuse.

4. Establish a global well-being framework

To protect vulnerable populations, particularly children and persons with disabilities, we must establish a global well-being framework that ensures consistent, standardized safety measures. This framework could operate on three pillars:

- Systemic design that enforces algorithmic accountability to eliminate exploitative advertising;
- Strict privacy protocols that prohibit excessive data collection that fuels exploitation; and
- Participatory global governance, embedding a dedicated youth network within the multilateral system and establishing binding international targets to ensure that progress in child safety is measurable and enforceable.

5. Strengthen legal protections and enforcement

To ensure accountability, legal frameworks must evolve as rapidly as the technology they govern. We need a system that strengthens protections through tangible enforcement, including strict warnings and sanctions for influencers, advertisers, and marketers who violate child protection standards. This accountability must be codified through mandatory transparency legislation, forcing digital platforms to open their operations to scrutiny rather than hiding behind self-regulation.

6. Empower youth to co-design and monitor progress towards equitable systems

We must empower youth to not only co-design these systems but to actively monitor their success. This requires creating and scaling child-friendly accountability tools—such as progress dashboards and scorecards—that allow children to track outcomes directly. We must institutionalize sustainable feedback loops where youth concerns trigger timely responses and tangible results. Finally, by introducing participatory budgeting and decision-tracking at school, community, and national levels, we ensure children can see exactly how priorities are set and funds are spent.

Contents

Introduction

> *"In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration."*
>
> Article 3(1) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The "Best Interests of the child" principle is increasingly found in digital policies and regulations, but with a lack of clarity on how to regulate or implement it in practice.

Despite Article 12 of the Convention affirming every child's right to be heard and for their views to be prioritized and given due weight in decision making, children's voices are still largely absent from critical discussions on how to realize their best interests in the digital environment – where they now spend much of their time.

Recognizing the need, and indeed our responsibility as duty-bearers, to include children in the design of digital environments, as part of the Children's best interests in a digital world project, UNICEF held participatory consultations with children in Sierra Leone, the US, Uganda, Brazil, Spain, Malaysia, and India in 2025. These consultations created a rare space and opportunity for children to reflect on how they experience the digital environment, and to explore the core tenets of rights-based digital futures anchored in their best interests.

Having heard these child voices, the Intergenerational Governance and Participation (IGP) team at UNICEF Innocenti recruited a network of 30 adolescents and youth. These individuals were recruited based on their diverse backgrounds, lived experiences, and specialized interests in the digital environment to ensure a comprehensive analysis of children's concerns, aspirations, and recommendations. UNICEF received 624 applicants for the 30 places, all of which were required to answer survey questions related to the past, present, and future of the digital environment. This paper presents insights captured from surveys and workshops.

The project employed a custom-made participatory research methodology designed to bridge data analysis with youth-led insights. Using digital boards to visualize anonymized data, young researchers utilized a Three Horizons framework to categorize insights into three distinct pillars: the current digital landscape, aspirational futures, and the horizon of high-potential innovations and disruptions. This process was intentionally paced, providing youth participants the dedicated space to deeply internalize the children's voices and ensure the final insights remained rooted in their lived experiences.

The programme design embraced principles of meaningful youth engagement ensuring young people were actively involved in the design and delivery of the process and outputs—from helping to analyze and categorize the data, to shaping the recommendations, and editing this paper. Robust safeguarding protocols and materials were shared throughout to ensure a safe and respectful environment for adolescents and youth alike.

The result is a testament to what is possible when children and youth collaborate to advance child rights and co-create digital futures that reflect their best interests. And now, it is our responsibility as duty-bearers to listen and act.

Please note that the children and young people mentioned and quoted in the following report refer specifically to the participants engaged through child consultations, youth surveys and youth workshops facilitated by UNICEF. Where possible, these quotes have been attributed to gender, age, and country of origin. These participants are not representative of all children and young people in their respective countries. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of UNICEF.

Methodology

While the child rights agenda is legally defined for those under 18, UNICEF engages more young people on global issues than any child rights organization on the planet. Why? Because integrating youth development, participation and mobilization of 15- to 24-year-olds strengthens the intergenerational continuum of rights. UNICEF Innocenti also recognizes that intergenerational governance models are essential to restoring trust and fostering social cohesion - foundations of healthier democratic societies.

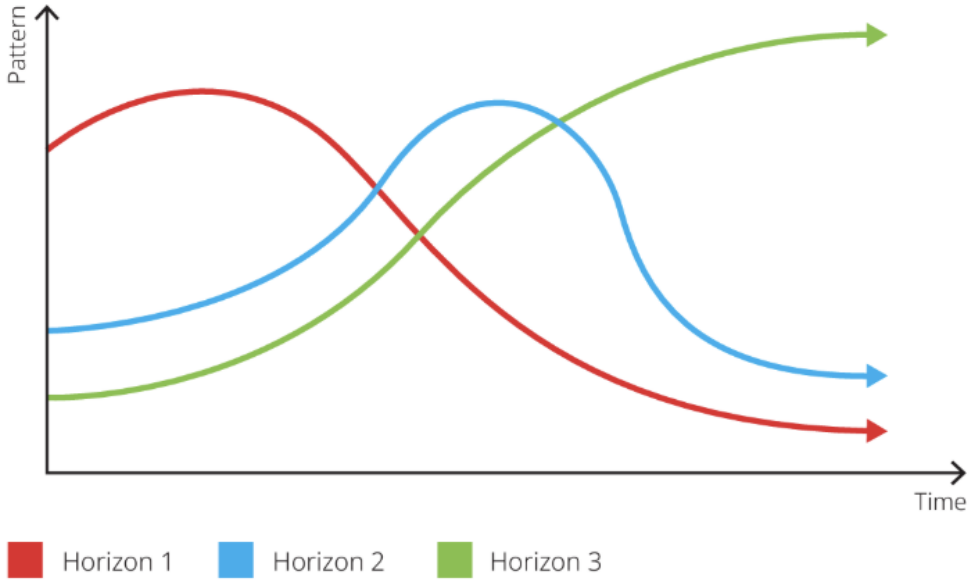
Our network of 30 digital changemakers, recruited specifically for this initiative, took part in two 90-minute virtual participatory youth foresight workshops designed and co-facilitated by the IGP team. In these sessions they reviewed, analyzed, and synthesized data from 12 child consultations that took place in Sierra Leone, the US, Uganda, Brazil, Spain, Malaysia, and India - providing critical context and shaping the recommendations to stakeholders presented in this paper.

