

WORKING PAPER

Skills for an AI World

Insights from children in five African countries

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Executive summary

This project considers children's and adolescents' perspectives on AI, and the skills, attitudes and knowledge they view as important to thrive in a world influenced by AI, both today and tomorrow, and in work and wider life. It is based on child-centred consultations with 97 children, aged 9 to 17 years, across five African countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Egypt, Mozambique, Senegal and Rwanda. The findings inform recommendations for stakeholders – including governments, education providers and technology companies – to strengthen children's AI-related skills and competencies.

Key findings

Children's understanding and use of AI

- Children view AI as a tool that can be used for a wide range of tasks in education, work and life in general. Their understanding of AI can be restricted to familiarity with chatbots rather than recognition of its broader applications, such as for predictive analytics and recommendations systems. Some children, especially younger participants, appear to have a limited understanding of what is and is not AI.
- Children use a range of AI tools, predominantly chatbots like ChatGPT and Meta AI. They use these for a variety of activities, including to support with schoolwork, look for information, help with tasks and learn skills. Few children report using AI for companion-like interactions.
- Older adolescents, particularly 16–17-year-olds, tend to demonstrate a more sophisticated level of engagement with AI, as they describe using more powerful research tools and give more precise detail about their activities with AI systems compared to younger peers.

Children's opinions about AI

- AI is seen as useful. Older adolescents in particular talked about the value of AI to help with research to complement people's knowledge, speed up activities and perform some tasks to a higher standard than humans.
- Children have significant worries about AI both today and in the future. They are concerned about AI's privacy and safety risks, and most think AI cannot be trusted as it can provide false information. They also worry about people becoming dependent on AI. Older adolescents (16–17-year-olds) express worry about AI creating job losses in the future.
- In general, children feel uncertain about future AI developments, for example, the possibility of it becoming sentient.
- Children highlight that skills alone are insufficient preparation for an AI-influenced world. They spoke about the need to have enough money to use tools, the importance of a supportive digital infrastructure and the desire for processes that meaningfully engage children in AI developments.

- Opinions vary across generations, as a small number of responses suggest parents and caregivers think negatively about AI and don't understand the technology.

Skills, attitudes and knowledge needed to thrive in an AI world

To thrive in an AI world, children feel it is important to be equipped with a broad range of skills (digital, transferable, safety-related and foundational), an attitude of moderation when using AI and knowledge about AI and wider subjects.

A broad range of skills

- **Prompting** is a key skill mentioned by participants. Aside from this, while some children discussed the need for **advanced digital skills** (such as coding) and **basic digital skills** (like knowing how to type), children do not prioritize digital competencies.
- Skills related to critical thinking and information literacy are seen as key. These involve knowing how to **evaluate and verify information** from various sources.
- Children feel it is important to develop skills related to safety, data protection and privacy, especially **understanding what information is and isn't safe to share** with AI systems. However, there is disagreement among children about what information should and should not be shared with these systems.
- Foundational skills of **literacy and numeracy** are also needed. These were mentioned mostly among younger children.

An attitude of moderation

- Children believe there is a need to **self-regulate AI use** by limiting how big a role AI plays in life and by being intentional about what to use AI for.
- Children feel it is important to **learn skills themselves**, not merely to complete tasks, but also to allow humans to maintain their autonomy.
- Children are keen to **invest in human relationships**, as AI should not replace interactions traditionally carried out between humans.

Knowledge about AI and more

- Children place some importance on understanding AI, particularly **knowing that AI is a non-sentient technology**. However, there was little discussion about developing other knowledge about AI, like understanding its wider capabilities and limitations.
- Children feel it is necessary to have **pre-existing knowledge about a subject** when using AI. This plays an important role in underpinning AI use, as it can help people to verify information and avoid over-reliance.

Recommendations

Governments, multilaterals, civil society organizations, technology companies, education companies, funders and communities all have a role to play in equipping children and adolescents to thrive. While the actions of specific stakeholders are identified in the final chapter, collectively their efforts must address the lived experiences and needs expressed by children, as revealed in the findings. Most recommendations are related to supporting skills development and creating a conducive environment for children to thrive, while two cut across all activities.

<i>Developing skills</i>	1. Adopt a holistic approach to skills development – address the full range of skills, knowledge and attitudes that children require for navigating an AI world. 2. Invest in developing these skills in schools – provide relevant guidance, embed skills across curricula and support teachers. 3. Strengthen skills development beyond formal education – develop and support extracurricular programmes, informal learning opportunities and awareness campaigns. 4. Investigate relevant skill needs further – research how best to develop these competencies and reassess these positions regularly.
<i>Creating a conducive environment for children to thrive</i>	5. Invest in child-centred AI governance and regulation – ensure these uphold children's rights and support them to thrive safely. 6. Develop AI tools which are safe, appropriate for children and conducive to developing skills – design products based on a child rights approach, which is inclusive of privacy by design and safety by design. 7. Address the digital divide to ensure meaningful connectivity for every child – invest in affordable internet access and device availability, particularly in rural and low-income settings.
<i>Considerations across all activities</i>	8. Support meaningful child participation – engage children both in policies and governance related to AI and skills, and across design, development and deployment processes. 9. Ensure all initiatives are targeted and grounded in local realities – respond to existing levels of infrastructure and connectivity, cultural needs and linguistic factors.

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I. Introduction

Rapid developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI)ⁱ have already had a major impact on the lives of children and adolescents: they engage with AI daily through chatbots or AI features integrated into apps and use it to help with learning, to look for information, for creative activities and for social and emotional support.¹ In analysis by UNICEF across a range of countries, up to 50 per cent of surveyed children are already using AI, with millions relying on it for homework and one in ten turning to it for advice about things that worry them.² The presence of AI in young people's lives is only expected to grow, for example as it is taken up in education systems, adopted in social media apps and embedded in other digital products. Beyond childhood, AI will have effects on the labour market as it displaces some jobs, transforms how work is done and reshapes how young people enter and advance in the workforce.³

This changing environment presents substantial opportunities and risks for children, both today and in the future. AI can offer personalized learning experiences, provide tools to support play and creativity, and enhance accessibility for children with disabilities. At the same time, human-like chatbots can expose children to persuasive disinformation and harmful content, while also impacting children's development in ways that are not fully understood.⁴ Indeed, children are already aware of some of these risks as they highlight threats to their safety, privacy and well-being.⁵

To uphold children's rights and support children to thrive in the age of AI, it is essential that they are equipped with the relevant skills and competencies. This involves understanding how children are using and thinking about AI, as well as developing an understanding of the full range of capabilities children need not just for learning and work, but across all of their lives which will play out in the digital environment, both today and in the future.

Children's perspectives are central to this. They have a right to have opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them and to exercise agency.⁶ They also *want* to be included in AI development – in its design, regulation and oversight.⁷ By investigating these issues based on children's perspectives, skills initiatives can more accurately address children's actual insights, concerns and priorities.

With this in mind, UNICEF Innocenti launched its 'Preparing Children for an AI World' initiative. This report forms one component of the initiative and aims to explore the following question:

With a focus on the African continent, how are children using and thinking about AI? And what skills will best support children's development, safety and employability in an AI-influenced world, both today and in the future?

ⁱ We can understand AI simply as software that can do things previously only associated with human levels of intelligence. It includes using machine learning techniques to recognize patterns in data to provide analysis for decision making and, more recently, generative AI (GenAI), which creates text, images or other content based on predicting statistical patterns.