The network of 30 was intentionally curated to represent a global cross-section of digital expertise and lived experience. This cohort includes UNICEF Innocenti Youth Foresight Fellows past and present trained in child rights and participatory methodologies; leaders from youth-led organizations providing critical insights into the governance specifically of artificial intelligence all over the world; individuals with internal experience working for major social media platforms, and researchers specializing in the full spectrum of the digital economy—ranging from FinTech and EdTech to gaming, platform design, and big data.

For most of the network, this was their first experience of foresight. Foresight is the capacity to think systematically about the future to inform decision making today. It is described by futurist

Maree Conway as a cognitive capacity that we need to develop as individuals, as organizations and as a society.

For this project, the IGP team employed the Three Horizons framework, a foresight tool that can help us think collectively about the future in a way that leads to more effective action in the face of uncertainty and complexity. The Three Horizons consists of three lines which represent different patterns. The first line is the current system, which is in decline (Horizon 1), the second line is the vision of a preferred future that is growing stronger (Horizon 3), and the third line represents areas of innovation and disruption, which can either be captured to maintain the current system or harnessed to bring about the new (Horizon 2).



Mapping insights from child consultations onto the Three Horizons framework transformed abstract data into a structured strategic dialogue. This approach ensured that every recommendation remained deeply rooted in children's authentic voices rather than speculation. By clearly identifying the 'preferred futures' articulated by children through consultation, youth were then able to leverage their specialized expertise to define the specific innovations and shifts required to bring those visions to life. Moreover, the map serves as a constant visual reminder that the children's priorities are the foundation of the work.

This paper presents both the perspectives of children—captured through direct consultations conducted by UNICEF—and the insights of adolescents and youth—generated through this participatory foresight process. Together, these complementary voices highlight not only what children are saying about their futures, but also how young people analyze, interpret, envision and contextualize these futures. Quotes from child consultations appear in orange while those from youth foresight exercises appear in blue.

The Network: Defining moments in the digital environment

The youth network that was brought together for this project was not only globally diverse—spanning continents, disciplines, and lived experiences—but also qualified. Ranging from 15-25, participants included young researchers, activists, policy advisors, digital safety trainers, technologists, and organizers, many of whom were already making a significant impact in their communities. Their expertise was rooted not only in professional or academic achievements but in deeply personal, often formative experiences within the digital environment.

To better understand their motivations, we asked members at the start of the workshops to reflect on a defining moment in their lives related to the digital environment. Their stories reveal why the digital environment is so critical to children and youth—not just as a space of learning, play, and connection, but as a site of advocacy, empowerment, innovation, exclusion and risk.

For some, the defining digital moment came through their social media feeds:

> *"When I saw how big family-focused social media channels were getting... the whole conversation with them being exploitative... that's the first time I really started viewing this as a very potentially unsafe place for kids."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Pakistan

Others encountered their defining moment through academic research:

> *"Through my coursework, there was a study that I came across which was about child sexual abuse material being proliferated using generative AI... So I think that's something that I'm interested in."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Myanmar

For others, it was witnessing transformation through education and working with children:

> *"I had to travel to Burundi to represent Evminet as a digital safety trainer and I had to train the kids there... seeing them just light up after they grasped the core concepts of safety and responsible technical use. I just felt something in me, and this affirmed my passion in digital safety."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Kenya

Several shared moments where digital spaces became platforms for protest and advocacy:

> *"In 2024, the US Congress had a big hearing where they had Mark Zuckerberg and all the big tech CEOs come, Myself and a couple of other youth organizers stood up during that hearing and had a T-shirt that said "I'm worth more than $270" - That was the price that Mark Zuckerberg's Meta had said young people were worth..."*
>
> Female, 18-25, USA

> *"We launched an online campaign on Twitter back then, and we pushed the agenda and got most of our members of parliament to sign the bill into law. And now the death penalty is abolished for all ordinary crimes in Ghana."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Ghana

Some reflections wrestled with the dual nature of digital power—its potential to both liberate and oppress:

> *"I lived in Egypt in the aftermath of the Arab Spring... it was really fascinating to see how the digital space enabled such quick mobilization and also how it enabled such rapid repression.*
>
> Male, 18-25, USA

> *"During the Black Lives Matter protest... a lot of AI tools were used by the police to predict and target young people who were on the front lines. So, it got me interested in this field."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Sudan

For others still, it was a realization that a digital future must be shaped from within their own communities:

> *"My defining moment in tech is when I realized that the future of technology for Kenyans, for Africans, should be shaped by people who look like us. And so I became one of those people shaping it for all the other young girls and young Africans who are going to come after me."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Kenya

> *"I had to work on a policy document, and I came across the realization that there are about 230 million digital jobs going to be created in Africa... without really skilling young people, we cannot really take advantage of these opportunities."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Ghana

These reflections show just how deeply the digital environment intersects with children's rights—from freedom of expression to protection from harm, from access to education to participation in civic life. For the young people in this network, the digital world is not an abstract policy domain. It is where their rights are negotiated, tested, and often violated—but also where they find voice, connection, and purpose.

Horizon 1: The present system

Horizon 1 explores the systems, norms, and practices that define children's current experience in the digital environment—what is being sustained, and what is no longer working. While not everything in Horizon 1 is negative or enacted with bad intentions in mind, the overarching message from both children and youth is clear: today's digital spaces are not built in the best interests of the child.

Many youth participants were struck by the clarity, honesty, and awareness evident in the reflections of children during the UNICEF consultations. Across regions and age groups, children demonstrated profound insight into how the digital world works—and how it doesn't work for them. This was a wake-up call for some:

> *"Children [in consultations] notice. A lot of times we have conversations we think are complex, but they say it as it is. This is why children need to be part of the conversation."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Kenya

Limited user choice and data exploitation

> *"Anywhere you put your age, surname and first name, they can know everything about you."*
>
> 10-13, Spain

Young people in the foresight workshops noticed the high levels of frustration children feel with the illusion of control in digital spaces. The "notice-and-consent" model of data privacy, where users make individual privacy decisions about their own personal information, is evidently failing. As one young researcher put it:

> *"I saw everywhere that everyone was kind of scared of where the information was going, whether it being their digital footprint or the information that they have. And a lot of the terms and conditions do explain these things, but they're just so long."*
>
> Female, 15-17, USA

Another youth participant was eager to point out that the term "digital footprint," added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2016, reflects how a generation raised in the digital age is now hyperaware of the permanence of whatever is posted online, and how it can't really be undone or

taken back. Many children and youth are not only aware of the risks—they are increasingly anxious about them.