Box 1: Skills and more

This project focuses on the **full range of skills, relevant attitudes and knowledge that children view as important to thrive in an AI world**. This full spectrum of requirements constitutes AI literacy,⁸ which in itself is an emergent part of digital literacy that covers all the capabilities needed to flourish more broadly in a digital environment.⁹

The term 'skills' is therefore employed in a broad sense and is best understood in the way it was explained to children in the consultations: *all of the things you need to know, and know how to do*, to thrive in an AI-influenced world. This includes:

- **Digital skills** – the skills that support the development of digitally literate children, ranging from basic capabilities like typing to more advanced skills like coding. This also include skills specific to AI, such as prompt engineering, managing AI agents and building AI applications.
- **Transferable skills**, also known as life skills – skills that help children become agile, adaptive learners who are able to navigate personal, social, academic and economic challenges. These include critical thinking, decision-making, self-management and empathy.
- **Foundational skills** – foundational literacy and numeracy.
- **Relevant attitudes** – the mindsets and behaviours that guide children's actions and the values that children need to understand how to use AI ethically and responsibly. These include being reflective, curious and adaptable.
- **Knowledge** – a technical and societal understanding of AI, such as knowledge of basic AI concepts (for example, what it is and what it is not), understanding how it works and its capabilities and limitations. This also includes broader knowledge about a wider range of relevant topics, for example pre-existing knowledge about certain fields.

The framing in the report draws on multiple skills frameworks¹⁰ and, rather than aligning with any single one, is led by children's own perspectives and language on the skills that matter to them. Where appropriate in the analysis below, children's views are framed in the terms used in existing frameworks (for example, where children discuss verifying information, this is linked to critical thinking).

Aligning with UNICEF's Africa Strategy, the project focuses on children across the African continent.¹¹ As around 60 per cent of Africans are under the age of 25, this represents a huge cohort of children and young people who need to be prepared for a rapidly changing world.¹² Yet, aside from the Caribbean, the African continent ranks lowest of global regions in terms of AI literacy, according to the Global Index of Responsible AI (scoring 27.82 against a global average of 36.58).¹³ This presents a pressing need to understand and develop relevant competencies among

children across the continent. Efforts can build on the growing AI focus across Africa, as evidenced through the African Union's Continental AI Strategy and the fact that, at time of writing, 22 African states have published national AI strategies (a further 21 are in draft stage).¹⁴ Many of these have a focus on AI skills development.

Developing an understanding of needed skills, and effective skills initiatives, forms one part of the wider efforts needed to prepare children for an AI world. The way skills are learned and applied does not happen in a vacuum, but in a digital ecosystem that affects the opportunities and challenges children face. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) AI Preparedness Index highlights major disparities across the globe in terms of readiness for AI, based on human capital, digital infrastructure, technological innovation and legal frameworks. There is a need for wider systemic initiatives to address the digital divide through investment in digital infrastructure. Similarly, investment in AI regulation is needed to ensure developments proceed in ways that adhere to child rights and address inequalities.¹⁵ And, in the context of concerns about AI-affected job losses, it is important to address existing jobs shortages across the African continent.¹⁶ While this report focuses on children's skills in an AI world, it should therefore be considered within the context of these broader needs.

Sampling and methodology

The study is based on child consultations with a purposive sample of children from five African countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Egypt, Mozambique, Rwanda and Senegal. These countries were selected to provide geographical and linguistic variety across the African continent, and to provide variety in terms of population size and income level. The countries also exhibit considerable diversity in terms of their AI developments, digital infrastructure and AI preparedness (see [Appendix 1](#): Figure 1 and Table 2).

In total, 97 children between 9–17 years old were engaged across 13 hybrid consultations conducted in January and February 2026. Within each country, children were selected who had some existing exposure to digital technologies. Most came from middle- or lower-income backgrounds and urban or peri-urban backgrounds. They had varying levels of existing exposure to AI and different socio-economic backgrounds (see Table 2 for a light demographic description of participants).

Each session involved a mixed-gender group of 4–11 children who were split roughly by age, into groups of 9–12, 13–15 and 16–17-year-olds. The consultation briefly covered children's understanding of AI, before focusing on children's perspectives on the skills they need to thrive today and in the future. This was primarily through four scenario-based discussions, which covered situations in which children might use AI today and in the future.

For each of the scenarios (See Table 1), children were asked to imagine they (or a friend) were in this situation. They were then asked: "To do well in this scenario, what are all the things you need to

know how to do?” Facilitators often adapted the wording of each scenario to make it age-appropriate for their group.

Table 1: Scenarios used during consultations

Scenarios for today	Detail
Scenario 1	A teacher has asked your class to write about the history of your country. You decide to use an AI tool (e.g., ChatGPT) to help you in this project.
Scenario 2	Your friend has started to message an AI companion to talk about their feelings and problems, and to ask for support.
Scenarios for tomorrow	Detail
Scenario 3	It is the year 2040. In your job, you use AI tools to improve the quality of your work. People in small businesses use AI to do things cheaply and to work faster. You are under a lot of pressure to keep up with the newest AI tools, but some tools are too expensive for you.
Scenario 4	It is the year 2040. You have an AI Life Assistant, which provides you with support for everything. At home, it helps with cooking. It helps parents to raise their children. It helps you communicate with people across the world through a global AI-assisted language. You use your Life Assistant lots but you are worried that you rely on it for everything.

These scenarios were informed by the work of the UNICEF Youth Foresight Fellows, as part of the project’s aim to be intergenerational and progressively child-centred throughout its different phases. The issue of skills in an AI world was first framed by experts’ opinions and existing literature, before iteratively engaging the views of young people, including the UNICEF Youth Foresight Fellows, and then children themselves. The project phases are outlined in Table 4.

Detailed information on the sampling, data collection methodology and study limitations is presented in [Appendix 1](#) (including Figure 1 and Tables 2, 3 and 4).

How to read this report: aims, target audience and structure

Given this is a purposive qualitative study, the findings are not intended to be generalizable for children within each country nor for children across the African continent. Instead, this project **aims to give a snapshot of perspectives on AI from children whose voices are often absent from discussions on AI.**

Therefore, while findings are disaggregated by country, they should not be used for direct country comparison. Instead, country-specific insights are included to allow readers to easily locate findings relevant to their own setting and to give an indication of the prevalence of certain views (for example, if points were mentioned in two or more countries). Similarly, the ability for comparisons across age-groups is limited (see limitations in [Appendix 1](#)), but where possible these comparisons

are made; at times they are shared more generally as insights from 'younger' or 'older' children. Throughout the report, 'children' is used to refer to the children and adolescents consulted in this study, unless otherwise specified.

The findings and recommendations are intended to inform policy, programming and advocacy efforts that ensure that children develop the appropriate skills to thrive in a world influenced by AI. The target audience includes:

- Government actors, particularly those in education ministries responsible for designing and delivering school curricula and training programmes.
- Multilateral institutions, civil society organizations, education companies and funders that run and fund skills programmes and provide education support for children, for example UNICEF country offices, community-based organizations and after-school clubs.
- Technology companies and others working in the AI ecosystem who develop AI tools which may be used by children.
- Researchers working on issues related to children's skills development, emerging technology and AI.

II. How children are thinking about and using AI

In the first part of the consultations, children shared how they understand and use AI, as well as where they receive support for using it. They then shared their feelings and opinions around what excited them and worried them about the technology.

Children's understanding and use

AI is understood as a tool

Most children tended to understand AI in terms of generative AI, as a tool that produces certain outputs. While 9–12-year-olds were more likely to describe it only in this way, as a tool or application, some older children explicitly mentioned that it is created by humans, is not natural or is a robot, like this 13–15-year-old in DRC:

"It's something that is made by humans. We can say a kind of robot that could answer certain questions, give guidance, clarifications on certain points of homework, points of life and various other things."

Some children in Senegal defined AI in broad terms as something able to simulate human intelligence: one 13–15-year-old described it as an *"application that is capable of producing some human capacity."*

Most often, AI was described in terms of what it is able to do, rather than in terms of the technology. Younger children described it as something that can accomplish a wide range of tasks in education, work and beyond. In education and work, it is seen as a tool that assists with study, homework and learning.

"... it's like an application that allows you to search for or know something"

9–12-year-old, Senegal

"A person can use it to help them, for example, if they want to write to someone, or a person to do their homework."