These insights revealed to some youth participants that user choice was clearly integral to children as well as youth:

> *"I think the underpinning thread that we can pull out from that is the desire to be able to choose what information they want to see and what information they want to share as well as the platforms."*
>
> Female, 18-25, USA

Some youth participants pointed to a growing normalization of surveillance capitalism, a term popularized in the digital context by Shoshana Zuboff, where children's personal data and attention spans are treated as currency; a digital economy driven by engagement and profit. They noted children's awareness of this—often described in simple yet striking terms—indicating the urgent need for child-centric, transparent, data governance. This echoes calls made within UNICEF's manifesto for better governance of children's data.

Inappropriate content and gaps in age verification

> *"One very important thing is that many children lose their innocence, because they access things that were meant for older children, for 18-year-olds."*
>
> 14-17, Brazil

Children shared in consultations that they might encounter content like this on social media:

> *"So mine is showing people being executed for their crimes."*
>
> 14-17, USA

> *"Videos that cuss out others... videos that are murderous or are about murder."*
>
> 10-13, Malaysia

While reading the voices of children, a sobering truth emerged: the current digital environment too often falls short of meeting even the most basic obligations to protect children from harm. Youth participants—some still children themselves—spoke with clarity and conviction about the everyday

realities many children face online: exposure to violence, bullying, hate speech, and manipulation by algorithms, and contact with strangers.

Many youth were struck by how common it is for children to encounter violent or explicit content—through ads, games, or autoplay suggestions made by algorithms—despite so-called "child-friendly" labels. These instances reflect a broader pattern where commercial design choices override children's best interests. Youth participants flagged the infiltration of advertising and adult content into digital spaces supposedly created for children:

> *"The practice (that is) no longer in the best interest of the child is having adverts that are essentially adult centered being integrated into Children's Games... It's exposing them to information they shouldn't be learning now."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Kenya

These are not isolated incidents. One youth participant pointed out how even some child-specific platforms had been repeatedly caught up in controversy due to inappropriate content slipping through their detection systems:

> *"It was made worse because parents trusted the Kids label and would allow unrestricted or unsupervised screentime on the app."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Pakistan

Another pervasive theme was the failure of platforms to verify age or ensure safe, appropriate access.

> *"Some people use Fake ID (man pretending to be a woman)."*
>
> 14-17, Malaysia

> *"Strangers I don't know follow me."*
>
> 14-17, Malaysia

In an environment where anyone can claim to be anyone, children can be easily contacted by strangers or deceived by imposters and online groomers, becoming victims of tech facilitated harassment and crimes, both financial and sexual. Citing UN Women's 2025 '16 Days of Activism' campaign, one participant underscored the urgent need to address the rise of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). In the absence of dedicated, child-friendly spaces online, children are forced to navigate environments built for adults. This accelerates their exposure to risk,

erodes the boundaries of childhood, and shifts the burden of protection onto those least equipped to carry it.

Reading the voices of children was, for many youth participants, both shocking and unsurprising: shocking in how normalized the harm has become for children themselves; unsurprising because they themselves had seen the cracks in the system from an early age. These stories confirm what many have long suspected: that the current design and governance of some digital platforms often prioritize growth, engagement, and profit at the expense of children's safety, dignity, and development.

The right to privacy and the complexity of protection

> *"So it is the responsibility of the companies that make the online world that when they make anything like this, they should take care of the privacy of children so that the children do not face any problem."*
>
> 14-17, Brazil

For children and young people, privacy in the digital world is a daily negotiation. It is the space where they explore identity, autonomy, and connection, often under the watchful eyes of both platforms and parents. In the workshops, youth participants noted the deeply personal—and sometimes conflicted—ways children spoke about privacy. They do not reject protection, but they want it on their own terms.

Many children are not naive about how their data is used. They are aware that while their digital footprints are what allows platforms to apply safety measures, they can also be exploited, and that privacy violations don't just come from strangers, but from the very tools and services they are told to trust. However, with rising complexity of systems, an information gap remains, leaving youth at risk. They voiced complex views about responsibility, including but not limited to the role of parents. For some, trust and transparency with caregivers brought a sense of safety:

> *"I feel safe either way because my parents know what I watch/do."*
>
> 10-13, Malaysia

Others, however, described a dynamic where privacy existed in name only:

> *"I have privacy, but my mom knows all of my privacy."*
>
> 14-17, Malaysia

As one youth participant put it, the tension is not simply between privacy and safety—it is between protection and autonomy:

> *"Children want privacy from their parents... their own little secrets. But at the same time, they understand the need for protection from doing bad things."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Myanmar

This is where the conversation on children's rights must evolve. The digital environment has become about control, often pitting adult anxiety against children's agency. But blanket bans on social media or surveillance-heavy parental controls are blunt instruments that risk undermining children's dignity and capacity for growth. UNICEF's statement on social media bans acknowledges that while restrictions reflect much-needed concern around children's online safety, they come with their own risks and limitations and may even backfire.

There was discussion around the implications of parents creating content using their children online, without any consideration of their privacy, making their children more vulnerable to harm online and offline. Entrusting the responsibility of online protection to caregivers, one youth participant shared, has not boded well in the past.

> *"We cannot and should not have any proposed (privacy) framework solely rely on the better judgement of the caregiver, as they could have conflicting areas of interest (e.g. family Channels being monetized)."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Pakistan

Respecting children's evolving capacities means recognizing that privacy is not only a means to safety, but a right in itself. It demands frameworks that teach responsibility rather than impose restriction, striking the balance between safety and accountability, that treat children not as problems to be managed, or consumers to be marketed to, but as citizens with rights and people to be trusted.