9–13-year-old, DRC

"[It is a] tool that simplifies work"

9–12-year-old, Rwanda

AI was also most often described as an app or tool on a phone. A child in Egypt said, *"For this generation, it is like the mobile phone was for the previous generation. We use it every day the way that generation used their phones."* A 9–12-year-old in Rwanda explicitly stated, *"One can download it into their phone and use it in their daily lives."* This suggests children are more familiar with AI on mobile devices rather than on computers or laptops.

Children use AI for a mix of activities

Children already go online to carry out various activities. They use the internet to find out information both for homework and study, and more generally to find answers to their questions. They communicate and chat with friends and family, and use the internet for entertainment: watching videos, films and football, listening to music and playing games. They use social media and messenger applications, such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and WhatsApp.

They report using a range of AI tools. ChatGPT and Meta AI were most discussed, coming up across all age groups but particularly among 13–15 and 16–17-year-olds. (Children were not initially prompted with AI tool names). Children also mentioned other chatbots and assistants like Gemini and Siri. Some children listed more specialized tools like NotebookLM and Grammarly, and video and photo-editing software like CapCut, Canva AI, Invideo, Celeste and Luzia. These responses indicate different levels of engagement with AI across age groups, as older children in Egypt and Senegal described using dedicated research tools rather than general-purpose AI chatbots. AI agents were not mentioned at all in the discussions.

In general, older adolescents, particularly 16–17-year-olds, gave more specific details about their reasons for using AI, which suggests they have a more sophisticated level of engagement with these systems compared with their younger peers.

For example, children report using AI to help with school, by assisting in homework and their learning. While this was mentioned across all age groups (and in all countries), younger children discussed learning support in general terms and described using AI to look for information. A 9–13-year-old in DRC spoke about how *"I used [AI] to help me do my homework, to look for things I don't know."* AI is also used to clarify information when studying, with an 11-year-old in Egypt explaining that *"if I get confused about a word while I'm studying, I can look it up through [AI]."* Older children described using AI to help with specific subjects and more often named the tool they use to support their homework. For example, 16–17-year-olds in Senegal spoke about using NotebookLM to help with lessons, with one describing using *"Meta [AI] to do research on our lessons not well understood at school, like Maths lessons, Life and Earth Sciences, Physics-Chemistry."*

Children also use AI to search for information beyond just schoolwork. In Mozambique, a 13–15-year-old described how *"I use [AI] for schoolwork, for scientific research, for general knowledge, and daily things. Research on daily things, physical, chemical and biological processes."* Meanwhile, a 13–15-year-old in Senegal spoke about using AI very broadly *"to know better information concerning life."*

AI is also used to assist with tasks, and to improve and learn skills. Children in Egypt, Rwanda and Senegal describe using AI to produce and edit photos. Older children in Egypt and Senegal use it to improve how they communicate their ideas: *"I sometimes use it if there's a word I want to place well, or a word I want to present in the right place"* (17-year-old, Egypt). Meanwhile, a 16–17-year-old in Mozambique described using AI to learn English.

Finally, a minority of participants shared that they use AI for companion-like interactions. A 16–17-year-old in Senegal described having a *"dialogue with AI. When I am alone."* The companionship component is discussed further below.

Some children have a limited understanding of AI

The AI tools mentioned and their uses also reveal that there is not a precise understanding of what constitutes AI. This is particularly the case among younger children (9–12-year-olds). When asked what AI systems they use, some of this group said Google: a 9–12-year-old in Senegal described how *"I use Google to search for my lessons"*. This made it unclear whether they were referring to AI-generated search summaries or 'overviews', AI functionalities within Google's suite of tools, or merely referencing the search engine in general. The same ambiguity arose when children talked about using YouTube, TikTok and VidMate. Some children described their activities using AI very similarly to the activities they undertake generally online. In Rwanda, Mozambique and Senegal, they said they use AI to play games, watch films or to *"go on YouTube to watch a video"* (Rwanda). This suggests they do not know how to differentiate between general online tools and AI tools, or to distinguish between AI functionality embedded in common apps.

Children learn about AI in a range of settings

Only children in Rwanda and Egypt described where they have received support on AI. Some of this has been in school: in Rwanda, there had been a debate in school about using AI. Children in Egypt described a government programme led by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and extra-curricular programmes run by private organizations. Children also described learning informally, either by themselves using the internet, or from their friends and siblings. A 16–17-year-old in Egypt stated:

"My sister was teaching it to me step by step, meaning I was learning it at the beginning. They would give it to me initially and I would get the first answer, then I would start building up the information myself."

Children in Egypt also explained that support for developing future skills should come from a range of sources: school, government, family and friends.

Opinions about AI

Children have mixed feelings towards AI, as they are aware of both the benefits it can bring and its risks. As a 14–17-year-old in DRC put it: *"[The] impact will be positive in the future, like helping us*

create robots, helping us to work, helping us, making the technological revolution, but also ... there are good and bad consequences."

AI is useful

Participants believe that AI can be useful. While this was less discussed among 9–12-year-olds, older adolescents talked about the value of using AI to help with research to complement people's knowledge, speed up tasks for humans and perform some tasks to a higher standard than humans:

"[W]hat I don't know, I will now resort to artificial intelligence to complete my knowledge."

14–17-year-old, DRC

"For me, AI is faster than human work. That's why we will use the new AI tools [in work]."

16–17-year-old, Senegal

"If I had an AI project, I could make a robot that helps someone perform surgery on their hand so they don't make mistakes, and removes things that might go wrong."

16–17-year-old, Egypt

16–17-year-olds in Mozambique described the benefit of AI improving the accessibility of technology. They described how, for various tasks, previously *"we had to resort to the computer or laptop, but nowadays we can do it at home."* This is assumed to refer to the ability to access various AI features through mobile devices.

With this usefulness, some children are thinking positively about a future in which AI can assist across various areas of life. One 9–12-year-old in Rwanda spoke optimistically about the broader positive impact of AI: *"We will be happy to see my country develop because of AI."* This current level of knowledge, usage and interest also suggests that children may be open to learning more and engaging with AI literacy initiatives.

Children in DRC, Mozambique and Senegal also described the value of companion-like interactions for emotional support. In Senegal, AI interactions were described as a space where people can offload their problems and find solutions. When discussing the hypothetical scenario about a friend using an AI companion to talk about their problems (Scenario 2), a 9–12-year-old stated that the friend *"should talk about it with the AI to free himself from this trauma"*. A 16–17-year-old in DRC said they too would use AI for support if they had no one else around: *"I too would do the same if I had no one to talk to because AI is there to help people. I find that it can also help me with my problems."* While such interactions may bring benefits for some children, this willingness highlights the risks that can emerge from using AI for emotional needs, as these technologies can give a false impression of care when in reality they do not offer genuinely compassionate support.

Box 2: Spotlight on companionship

Discussion among groups in Mozambique revealed some children's conflicting feelings about using AI tools for companionship. A 13–15-year-old spoke about how they would use it for emotional support as it never judges: *"... it says, 'Hello, I am artificial intelligence. I'm here to support you, listen, and whatever.' So, just to support you. It will never judge you."*

However, this age group still highlighted the risks associated with such interactions with AI. They were still aware of the safety concerns of sharing personal information, so suggested sharing information anonymously. They were also aware of AI's ability to be sycophantic (always agreeing with and pleasing users): *"Artificial intelligence will support you in everything you say..."*; one child noted, to which another child responded: *"Yes, yes, yes, regardless if it's wrong. It will never tell you it's wrong"*.

An older child also talked about AI interactions being unhelpful when the responses are inaccurate. A 16–17-year-old described: *"You can be there, sending a message, something sad, and artificial intelligence responds, saying, it's a disease, or you are not well, something, something is wrong with you ... So, then they get there, [they] find a different response and may become disappointed."*

The result is a complicated relationship in which children may use AI for companionship even when they know it is flawed. As one child put it, *"I am in favour and I don't trust [AI]"*.

Children are concerned about safety and privacy

Despite various benefits, children also have significant reservations about the technology, both for today and in the future. There are concerns about data privacy and the security of AI tools. In Egypt and Rwanda, children worry about data being sold and hacked, while in DRC there was a worry about people gaining access to people's data and doing *"bad things"* (9–13-year-old).

Children in Rwanda and Senegal also briefly mentioned concern about people generating images which are not safe for children. In Senegal, a 17-year-old spoke more generally about generating inappropriate images: they worried about *"people who take other people's photos to transform them by taking their faces, their forms – who transform them in a way that is not good."* In the session with 9–12-year-olds in Rwanda, there was a brief discussion about photo-editing software being used to produce naked images. While both comments emerged in passing, they highlight the risk of AI producing harmful, inappropriate or illegal content.

(Un)trustworthiness

Most children said that the information from AI cannot be trusted. As put by a 9–13-year-old in DRC: *"artificial intelligence, we cannot totally trust. It can give us information that is not true"*. In the consultations, children were presented with a hypothetical situation in which an AI chatbot told them that a certain fruit is safe to eat. Most said they would verify information from AI elsewhere or

not trust the information it provides about the fruit. (It should be noted that less than half of the groups discussed this question – it was not covered in Rwanda or Senegal). By contrast, only a very small number of children said they trust AI, with one 9–12-year-old in Senegal encouraging people to trust it.

This lack of trust is related to an understanding that AI can provide false information, which was mentioned in DRC, Egypt, Mozambique and Rwanda. One child explained the consequences of using untrustworthy information in school:

“From school last year, most of my classmates used ChatGPT to do tests, everything else. But since our tests are multiple choice, then it gave wrong answers. So, all of us in the room got negative grades.”

16–17-year-old, Mozambique

Children are worried about dependence

Some children are worried about overreliance on AI. This is described as already happening by a 16–17-year-old in Mozambique: *“there are times when you become dependent on artificial intelligence. You no longer learn, you no longer seek any information.”* There is a worry about the impact of this on learning, as children outsource their homework to AI. As a 14–17-year-old in DRC described:

“I speak of the weakening of students, I speak of students who can be in class, we give homework. Instead of studying, they just know that AI is there, ChatGPT is there, Meta is there, Nova and so on.”

Children are aware that offloading tasks to AI can result in cognitive decline. This was described in various ways: increased laziness, brain rot or *“weakening”*, as above, and was a theme that emerged across all age groups. It was mentioned in DRC, Egypt, Mozambique and Rwanda.

“What worries me most is that artificial intelligence will dominate the world, and we will be faced with lazy human beings, with weak intellectual capacities, who will not express themselves or their feelings to society.”

16–17-year-old, Mozambique

There is also concern about overreliance affecting people's relationships. In Senegal and Rwanda, children worried about AI disrupting relationships within families, for example if parents leave their children with an AI tool (Scenario 4). In Egypt and Mozambique, children expressed worry about AI impacting people's ability to communicate with one another, as shown by the quote above about people losing their ability to express themselves.

Worries about job losses

Older adolescents shared concerns about AI creating job losses. For one 16–17-year-old in Senegal, this and ethical issues were their greatest worries about AI in the future:

“What worries me the most is the risk of job loss due to automation. As well as ethical questions related to privacy and data security.”

For one 16–17-year-old in DRC, the issue of job losses contributed to their mixed feelings towards AI: *“artificial intelligence is good, of course, with the creation of robots and everything, but in the future, if there are more robots than people, there will be a high unemployment rate”*. Among the same age group in Egypt, one adolescent asked whether AI might *“end all work altogether”*. The fact that this emerged among older participants may be because these adolescents are thinking more about employment than their younger peers.

Children feel uncertain about AI developments in the future

While most children are aware of AI not being sentient, some 16–17-year-olds are concerned that this might change in the future. In Rwanda, one child described their worry that *“its emotions will think like a human, like it feels”*. The implications of this could be that AI acts autonomously, as highlighted by a child of the same age in Egypt: *“AI is supposed to be programmed with certain commands, so it might deviate from this programming and do wrong things.”*

Overall, there were mixed feelings about how prepared children feel for a future where AI plays a large role. Ultimately, this was influenced by the fact that there is a great deal of uncertainty about the future. A 16–17-year-old in Egypt spoke about how this related to AI specifically: *“I don’t know its developments and what limits it will take.”* But uncertainty also ran deeper, with a 9–12-year-old in Mozambique sharing that, *“What worries me is not knowing what will happen in the future.”*

These views reflect broader uncertainties about what the future might hold, as the pace of technological developments means it is difficult to know what trends will emerge or fade.¹⁷ The evolving tech landscape creates a need to continually reassess the state of AI developments and what they will mean for children and adolescents’ changing skills needs.

Children recognize that they need more than skills

Children are aware that competencies alone are insufficient for thriving in an AI world. In the DRC, Mozambique and Rwanda, having access to enough money is seen as necessary to navigate the future workplace. Children are conscious about the possible financial barriers that AI may present, and so talked about strategies to navigate a possible future environment with expensive tools (Scenario 3). A 9–12-year-old in Senegal explained how *“I will stay with the old AI tool until I have the opportunity to use the new AI in collaboration with big companies.”* A 9–12-year-old in Mozambique spoke about their desire to work hard to afford tools: *“We need to work more to have enough money to buy these tools.”* While the scenario itself, designed by UNICEF Youth Foresight Fellows,

may have led children towards responses related to the cost of tools, it is telling that issues related to the cost of AI resonated with participants.

Similarly, some children spoke about the need for appropriate digital infrastructure across the continent. Multiple consultations were disrupted by internet connectivity issues – a reminder of the requirement of improved internet access and device availability. AI tools must also be appropriate to African contexts: in Rwanda, children called for AI tools to be in local languages like Kinyarwanda.

Further, the children voiced a desire for African AI tools developed with children. A 17-year-old in Rwanda noted how the USA and China are driving AI developments in a tech race: *“they will keep making [AI tools] and then compete with them”*. A 13–15-year-old in Senegal advocated that *“We must have great tools that are within Africa.”* Meanwhile, a 17-year-old in Mozambique mentioned that they distrusted AI because: *“I don’t know who is behind it.”* A solution was offered by 9–12-year-olds in Rwanda, as they called for children to be involved in making AI tools so that they could own these tools themselves.

Opinions vary across generations

Consultations aimed to enquire about how children’s views compared with those of their parents and caregivers, but due to time constraints this was only covered by one group in Egypt.

Nevertheless, the results are revealing. An 11-year-old described how their parents can have a negative view towards AI, stating that: *“they would say about the harms or the wrong things in it because they know that it’s something that stresses me out.”* This suggests that some parents are aware of the risks that AI can pose. However, children also talked about how their parents lack an understanding about the technology; in the words of a 17-year-old: *“most of our parents don’t even know what is AI ... it is something new, not something they use in their daily lives like us”*. Parents need support to build their own AI literacy, so that they can better help children understand the risks, opportunities and safe ways to use these tools.

These findings echo generational differences in general. A 17-year-old mentioned that, *“There is a big difference [in understanding] between Gen Alpha and Gen-Z, as well as between our generation and our parents’ generation”*. Such divergences highlight the importance of targeting AI literacy initiatives to the specific needs of different age groups.

III. The skills, attitudes and knowledge important to children

Children discussed a range of capabilities and competencies that they see as being important for a world influenced by AI. They expressed the need for a broad range of skills, an attitude of moderation towards AI and relevant knowledge about AI and more.

A broad range of skills

Children spoke about digital skills, transferable skills (those related to critical thinking and information literacy) and skills related to protecting data and privacy, as well as foundational literacy and numeracy.