Mental health and well-being are being undermined

> *"I love to watch TikTok because I live a stressful life."*
>
> 10-13, Malaysia

Mental health emerged as a major concern for children. Youth participants noted how children use platforms to escape their problems and to seek emotional support — often simultaneously. They described the mental toll of comparison, excessive use, and overexposure. The duality of this coping mechanism was not lost on youth participants.

> *"They cannot stop using [social media] and it affects their health... but one said, 'I use TikTok because I have a stressful life.' That's strong, because it's a child saying that they need to relax using these platforms."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Argentina

Another youth participant reflected more broadly that this tendency signals a deeper systemic issue: the erosion of recreational spaces and physical play. This insight challenges us to recognize that the future of the digital environment cannot be delinked from offline realities. Rebalancing this over-reliance will require systemic, intersectoral change—not just safer platforms, but safer communities.

Children spoke with striking clarity about the impact of the digital environment on their sleep, self-image, and ability to focus. What once may have been brushed aside as teenage distraction now reads as a warning:

> *"So many people are now comparing themselves to people on the internet... the part of your brain that once was like, "that's fake", "that's real" is now just super confused."*
>
> 10-13, USA

> *"Looking at the screen for extended hours at night makes my eyes hurt."*
>
> 14-17, Malaysia

The impacts of self-image and social comparison, exemplified by paid ads on social media for weight loss drugs without proper information are, as one youth analyst put it, "devastating and vast" Female, 15-17, UK. Another pointed out that social comparison may be exacerbated because

of deepfakes and generative AI of unreal images. So many children are trying to make sense of these harms on their own—without the guidance, language, or tools to fully understand what they are experiencing:

> *"Even though children want to be free to use social media, they are also acknowledging that extended screen time has health implications."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Ghana

Another cause for concern was the present and future impacts of AI on well-being, critical thinking, and other vital skills for development:

> *"I think AI should be used to make things go quicker and simpler to do, but replacing thinking is a bad idea."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Kazakhstan

As AI becomes increasingly integrated into everyday digital experiences, young people are beginning to question not only what AI does, but what it means for their sense of agency and knowledge. As one youth analyst noted:

> *"Something that I am seeing (that isn't talked about as much) is giving epistemic authority to algorithms... some children are becoming insecure and are doubting their own judgement, thinking their idea is wrong if it deviates from 'what AI says'."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Australia

Children's honesty about their digital dependencies, especially at young ages, calls for serious reflection on how platforms are designed and monetized. Children recognize that some platforms do not always uphold their best interests. They are asking, not always with words, for help in reclaiming control over their attention, their emotions, and their well-being.

A widespread lack of rights awareness

> *"People don't know their rights."*
>
> 14-17, Brazil

> *"The rights of children and adolescents are not discussed, only by adults."*
>
> 14-17, Brazil

Many youth participants noted that children clearly do not know their rights in the digital world. They saw this not as a personal failing, but a systemic one. The absence of digital rights education in schools, media, and child-facing services has left children ill-equipped to navigate one of the most powerful forces and environments shaping their lives.

Importantly, how children's rights are respected in the digital environment varies significantly across countries and contexts. While some children benefit from specific protections, others are subject to entirely different rules or lack clear safeguards altogether. Thus, the issue is not only about ensuring children know what rights they currently have— but about equipping them to hold legislators and policymakers accountable. While the duty to protect rests firmly with the state regardless of a child's level of awareness, such awareness serves as a vital tool for agency.

> *"You can't teach children to defend rights they don't know exist."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Ghana

This disconnect reinforces power imbalances and makes children more vulnerable to exploitation. As this youth participant noted, advocacy begins with awareness. So many guides on child safeguarding online target parents alone, focusing on the actions that can be taken by individuals, ignoring the systemic change necessary. It is thus not surprising when these attempts fail to have a significant and lasting impact.

> *"This "talking over their heads" at a policy level is the biggest reason for the lack of sustainable action we see today."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Pakistan

Awareness begins with being told: you have rights, and advocacy occurs with being told they matter.

The failure of institutions to protect children

> *"The government is responsible."*
>
> 14-17, Brazil

Children and youth were united in their criticism of the institutions meant to protect them. Their trust in platforms is low but their disappointment in governments and regulators runs just as deep. Children do not need to be experts in law or policy to recognize institutional failure. They feel it every time a platform violates their privacy without consequence, every time online abuse is ignored, every time safety features are optional rather than standard.

The digital environment is not failing children by accident. It is failing by design—and by neglect. Youth participants made it clear that the burden of safety cannot fall solely on children. It must be carried by those with power and resources—governments, tech companies, regulators—who can often choose inaction over accountability. Some decision makers will be struggling with the complex task of balancing rights like privacy and protection. Yet, whether the barrier is a lack of effort or the difficulty of the task, the outcome for the child is the same. Accountability means refusing to let these complexities become a permanent excuse for inaction.

> *"Government's need to take responsibility in making proactive policies and regulations that protect the children's rights and safety, and pressure the tech companies in doing the same."*
>
> Youth participant

> *"Given that cyberspace is by its very nature a cross-border sphere of interest, any lack of proper regulation is not just a failure of countries, but of the international community."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Italy

Horizon 1 is not just a critique of platforms—but of systemic inertia across all levels of governance. Without robust legal and institutional protections, children remain at the mercy of market logic.

Across all regions and perspectives, Horizon 1 paints a sobering but necessary picture of children's digital realities. The systems currently in place often fail to protect, support, or empower them. Yet what also emerges is a strong current of awareness, reflection, and resolve—from both children and youth.

Horizon 3: Children's preferred futures

Horizon 3 explores the futures children want: a digital world that is inclusive, safe, and empowering. Through youth-led synthesis of child consultation data, a shared vision emerged—one in which technology is not only accessible but designed around the best interests of the child. In this section, we highlight the key themes and aspirations voiced by children and youth for the digital future they wish to see.

Inclusion and accessibility for all

Many children's visions for the future are rooted in inclusion—technological infrastructure, language accessibility, disability accommodations, and equitable access to learning tools.

> *"Digital literacy would be taught early... empowering them to navigate, create, and lead."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Nigeria

Youth emphasized that marginalization in the digital world often mirrors existing societal inequities, and that future design must bridge these gaps, not deepen them. Youth are optimistic that an equitable digital landscape can help bring down information disparity globally. To read these principles in the voices of children was a profound experience for some youth participants:

> *"One of the sticky notes said that WhatsApp should have Malaysian sign language... that means this is something that really affects them or someone close to them. I was just amazed by that."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Pakistan

With all the discussion around digital literacy, some youth participants pointed out the evident lack of access to digital devices and infrastructure experienced by children. Many children called for access to laptops, mobile phones, and the internet in the preferred future. This brought home to many young participants that there is no digital environment—or a very limited digital environment—for so many children around the world, prohibiting their access to education and opportunity:

> *"Education access is still a big issue in our world today. Not everybody has access to education, especially girls... (but) a lot of countries are struggling with the digital divide where they don't have access to the technological infrastructure to even facilitate access to education."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Sudan

Additionally, the exponential pace of technological advancement may only serve to widen this existing inequality in access to, and quality of, the education received.

By contrast, youth participants highlighted a surprising insight: not all children want more access to digital tools in their preferred futures; some want safer, slower, and more intentional pathways. Some even call for age limits:

> *"Those who know how to use it can have it, and those who don't know how to use it should not be able to use their own mobile phone."*
>
> 10-13, Spain

> *"Not normalizing mobile phones in high schools."*
>
> 14-17, Spain

Similarly, the idea of a "license" to use and access digital devices shared by some children reflected a desire for protection, readiness, and self-regulation.

> *"A license to own a phone or to use AI... I thought that was really original."*
>
> Male, 18-25, USA

A culture of shared responsibility

Youth participants noticed that many children envisioned a future where responsibility for the best interests of children in the digital environment was shared across generations, governments, platforms, and communities.

Some prioritized the role of elder siblings to help them register for digital platforms:

> *"I love the emphasis on the familial ties."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Egypt

But responsibility was assigned to numerous stakeholders. As one youth participant shared:

> *"It's also interesting to see... some people think the government is responsible, some people think we as children are responsible, some persons think the older siblings are responsible, etc. I think that's also an interesting space to explore in terms of who actually is responsible and what are the responsibilities at those different levels."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Jamaica

Some children emphasized the importance of society and collective care—the individual, family, and state acting in harmony to create safer, more empowering digital spaces:

> *"Society needs to understand its role as a society, it's not just about posting a photo and getting a like, it needs to understand what it needs, how it's going to change if you're watching TikTok all day."*
>
> 14-17, Brazil

Well-being as a design principle

It was evident that many children desire a future where there is greater attention to well-being in the digital environment. A considerable number of children spoke to the impacts of a digital environment wracked with judgement and objectification. The preferred future, by contrast,

> *"...would make them feel like, like they could share stuff with people, and they can be who they want to be, and no one would judge them for that."*
>
> 10-13, USA

For some young participants, they found it fascinating how aware and conscious children were about well-being, or a lack thereof, in the digital environment:

> *"I thought it was interesting how many of them felt that those who provide technology basically don't care about their well-being... it's amazing that at such a young age you can already know that."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Jamaica

Many children evidently wish for digital spaces that support mental health, dignity, and authentic self-expression, not ones designed for excessive and unhealth use, or comparison. They see a

better future where well-being is protected not just by content filters or report buttons, but by culture, design, and law.

Many children recognized how problematic algorithms that prioritize negative content can be:

> *"Bad content should not be allowed to go viral. Good content should be promoted."*
>
> 14-17, India

Youth participants also emphasized the importance of platform algorithms that can elevate positive content and reduce harm, underscoring the need for a shift in how attention is monetized.

> *"Algorithms would promote positive content instead of harmful stuff."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Sierra Leone

Some children in consultations saw this as natural and wished for a digital environment that mimicked nature:

> *"Well, I have made this tree on your head because a tree is such that we have to remove the things that are not useful to us in digital, like the leaves of trees that are not useful fall and new leaves come. Similarly, in our digital marketing, the things that are not useful to us, which are very negative, we have to remove them and bring positive things, something good."*
>
> 14-17, India

Advanced privacy and safety standards

Children imagine a future where digital privacy and safety are not optional features but fundamental design principles. They envision systems where data collection is minimized, access is age-appropriate, and personal information is protected.

While overall, children who took part in consultations expressed negative attitudes towards bans, believing they are not a solution to the problem, some appeared to call for limits on children in the digital environment:

> *"Before 12 years old, children should not be given online privacy. They are too vulnerable to bad content or bad people."*
>
> 14-17, India

> *"There should be an automatic limit on screen time."*
>
> 10-13, Sierra Leone

Data governance was also a major focus in the preferred future:

> *"They also imagine a digital world where apps and websites do not ask for personal data and only need a nickname other than your real name."*
>
> 10-13, Spain

Youth echoed the need for robust governance frameworks that safeguard children's rights while helping them understand how digital systems work. Privacy, in their view, must be balanced with protection—especially for younger users. One youth participant acknowledged that,

> *"Data governance is a core area for protecting the rights of the child in the digital world. Especially when it comes to sensitive data like health."*
>
> Youth participant

Agency, expression, and child-centred design

It was apparent to some youth participants that many children do not see themselves as passive consumers of technology. In the preferred future, they want to help create it, improve it, and shape the culture around it.

A number of children recognized how vitally important the digital environment has been and would be in the preferred future as a platform for advocacy and free expression:

> *"It helps us to express our voices."*
>
> 10-13, Seirra Leone

Many children's visions for a digital environment in children's best interests include meaningful participation:

> *"We are responsible for change."*
>
> 14-17, Brazil

> *"We are responsible for good technology."*
>
> 14-17, Malaysia

Youth participants reinforced this, calling for policies and platforms that centre children's rights not as an afterthought, but as a guiding principle for digital innovation. Together, they call for a shift from top-down control to co-created child-centred design.

It is evident that children's preferred futures are about dignity, fairness, and trust. They imagine a world where digital spaces are safe and inclusive, where responsibility is shared, and where children can both shape and thrive in the technology that surrounds them.

Horizon 2: Innovations and disruptions

Horizon 2 sheds light on the innovations, shifts, and youth-driven experiments that are beginning to challenge the status quo. Drawing on both the survey results and workshop data, this section surfaces a wave of possibilities—some efforts that could be captured to maintain the status quo in Horizon 1, and others that could be harnessed to open up pathways toward Horizon 3. What unites them is a demand for agency, dignity, and values-led design in the digital world. These aren't just emerging trends; they are signals of a generation reimagining what the digital environment could and should be.