Digital skills

Some children spoke about the need for advanced digital skills, such as coding and developing AI tools. These were primarily discussed among 16–17-year-olds. They came up most in Egypt, which is perhaps unsurprising given this cohort had taken part in an AI skills training programme. This shows that AI skills programmes can enhance children's knowledge and practice. To a lesser extent, advanced digital skills were also discussed among this age group in DRC. These skills can help young people use AI to suit their own (and their country's) needs rather than relying on the functions of AI as set by a tool's developers. A 16–17-year-old in Egypt described how, by developing and guiding their own AI tools, they can *"see what is suitable for me or keeps pace with Egypt with all its development, instead of what the company imagines."*

Prompting was one of the most-mentioned skills across consultations. While coming up among all age groups, it was more common among 13–15 and 16–17-year-olds, perhaps because these groups are more familiar with engaging with AI chatbots. It came up in DRC, Egypt, Mozambique and Rwanda, mostly when discussing the scenario of using a tool like ChatGPT to do homework (Scenario 1).

Most mentions of prompting referred generally to the ability to communicate well with a chatbot. A 16–17-year-old in DRC described the need to *"be capable [of] writing a text well so that ChatGPT can understand it well"*, while a 9–12-year-old in Mozambique said that they *"cannot write things that do not make sense"*. Notably, it was primarily those who had received AI training in Egypt who gave more detail about specific prompting strategies (see Box 3 below). This variety of perspectives could indicate that, while many children view prompting as important, some may not have a clear grasp of what constitutes a good prompt. Further research investigating children's actual prompting practices could illuminate more about where children stand on this issue.

The responses highlight that prompting is very much linked to good communication skills and, more fundamentally, foundational literacy, which will be discussed later. Yet it is also worth noting that a 16–17-year-old in DRC was aware that AI tools do not necessarily require written prompts, saying that: *“we can also send the subject by audio or a voice message or a photo”*.

Box 3: Spotlight on prompting among children with AI training

For one group in Egypt, prompt engineering was described as the most important skill that children need, above all other competencies. They gave examples of what, for them, constituted good prompting:

- A 17-year-old described asking tools to respond from certain perspectives: *“I’ll talk about the point of finding who is the best person to speak about this topic ... I will tell it to imagine itself as a famous Egyptian writer and write for me.”*
- An 11-year-old spoke about asking chatbots to provide sources: *“I can make it ask itself – in the new version it gives you the sources if it got the information from somewhere.”*
- Another child described how they would break their question into parts to get better responses.

They also highlighted the value of writing effective prompts: it can help people make the most of AI tools even when they don’t have access to the best (or most expensive) software. As a 16–17-year-old said, *“you can write any prompt with the expensive tools and it will give you a result higher than what you wrote, but if you write a strong prompt [with a cheaper tool], it can give you a close result”*.

Some basic digital skills were mentioned, as children in DRC and Senegal discussed the need to be able to use a phone, a computer and apps. But aside from these and prompting, it is telling that digital skills were not widely discussed. This was particularly the case among children who were younger and without training. For example, when discussing how best to use AI tools, some 9–12-year-olds spoke only in general terms: a Rwandan child said you need to *“know that tool well”*. More in-depth answers on using AI tended to come up more among older children and those who had participated in AI skills programmes in Egypt.

Overall, most discussion in the consultations focused on non-digital capabilities, which draws attention to the fact that thriving in an AI world is far more than a technical exercise. AI literacy frameworks, such as the one published by UNESCO, highlight that while digital skills, like the ability to create or design AI tools, are important, wider competencies like subject specific knowledge, transferable skills and future-ready attitudes are also needed.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the UNICEF framework of transferable skills includes competencies like critical thinking, decision-making, self-management and empathy.¹⁹ The following section turns to transferable skills.

Skills related to information literacy and critical thinking

Many children described the importance of knowing how to evaluate information. This was mentioned in Egypt, Mozambique and Rwanda, across all age groups, primarily in reference to using ChatGPT to carry out homework (Scenario 1). They also referred to verifying information from AI from their existing knowledge or from other sources. They suggested that AI outputs can be verified by using Wikipedia, asking an adult (a parent or elder), using an alternative AI tool like Gemini, or by reading books.

"You can get an answer, then you go to check it, you verify it and see that it's something that is useful and you understand it."

9–12-year-old, Rwanda

"I verify [AI responses] from several sources from websites like Wikipedia – and many things it had said turned out to be very wrong"

16–17-year-old, Egypt

There were mixed responses about children's abilities to verify information. While some children (most participants in Senegal and Mozambique) said they find it easy to know if information from AI is true, others (most in Egypt and Rwanda) disagreed with this. This suggests there is a need to support children to further develop their ability to critically assess outputs from AI. This need is heightened when we consider how children are using AI. With one child in Egypt describing how they use AI to research what medicine they should take when they are sick, it is crucial that they know how to critically engage with the information they receive from AI – and know what not to ask AI for.

These insights also align with findings from wider research and existing understandings about AI. Some children do not verify information from AI, or struggle to evaluate whether AI systems can invent facts.²⁰ The need for evaluating and verifying information is due to the fact that AI systems sometimes generate misleading or incorrect outputs, including fabricated facts, quotes or studies. AI systems also mostly sound confident in responses, even when wrong. Although OpenAI, for example, "encourage[s] users to approach ChatGPT critically and verify important information from reliable sources,"²¹ it can be difficult to know whether information from AI is true – for children and adults.

Even though children did not mention information literacy and critical thinking in explicit terms, their discussion shows they are thinking about skills related to these concepts. Information literacy can be seen as the ability to find, evaluate and use information, while critical thinking can be considered to be a suite of capabilities that involve analysing, questioning and evaluating information, as well as making reasoned judgements.²² Children articulated components of this, for example when describing the process of engaging with AI for research. A 16–17-year-old in

Mozambique spoke about the importance of actively engaging with multiple sources, comparing responses from AI with other sources and making a judgement about which information can be trusted:

“So, let's suppose we are researching things from years ago ... So we can look for those sources, first try to find out what happened at that time, basic information. Then we will look for the AI to research and see if that information is indeed truthful or not. And ... we must analyse and filter the information, because not everything that is provided to us by artificial intelligence is ... truthful.”

Skills related to safety, data protection and privacy

There were general comments about the need to use AI safely. The key skill mentioned here was knowing what to share – and what not to share – with AI. This was discussed in Egypt, Mozambique, Rwanda and Senegal, and emerged at least once in each age group. Across these four countries, most children said they know what information they should and should not share with AI. This may reflect a high degree of AI literacy, or a false over-confidence in children's own abilities. Almost all children said it is not safe to share personal information with AI tools, which could include identifiable data like their address, location, email address or password, as well as secrets and feelings.

However, further discussion revealed disagreement about exactly what information is appropriate to share, particularly when it comes to feelings. In Mozambique, 13–15-year-olds said it was fine to share feelings with an AI as long as it is done in an anonymous way: *“I will also use that app, communicate with it and share my feelings”*. By contrast, an 11-year-old in Egypt talked about how they would never discuss personal problems with an AI tool: *“if I have a problem and I don't find anyone but this AI to tell it to, even if I found him, I still wouldn't tell him.”* These discrepancies highlight the need to develop a shared understanding of how best to use AI safely.

Box 4: Spotlight on emotional intelligence and empathy

While not emerging as a common theme, a minority of older participants highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence and good emotional well-being. A 16–17-year-old in DRC spoke about needing to be “*emotionally well*” if people are using AI for companion-like interactions. Meanwhile, a 17-year-old in Egypt said that emotional intelligence is a key skill. Describing this as “*having awareness of your own feelings first*”, they said it is important to be aware that AI can affect your feelings, and understand that AI isn’t concerned with a person’s welfare. It should be noted that this adolescent in question had a high level of understanding about AI, as they led training programmes for younger children about using AI. Nevertheless, the extent to which these capabilities extend beyond the technical highlights the importance of taking a holistic approach to developing relevant competencies among children.