Digital literacy as a foundational right

Youth participants contributing through both surveys and workshops increasingly see digital literacy not just as a skill but a right and necessity for navigating risks and shaping the digital world.

They spoke of digital onboarding, not only for functionality but for ethics, safety, and rights awareness. Literacy is framed here as empowerment: a necessary tool for children to navigate, critique, and shape their digital surroundings.

> *"Students should not just be technology users but also thinkers."*
>
> 14-17, Indonesia

> *"Initiatives that teach digital literacy from an early age show promise. We can learn the importance of involving young people directly in shaping their digital experiences."*
>
> Female, 18-25, El Salvador

No trend surfaced more frequently across workshop and survey responses than AI. AI, as many noted, is forcing a reckoning with core values. Its capacity to accelerate tasks and amplify expression is reshaping how young people learn, communicate, and make decisions. AI literacy is crucial today, and will only grow in importance tomorrow:

> *"AI is obviously huge right now... it's changing how we learn, talk, and even think... People are starting to ask better questions: not just "Can we build this?" but "Should we?"*
>
> Male, 18-25, China

> *"Individuals need to be able to identify misinformation online, deepfakes, and how AI influences their perceptions."*
>
> Female, 18-25, USA

Some youth participants pointed to local initiatives and their impact:

> *"Pakistan's "Digital Rights Youth Coalition" has shown that locally led tech literacy programs work where Silicon Valley's "one-size-fits-all" models fail - our Urdu-language critical thinking workshops helped students spot disinformation 3x faster than global platforms' fact-checking tools."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Pakistan

> *"What inspires me most are educational initiatives like "digital citizenship" programs that teach children to consume content more mindfully. In CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries, this is still underdeveloped, but the pilot projects I've encountered show surprising results—kids really do start approaching online content more critically."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Russia

Digital literacy is not just about technical competence. It is about agency, citizenship, and inclusion. It also lays out the groundwork for many of the trends below.

Tech for expression, identity, and social change

Far from being passive consumers, children and youth are actively repurposing digital tools to express themselves, build communities, and lead change.

Many described using platforms like TikTok, Canva, and Minecraft as tools for activism, storytelling, and education. They shared examples of youth creating podcasts, glossaries, simulations, and open-source resources for climate justice, mental health, and social inclusion.

> *"Youth led movements on platforms like TikTok are proving that young voices can drive change. This shows that when young people are given agency, they become powerful contributors to innovation and advocacy."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Zambia

> *"I've seen a promising change in how young people reclaim digital tools, like climate podcasts hosted by teenagers, grassroots campaigns going viral through art, and AI used for environmental simulations by student groups... We need more support to scale that curiosity."*
>
> 14-17, India

> *"The other big movement... is youth-led and youth-informed innovation. When our voice is included, the tools and spaces that emerge will be more considerate, inclusive, and relevant."*
>
> 14-17, Uzbekistan

> *"Use of TikTok has made me to be creative."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Uganda

In Horizon 2, innovation is grassroots and personal. And it doesn't require a lab, just a curious mind and a mobile phone.

> *"Young people are now actively participating in digital ethics debates. Most of them are calling out toxic topics/taboo issues to push a safer environment- especially online spaces. The learnings in this is that, children and youths are not just displays, they are not just users/consumers, they're creators and critics. Their curiosity fuels their ability to listen and empower their voices when shaping future policies."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Philippines

Humane tech and design that supports well-being

Many children and youth are rejecting exploitative platform design and demanding more humane, ethical, and emotionally intelligent alternatives. They envision platforms designed around dignity, reflection, and care.

Across both survey and workshop data, young people pointed to promising tools that give users greater control over their experiences. These features, though still limited in reach, offer hope that platforms can evolve toward well-being-focused design.

> *"I have noticed more digital well-being tools on platforms like Instagram and Facebook where things like screen time reminders, mute and block options, and content warnings. Honestly, it gives me hope."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Ghana

In Kenya, youth are promoting the idea of *digital utu* to the digital realm—while others called for more privacy-preserving, non-extractive alternatives to dominant platforms:

> *"There's growing interest among Kenyan youth in building tools that prioritize "digital utu"—a people-centered approach rooted in dignity, ethics, and communal well-being."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Kenya

Meanwhile, a growing number of youth are embracing mental health tech—such as journaling apps, mood trackers, and trauma-informed platforms—as part of a broader movement to reclaim the internet as a space for healing. These tools reflect a deeper mindset shift away from extraction and optimization, toward emotional intelligence and intentional design.

> *"AI is reshaping everything from creative expression to identity formation. It's both thrilling and terrifying... The lesson? Tech will always evolve, but values have to lead."*
>
> Female, 15-17, Kenya

In this vision of Horizon 2, well-being is not an afterthought. It is a design principle and a necessary foundation for a just and inclusive digital future.

Rebalancing responsibility between adults and children

Children and youth participants called for a recalibration of roles in the digital environment—one that neither overprotects nor abandons children but instead fosters shared responsibility. Horizon 2 reveals a desire for intergenerational partnership: empowering children to be informed and resilient digital citizens while holding adults, governments, and platforms accountable for creating safer spaces:

While the majority were not supportive, there was support from some youth participants for age-based limits on social media—but only when paired with privacy safeguards, proper implementation, with rights-based approaches. It is at least recognition that the problem exists:

> *"I appreciated the new Australian law that bans accounts of people under 16 years old from social media. It is a step towards protecting minors in a risky environment, even if imperfect."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Italy

Youth also emphasized the growing role of AI in mediating access and safety—tools like content filters, age estimation, and adaptive learning apps. But they cautioned that these tools are only effective when adults understand and responsibly manage them:

> *"Platforms like TikTok and Instagram are already using these to block harmful or age-inappropriate content. This is helpful, but only if parents know how to use the tools and keep them updated."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Philippines

Some pointed to a global shift in digital governance—citing laws like the EU's Digital Services Act—as signs of progress toward child-inclusive regulation:

> *"They are not absolutely perfect, but they indicate that children require some protection and involvement rights in the digital environment."*
>
> Female, 15-17, Oman

In Horizon 2, youth are interested in innovations and systems where adults and children co-create boundaries, protections, and opportunities—anchored in trust, transparency, and evolving capacities.