Despite this discussion, it was notable that there was no mention of empathy (the ability to understand and experience the emotions of others without judging them) across the consultations.²³ This has been argued to be a key competency for the future, and forms a core component of relationships with others.²⁴ AI systems mimic empathy while having an ‘empathy gap’ that misses human nuance and understanding,²⁵ making the need for human empathy more critical in an AI world. It is possible that the design of the scenarios did not encourage this topic to come up. For example, in longer consultations, discussion about emotional intelligence and investing in human relationships may have developed into conversations about empathy. This absence should therefore not necessarily be taken as evidence that empathy is seen as unimportant, and instead highlights it as a topic for possible further study.

Foundational literacy and numeracy

Finally, children mentioned foundational literacy and numeracy as important skills. Knowing how to read, write and do basic maths were mentioned across all ages, more commonly among younger children. It came up in consultations in DRC, Mozambique, Rwanda and Senegal.

It is worth drawing attention to the fact that this emerged most among 9–12-year-olds. It is possible that these children deferred to these fundamental skills because they did not understand the more technical skills that would be needed to engage with AI. Nevertheless, it aligns with the need to improve learning outcomes in low- and middle-income countries, given low literacy and numeracy levels in some contexts: only 6 per cent of young people in sub-Saharan Africa meet a global standard of basic skills in mathematics and science.²⁶ Additionally, while different skills can develop concurrently (with digital skills developing alongside literacy, for example), these foundational skills are a safe investment of competencies that will be relevant despite the uncertainties of what direction future AI developments will take.²⁷

An attitude of moderation

Beyond skills discussions, children's responses also highlighted the need for appropriate mindsets and behaviours when using AI. This can be described as having an attitude of moderation and being intentional about how to use AI: a 9–13-year-old in DRC explicitly described the need to *“use [AI] with moderation”*, while others noted the importance of people retaining their autonomy when engaging with AI. This desire for moderation builds on concerns about dependence on AI (outlined in the [Opinions about AI](#) section).

Developing an attitude of moderation focused on three areas and primarily emerged when discussing the future scenario about using an AI Life Assistant (Scenario 4).

Self-regulation and intentional AI use

Firstly, children in all countries talked about self-regulating AI use. In general terms this means limiting how big a role AI plays in people's lives. As a 13–15-year-old in Egypt put it: *“AI is in the end a tool that helps me do something. But I won't let it be a large part of my life – it will be a secondary part, not a primary one.”* One 17-year-old in the same country described the need to be aware of overall AI use: *“If I lived my life in 2040 and found that this AI, I couldn't live without it, then that's a problem”*. These points were much more commonly discussed among 13–15-year-olds and 16–17-year-olds, rather than 9–12-year-olds, which may suggest a lack of awareness about the risk of over-reliance among younger children.

That said, when describing strategies to regulate AI use, it was a 9–12-year-old in Mozambique who suggested abstaining from AI completely to avoid over-dependence: people should *“basically do everything by ourselves without the help of AI”*. More often though, self-regulating referred to being intentional about when to use AI. Children spoke about the need to avoid using AI to research things they already know or to explain things they can explain themselves. A 13–15-year-old in Mozambique spoke about their desire to balance AI use with other activities:

“I would use artificial intelligence to create a balance, and, in addition to artificial intelligence, I would use books and modules to facilitate my research.”

Children need to understand when, and how much, to use AI to get the best results and retain their autonomy.

Learning skills yourself

Secondly, children described the need to learn skills themselves. Again, this was a key theme emerging across all age groups, and was discussed in Egypt, Mozambique, Rwanda and Senegal. It also mostly arose among discussions about living in the future with an AI Life Assistant (Scenario 4). Children said that people should learn skills for offline activities, such as learning languages or cooking: *“I will learn the recipe so I do not need the assistance of the AI. In that way, I can do it by myself”* (9–12-year-old, Mozambique). They also mentioned learning skills for specific digital

activities such as graphic design or photo-editing. In Egypt, a 16–17-year-old described the need for these skills even when using AI tools to carry out these tasks. Overall, the children's views suggest that self-learned skills are seen as important not merely for completing a task, but also for allowing humans to maintain autonomy.

Investing in relationships

Thirdly, children want to invest in human relationships. This emerged in discussions about people using AI in interactions traditionally carried out between humans, for example, for assisting with childcare (Scenario 4) or for companionship (Scenario 2). When discussing hypothetical AI assistants in the future, which could help across all elements of life, children said that these should not be used to raise children and should instead be restricted to carrying out housework and chores. Children in Egypt, Mozambique and Senegal stressed the need for parenting to be a fundamentally human endeavour: as a 13–15-year-old in Senegal stated and repeated for emphasis “*Parents should take their time with their children, take their time with their children*”.

Similarly, when discussing companionship, children stressed that providing support among friends requires an essentially human dimension: a 9–12-year-old in Mozambique articulated a point raised more broadly across the consultations that someone who needs support “*should talk to a friend*”. Children should be supported to foster positive relationships with those around them.

Knowledge about AI and more

Underpinning the above skills and attitudes, children also spoke about having appropriate knowledge. While some of this relates to understanding AI, children more often discussed the need for pre-existing knowledge about various subjects.

Knowledge about AI

13–15-year-olds and 16–17-year-olds talked about the importance of knowing that AI is a non-sentient machine. This came up in Egypt, Rwanda and Senegal. A 16–17-year-old in Rwanda described how “*we should live knowing that all things AI, it doesn't wonder about questions or all that a person feels, and it doesn't even have wisdom*”. This has implications for what people can and cannot use AI for. A 16–17-year-old in Egypt described AI's limited capacity for emotional support: “*It will not give me the same connection that I need when I talk to another person*.” The fact that 9–12-year-olds did not discuss the point on sentience at all suggests a possible limited understanding of what AI is.

Interestingly, children did not talk about the need for wider knowledge about AI, such as understanding its broader capabilities and limitations. This could include understanding that AI tools are effective at tasks like pattern-recognition and automation, and poor at other tasks such as ethical reasoning, giving context and originality.²⁸ Similarly, there was little discussion about knowing that the data, design and development of AI tools all reflect human biases. While this may have been influenced by the fact that the consultations did not cover bias explicitly in questions or

scenarios, these absences may also reflect children's limited understanding of the more technical components of AI and highlight a need to develop a more comprehensive understanding of AI.

Pre-existing knowledge

Across all countries and ages, children discussed the need to have, and to apply, pre-existing knowledge about a subject. This can underpin many of the other skills that are seen as important. A 13–15-year-old in DRC saw such knowledge as a prerequisite for interacting with an AI tool: *“you must first know the subject. Then type it into the artificial intelligence and ask it for ideas”*. A 16–17-year-old in Egypt went into more detail, describing how it is needed to verify responses from AI (i.e., to critically engage with it) and to write better prompts:

“I must have background information about [a subject], even if it's simple, because as we said, ChatGPT or all AI might be unreliable and its sources might be unknown, like Wikipedia. So I must have my own information even if basic, and I'll try to verify afterwards. I'll give it what it needs to make a complete prompt.”

In Mozambique, a 16–17-year-old also explained how subject knowledge can help avoid overreliance on AI tools, and advocated for people to use their existing knowledge when they do not need to use an AI tool:

“There are things that we ask while we already know the answer to the question that was just posed to the AI. So, we should try as much as possible not to be searching for anything and everything that comes ... in front of us.”

It is important not to overlook these links between pre-existing knowledge and other skills and attitudes. It illustrates a key insight that children do not view their needs for an AI world as a set of neatly separated, clearly defined skills, attitudes and knowledge. Instead, they describe a wide-ranging set of capabilities and competencies which intersect with one another, which highlights that this is a broad endeavour to prepare children for today and the future.

IV. Recommendations

To equip children with these relevant skills, attitudes and knowledge, it is necessary both to develop skills directly and to create a conducive environment for skills development to take place. Many actors are responsible for these activities; the recommendations below present actionable measures for governments, multilateral institutions, civil society organizations, technology companies, funders, families and communities to take, as well as cross-cutting considerations across all activities.