Equitable access and inclusive infrastructure

Across both Global North and South contexts, children and youth emphasized that digital equity remains a foundational challenge. They pointed not only to gaps in access to devices and connectivity—but also to broader disparities in digital inclusion, safety, and representation.

Young people are imagining futures where these gaps are closed through community-driven innovations:

> *"Offline learning apps, solar-powered digital kits, and community internet centers are making it possible to bridge the digital divide."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Malawi

This vision is grounded in a belief in universal rights: that every child, no matter where they live, should have access to empowering digital experiences, empowering the next generation to use technology with awareness and intention. Youth called for localized infrastructure strategies that reflect diverse needs—from remote villages to urban centres—and for affordability, age-appropriate content, and cultural relevance to be prioritized:

> *"Kids from remote areas in Sierra Leone to bustling cities in Europe can get online with affordable data, good devices, and content that suits their age."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Sierra Leone

This isn't just a call for more devices or faster networks. As one participant puts it, equitable access means building environments that are empowering and tailored to their contexts:

> *"Installing digital networks in every public place to promote digital environment."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Uganda

For equitable infrastructure to bring about the preferred future, it must be seen as a justice issue, demanding investment in locally relevant people-centred design.

Youth as co-governors and co-designers

One of the most powerful currents running through Horizon 2 is a reimagining of governance itself. Many children and youth are demanding co-ownership of the digital world. This includes decision-making roles in platform design, child rights impact assessments, and digital policymaking. Young people are imagining futures where these gaps are closed through community-driven innovations:

> *"Youth wouldn't just be consulted about digital policies but would hold real decision-making power—perhaps through a 'Children's Digital Rights Council."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Pakistan

> *"Young people wouldn't just follow digital rules; they would help create them."*
>
> Male, 18-25, Sierra Leone

This vision is already taking shape through youth-led movements and participatory design initiatives:

> *"Open-source tools and platforms promoting transparency and decentralization are also gaining traction. These trends highlight the importance of participatory design, where youth co-create digital spaces that reflect our needs, values, and diversity."*
>
> Female, 15-17, Canada

> *"More youth are becoming active participants of designing the digital world while actively pushing for ethical tech. This creates checks and balances."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Indonesia

This shift from tokenism to co-governance is also rooted in lived experience. Youth are calling for participatory mechanisms that recognize their evolving capacities and leadership:

> *"Platforms must include participatory feedback mechanisms that give children and young people a say in shaping their digital spaces, something that aligns with inclusive leadership and advocacy values."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Bangladesh

For some youth, concrete examples like the Youth Internet Governance Forum (IGF) show that youth-led governance is not theoretical—it is already happening:

> *"Youth IGF... empowers young people to engage in internet governance through annual events, debates, training, and awareness-raising activities around digital rights and online safety. This*

> *initiative specifically demonstrates the importance of actively involving young people in shaping the future of the internet for safer, more youth-centered online spaces."*
>
> Female, 18-25, USA

In Horizon 2, children and youth are no longer peripheral stakeholders. They are digital stewards—designers, decision-makers, and advocates for a more just and accountable digital future. As one youth participant noted:

> *"Children should be empowered to help shape and promote the positive practices they stand for. Children should be empowered to answer both what the new rule should be and how it can be effectively respected and implemented."*
>
> Female, 18-25, Italy

Recommendations

Both during and after the workshops, adolescents and youth worked together to formulate a series of recommendations for various stakeholders. These recommendations represent a call to action for all stakeholders—governments, technology companies, educators, and civil society—to move beyond fragmented approaches toward comprehensive, youth-informed solutions. The vision is clear: every child should grow up empowered, protected, and able to harness technology's potential while being shielded from its harms.

1. Transform digital education through rights-based literacy

> *We envision a world where every child can feel in control of their digital experience—aware of their rights, confident in their choices, and equipped to use media and AI for good. This fosters not only safer digital childhoods but also more informed, empathetic, and resilient societies.*

Current digital literacy approaches are outdated and fragmented. Education systems must shift from basic technical skills to a comprehensive understanding of digital rights, data use, and ethical engagement. This requires a cohesive approach with a focus on accessibility for all.

Children should learn to:

- Recognize and exercise their rights in the digital environment, including privacy, consent, and freedom from exploitation.
- Understand how their data is collected, used, and monetized—particularly in profiling, advertising, and algorithmic decision-making.
- Evaluate the reliability of online information and recognize signs of manipulation, misinformation, and harmful content.
- Help young people manage their use of technology, recognize when their use is excessive or undermines rather than supports their mental health, and find ways to seek help without shame.
- Navigate and understand support systems for abuse reporting and intervention.
- Engage ethically and respectfully in digital spaces, taking responsibility for their own online behaviors.

Action steps:

- Schools and universities implement comprehensive digital and AI literacy programmes, supported by public awareness campaigns and co-created with youth to drive engagement. Family engagement is crucial.
- Teacher training programmes focus on effective communication about digital safety and well-being.
- Governments should establish and effectively implement coherent legislation, while regional bodies should ensure harmonized legislation that clarifies the roles and responsibilities of all relevant actors—users, platforms, regulators, and media.
- AI and media platforms should reflect children's input in their design, empowering future generations to use technology responsibility as a tool—not a threat, or a means to shirk responsibility. See Recommendation 6.

2. Ensure transparent, age-appropriate platform communication

> *We envision a world where every child is aware of their rights and the implications of engaging with any online platform, which informs their decisions on how to use such tools.*

Platform terms and policies must be accessible to children, moving beyond complex legal language to clear, engaging communication. We must hold developers accountable to effectively communicate what it means to engage with them and use the services provided. This can give children the autonomy to decide how to use online platforms and digital tools.

Requirements:

- Age-appropriate language in all platform communications.
- Alternative formats including visual materials, videos, and storytelling for accessibility.
- Easy, accessible consent withdrawal mechanisms.
- Clear guidelines for platform developers on communication standards.

Implementation:

- Decision-makers at the national, regional, and global levels must create the necessary mechanisms (policies, regulations, etc.) to establish guidelines and communication expectations.
- Regular evaluation and adjustment of guidelines in collaboration with children. See Recommendation 6.
- Platforms redesign user interfaces to prioritize clarity and informed consent.