The recommendations are informed by children's views and by an expert consultation conducted in April 2026. Those which emerged directly from child consultations are indicated with *. Taken together, all recommendations should be read with the caveat that they are based on what is a small qualitative study, although many bolster existing recommendations made by UNICEF.²⁹

Developing skills

1. *Adopt a holistic approach to skills development

Who: governments, multilateral institutions and civil society organizations, companies and communities

- Those working on developing AI literacy must consider the full range of skills, knowledge and attitudes that children require for navigating an AI world. Based on the key themes highlighted in this project, these include:
 - Digital skills (including prompting) and competencies related to information literacy, such as knowing how to critically evaluate and verify information, an understanding of data privacy and knowing what – and what not – to share with AI. Foundational literacy and numeracy remain critical in the AI era.
 - An attitude of moderated and intentional AI use (using it in ways that support learning and development) and positive relationships with others.
 - Pre-existing knowledge across relevant subjects to underpin AI use and avoid over-reliance.
- Skill initiatives must meet children at their current level of understanding and use of AI, even while raising that level. For example, children must be supported to develop an understanding of AI that extends beyond generative AI and that accounts for the fact that younger children may have a less technical understanding of AI compared with older peers. Given gaps in children's understanding, skills initiatives should also ensure children develop a clear understanding of AI's capabilities, limitations and risks, which range from prejudicial bias to what researchers describe as 'emotional manipulation'.³⁰ Encouragingly, children's knowledge, usage and interests suggest that they will be open to learning more and developing AI literacy.

2. Invest in developing these skills in schools

Who: governments and non-state education organizations

- Governments should provide schools with relevant, context-specific guidance about which competencies are important to develop, and best practices on how to develop these.
- Relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes should be embedded across curricula, rather than in specific classes (e.g., only in a computing class). For example, competencies related to critical thinking are best developed across subjects.³¹
- Teachers should be supported to develop appropriate AI literacy and be equipped with appropriate knowledge and resources to teach relevant competencies to students. For example, teachers need to instruct children not only on the skills to use AI well, but also about ethical concerns and risks, including the possibility of AI hallucinations, while taking into account children's safety and psychological well-being when using such AI systems.³² Children and teachers need support to use AI systems effectively, since unguided use may actively deskill students and teachers.³³

3. *Strengthen skills development beyond formal education

Who: governments, multilateral institutions and civil society organizations, companies and communities

- After-school and extracurricular programmes should be developed and supported for children to develop relevant AI competencies. Children learn about AI from a range of sources, including extra-curricular programmes, peers and family members, so the onus is not just on schools to develop relevant capabilities among children.
- AI-related awareness campaigns should be carried out to help parents and caregivers develop their own understanding of AI (including its benefits, risks and limitations) so they can support children with the necessary competencies for safe and effective AI use.

4. Investigate further into relevant skills needs and how best to develop these competencies – and reassess these positions regularly

Who: researchers and funders

- Follow-up research is needed to understand how insights from this study relate to a broader sample across the African continent, for example children living in rural settings. It is also important to investigate themes that did not arise in this project, such as children's perspectives on skills related to empathy. A more thorough understanding of how children use AI, and its impacts on their development and learning, is also key to informing targeted skills content and delivery.
- It is essential to understand under what conditions and how best children develop necessary competencies so that interventions can most effectively equip them with

relevant capabilities. This includes exploring how skills are learned in informal settings (e.g., from family, friends and peers) and how best to leverage these learning opportunities.

- Research must feed into skills development programmes to equip children to safely and productively navigate the digital environment. It must also consider market needs about skills needed for work, while constantly revisiting these issues to ensure that competency development remains relevant in a rapidly changing environment. Collaboration between academia, governments and industry can help bridge the divide between workforce demands and education systems' offerings.

Creating a conducive environment for children to thrive

5. Invest in child-centred AI governance and regulation

Who: governments, multilateral institutions

- Regulation has a key role to play in ensuring that AI developments appropriately support children's rights and support them to thrive safely. Given concerns about using AI safely, government regulation and oversight should ensure that tech companies release safe AI systems to avoid a situation in which the user bears sole responsibility for avoiding harm.
- Governance can also help countries prepare well for the future. Countries that have invested in governance frameworks can 'overperform' in terms of their preparedness for AI.³⁴ Having a child rights foundation to such governance efforts is necessary to empower and protect children.

6. Develop AI tools which are safe, appropriate for children, and conducive to developing skills

Who: tech companies

- AI products must be designed based on a child-rights approach, which is inclusive of privacy by design and safety by design. Tools can also help children develop appropriate competencies along the way. For example, large language models (LLMs) used in learning should not simply provide answers to questions, but be designed to help children arrive at the answers, such as by asking questions and encouraging children to explain their reasoning. Adding this 'friction' is core to the productive struggle of learning.

7. *Address the digital divide to ensure meaningful connectivity for every child

Who: governments, multilateral institutions, companies and funders

- Digital infrastructure must be improved so that all children have equal access to the benefits of AI. Children are already aware of the financial and infrastructure barriers facing them. There must be meaningful connectivity through affordable internet access and device availability, particularly in rural and low-income settings.

Considerations across all activities

8. Support meaningful child participation, both in AI policies and governance, and in design, development and deployment processes

Who: governments, multilateral institutions and civil society organizations, companies and researchers

- Children's participation is essential when an AI system is intended for children or when children may use the system.³⁵ The involvement of children, teachers and parents is not a nice-to-have feature, but is rather a condition for addressing these issues fairly and for developing solutions that accurately respond to children's needs and lived experiences.
- Participation must occur across all areas of AI development, related to governance, design, development and deployment. For example, AI development must respond to children's concerns and skill needs, and children's perspectives should be included on what AI tools should look like and how they should support children.

9. *Ensure all initiatives are targeted and grounded in local realities

Who: governments, multilateral institutions and civil society organizations, companies and researchers

- Skills initiatives must be appropriate not only to existing levels of AI understanding and use, but also levels of infrastructure and connectivity, cultural needs and linguistic factors. Even within the sample of this study, there was considerable variation in digital infrastructure and responsible AI index scores (see [Appendix 1](#)), which creates different priorities in terms of which skills should be prioritized at which point.
- AI systems and features must also be culturally, linguistically, socially and regionally relevant. Consultations revealed a desire for AI tools that are developed within the African continent – these should be trained on local data and effective in local languages. Technology stakeholders should also acknowledge infrastructure differences, for example by exploring AI solutions that work offline, at the edge of the computing stack, and/or which use minimal computational resources while still offering the best opportunities for all children.
- The disparities in levels of understanding among children highlight the need to target AI initiatives where they are most needed. While these consultations revealed different levels of understanding across age groups, it is most important to support those

experiencing the sharp end of inequalities, including children who have received the least guidance on AI literacy, those in low-income and rural settings, girls and young women, children with disabilities, refugees, minority groups and those in crisis-affected settings.³⁶