3. Combat AI-generated harm through comprehensive safeguards

> *We envision a safe digital world where every child can grow up informed, empowered, and protected—free from the harms of AI, and equipped to shape its future.*

Children have a right to privacy and protection, but AI-generated content like deepfakes puts them at risk. Some turn to parents for help, yet few adults know how to respond. Meanwhile, AI companies have the resources to act, but without regulation, harmful content spreads—and the positive potential of AI is lost.

Key measures:

- Tech companies should build community guidelines independent of governments to avoid bringing political bias into filtering processes. This would allow freedom of speech and only flag content if there are reasonable grounds to believe that a child is in danger or certain content is violent or unsafe.
- Mandatory labeling of AI-generated content, especially deceptive or harmful deepfakes, must be clearly labeled to prevent harm and confusion. Platforms should prioritize design features that make it easy to identify and report fake or harmful content.
- Quick and effective removal processes for harmful AI content with offender accountability.
- Strong legal consequences for offenders who use AI to harm or exploit children must be put in place, including rehabilitation and educational measures to reintegrate them into the digital environment.
- Legitimate, trustworthy content should be promoted over manipulative or misleading material, including bots that can be weaponized to target vulnerable communities, such as children from religious and ethnic minorities and the LGBTQIA+ community to name a few.
- Judicial systems must be proactive in adapting with technology, ensuring global equity in child protection resources.

4. Establish a global digital well-being framework

> *We envision a future where all children grow up and live in a world with a safe, equitable and inclusive digital environment, regulated by a systemized global framework that protects children, and is regularly updated and continuously improved upon in collaboration with them.*

Vulnerable populations—especially children and those with disabilities—need consistent global protections and standardized safety measures.

Framework pillars:

- Systemic design & algorithmic accountability:
    - Algorithm redesign to eliminate exploitative advertising targeting children.
    - Restrictions on manipulative design features and gamified reward systems that are designed to encourage prolonged engagement and potentially foster unhealthy use.
    - Built-in screen-time regulation tools and "do not disturb" options that empower children to manage and regulate their screen time effectively.
- Privacy and crisis response:
    - Prohibition of excessive data collection from children that undermines their privacy or leads to exploitation.
    - 24/7 referral systems for online abuse and grooming to ensure timely intervention.
- Global governance and participation:
    - Establish a youth network within the multilateral system dedicated to achieving child safety, co-created with young people to ensure their voices are central.
    - Binding international targets to ensure measurable progress in child safety.

5. Strengthen legal protections and enforcement

> *We envision a future where children's digital rights are protected by law, respected, and shaped by their voices. As technology evolves, legal systems evolve alongside, ensuring a global culture of accountability, consent, and digital dignity.*

Legal frameworks must evolve alongside technology to protect children's digital rights and ensure accountability. These systems are essential to create accountability from adults and systems that shape the world of children today.

Essential legal recognitions:

- Ownership and copyright of their self-image.
- Total consent over data sharing, self-image, and exposure.
- Child-friendly violation reporting mechanisms, including judicial review to challenge misuse.
- Mandatory transparency in data use and monetization.

Enforcement measures:

- Warnings and sanctions for influencers, advertisers and marketers violating child protection standards.
- Stakeholder consultations between government, non-profits, and youth to identify issues in greater depth.
- Mandatory transparency legislation for digital platforms.
- AI regulation with explicit child rights provisions, recognized and enshrined in supranational AI agreements, such as the Global Digital Compact (GDC).
- Clear sanctions for big tech companies with global enforcement.
- Ongoing monitoring systems that evolve with emerging technologies.

6. Empower youth to co-design and monitor progress towards equitable systems

> *We envision a future where every child can track and influence the decisions that shape their life; where youth-friendly data dashboards sit alongside budgets; where no policy made in the name of children can be implemented without clear pathways for feedback and redress; and where accountability is not a burden placed on children but a power they are resourced and trusted to wield.*

Without robust accountability, policies meant to protect children can falter in silence. When children can track outcomes, interrogate delivery, and co-shape solutions, they are more likely to stay engaged and champion progress. Empowering children and young people to monitor and evaluate not only builds transparency but enhances the relevance and responsiveness of programmes.

Accountability mechanisms:

- Children and young people recognized as active system monitors — not just participants in consultations.
- Child-friendly accountability tools must be created and scaled, including progress dashboards, simplified scorecards.
- Youth-led audit mechanisms and participatory budgeting processes.
- Participatory budgeting and decision-tracking must be introduced at school, community, and national levels to ensure children can see how government priorities are set and funds are spent.
- Capacity-building must be provided so that all children, especially those in marginalized or underrepresented groups, have the skills and resources to meaningfully engage. See Recommendation 1.

- Feedback loops must be institutionalized and sustained, ensuring that when children raise concerns, they receive timely responses and see tangible outcomes from their advocacy.
- Mandatory child-led accountability in donor funding and UN evaluation cycles.

Conclusion

The path forward, charted by adolescents and youth, demands unprecedented collaboration between generations, sectors, and stakeholders. It requires moving beyond consultation to genuine co-creation, where children's voices don't just inform decisions but fundamentally shape them. Most importantly, it demands accountability mechanisms that ensure promises translate into measurable progress.

The young people behind these recommendations have articulated a clear vision: a digital world where every child can thrive safely, exercise their rights confidently, and contribute meaningfully to technological advancement.

The time for fragmented, reactive approaches has passed. These recommendations provide a roadmap for proactive, comprehensive action. The question now is not whether we can afford to implement them, but whether we can afford not to.

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About us

UNICEF, the United Nations agency for children, works to protect the rights of every child, everywhere, especially the most disadvantaged children and in the toughest places to reach. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive, and fulfil their potential.

UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti accelerates progress for children by working to ensure that policies and programming are informed by high-quality evidence. As the global custodian of child-related official statistics, it works closely with governments and partners to strengthen national statistical systems. Through world-leading data, research and foresight, it underpins UNICEF's global leadership on children's rights and serves as the organization's hub for setting strategy and monitoring programmes. With the active engagement of young people and other partners, it supports advocacy and dialogue aimed at improving the lives of children everywhere.

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