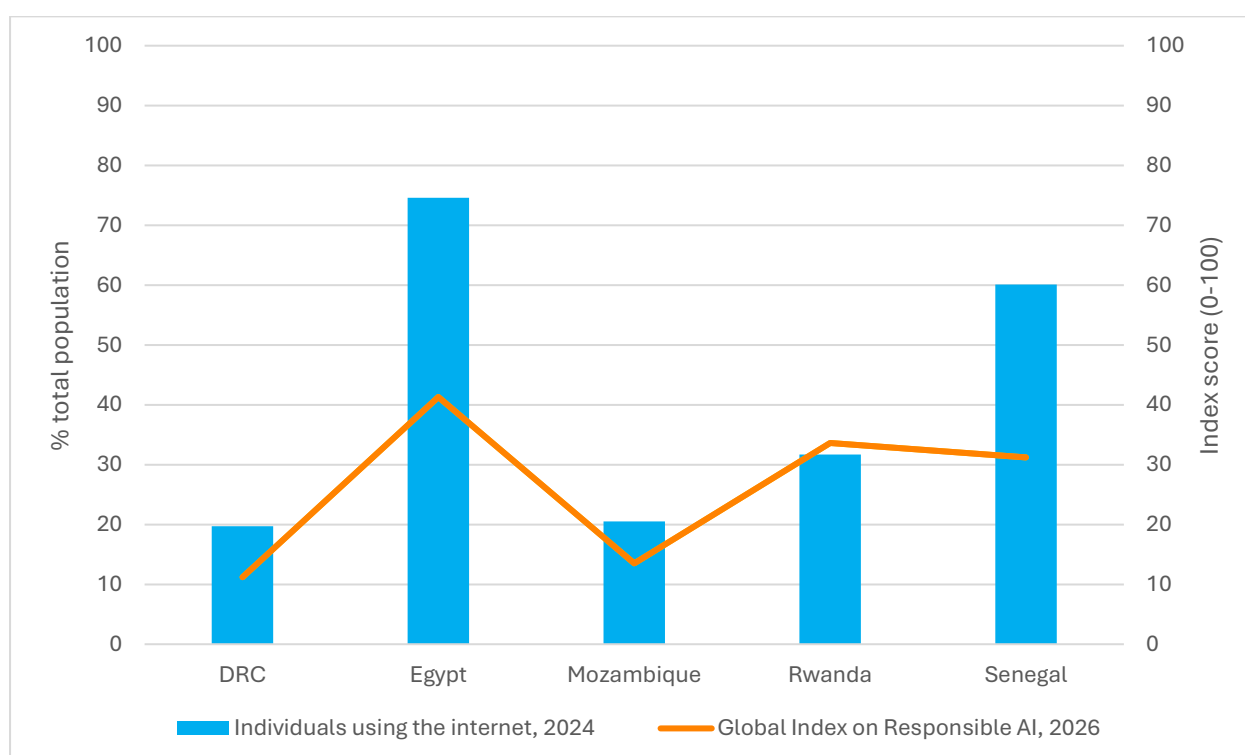
V. Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodological notes on consultations

Sampling of countries and children

The purposive sample aimed to engage countries that demonstrated geographical, linguistic and cultural variety across the African continent, and to provide variety in terms of population size and income level. The sample was also chosen based on locations where child consultations could be carried out in short timelines. The sample countries demonstrate considerable variety in terms of digital and AI infrastructure, highlighting issues related to the digital divide even before the consultations had begun (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Internet use and responsible AI index across countries



Sources: ITU Datahub, 2024, individuals using the internet in the last three months; Global Index on Responsible AI, 2026, which scores countries across Inclusion and Diversity, Ethics and Sustainability, Labour and Skills, Trust and Safety and AI Use in Public Service.³⁷

All children including in the study were recruited via local organizations who have existing child networks. The children exhibited variety across their backgrounds, in terms of socio-economic status as well as existing exposure to AI. The country profiles below give more information on the context of AI developments in each setting, as well as light demographic descriptions of consulted children (Table 2).

Table 2

County	Profile
<i>Democratic Republic of the Congo</i>	AI context: The government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has sought to position the country as a regional digital hub through the National Digital Plan 2026–2030 and the National AI Strategy. The strategy includes investments in connectivity, digital public services and initiatives to develop digital and AI skills among young people. However, significant challenges remain, including limited internet access, urban-rural digital divides, insufficient energy infrastructure and the limited availability of AI training data in national languages. At the same time, the country's large youth population presents opportunities to harness AI and digital innovation for development.³⁸ Participant demographics: Participating children came from a mix of urban and peri-urban communities in North and South Kivu. Socio-economically, they represented a range from lower- to middle-income households, and their backgrounds reflected the everyday diversity of their neighbourhoods. None of the participants had previous exposure to AI training or formal AI skills programmes.
<i>Egypt</i>	AI context: Egypt ranks first in Africa on the Government AI Readiness Index. Its updated National AI Strategy (2025–2030) sets a target of cultivating 30,000 AI specialists through education and training programmes. From the start of the 2025–2026 academic year, it was announced that AI curricula would be introduced into select schools, following a review of international models for teaching AI at primary and secondary level.³⁹ Participant demographics: Children from Cairo and Alexandria participated in consultations. Most of the children came from middle-income families and were already involved in AI skills development programmes, which contributed to their understanding of AI.
<i>Mozambique</i>	AI context: Mozambique is in the early stages of AI adoption and efforts are underway to develop national AI policies. There is a partial foundation for this in the Electronic Transactions Law (2017) and a draft Cybersecurity Law, but at present there is no specific AI legislation.⁴⁰ Existing laws provide some protection against digital risks but are not designed to address emerging AI-related harms. Participant demographics: The group included participants from two districts. Two participants came from the Matola District, in Maputo Province, in the south of the country, from a peri-urban neighbourhood with a low to lower-middle socioeconomic profile. The remaining 18 participants came from Maputo City, also located in southern Mozambique. These participants came from three neighbourhoods similarly characterized by low-income socioeconomic contexts.
<i>Rwanda</i>	AI context: Rwanda's 2023 National AI Policy made it the first African country to adopt a comprehensive national AI policy, with an ambition to position Rwanda as a global centre for AI research and innovation. In 2026, Rwanda approved the establishment of a National AI Agency, becoming the first African country with a standalone institution dedicated to AI. Rwanda is reforming its education system with a competency-based curriculum and plans to integrate AI literacy at all levels.⁴¹ Participant demographics: Children represented a demographic mix from both urban and rural areas and ranged from low- to middle-income socioeconomic backgrounds. Some of the children had participated in AI-related skills training programmes before.
<i>Senegal</i>	AI context: Senegal launched its National AI Strategy in 2023, which is built around four pillars: AI as an economic driver, AI for Good, regional cooperation in the spirit of Ubuntu and trustworthy, ethical AI. In 2025, Senegal launched New Deal Technologique, a digital strategy under the Senegal 2050 agenda, which aims to see the country become a digital leader across the African continent. The country is already investing in upgrading its digital infrastructure and has one of the most dynamic digital entrepreneurship ecosystems in French-speaking West Africa.⁴² Participant demographics: Most participants came from an urban environment with high population density, while around a third resided in peri-urban areas located near Diourbel. Children had not taken part in AI-related skills training programmes.

Together, the countries and children engaged in the study may have influenced which skills were discussed where. For example, younger children in DRC, where there is the lowest level of internet access, demonstrated the most superficial level of understanding about AI, whereas those in Egypt, who had taken part in AI skills programmes, discussed advanced digital skills the most.

The full breakdown of the children engaged in each consultation, and the language used in each consultation, is given below (Table 3).

Table 3

Country	Language of consultations	# total participants	Female	Male	Age range per consultation	# per consultation
Rwanda	English, Kinyarwanda	20	11	9	9–12	6
					13–15	8
					16–17	6
DRC	French	17	10	7	9–13	8
					14–17	9
Senegal	French, Wolof	20	14	6	9–12	5
					13–15	7
					16–17	8
Egypt	Arabic	20	7	13	11–17	9
					13–17	11
Mozambique	Portuguese	20	9	11	9–12	9
					13–15	4
					16–17	7
Total		97	51	46		

Child consultation methodology

Each consultation lasted 2–2.5 hours. Children and local facilitators were in person in the same room, while staff from UNICEF and Mtoto News, the implementation partner, observed online. The consultation structure is outlined below (Box 5).

Local facilitators conducted the session through a combination of quickfire questions, questions where children were asked to vote and discussion-based scenarios. For the full facilitator guide, please see the [consultation methodology](#).

Box 5: Consultation structure

Introduction (20 mins)

Focus on today (45 mins)

- Children's current understanding and use of digital and AI
- Children's skill needs today
 - Current perceived skills
 - Current skill needs scenarios

Break (10 mins)

Future (35 mins)

- Feelings about the future
- Children's skill needs tomorrow
 - Future of work and digital environment scenarios
 - Other reflections on skills

Final reflections (5 mins)

Wrap-up and close (5 mins)

Aiming for a progressively child-centred approach

The project aimed to be intergenerational and progressively child-centred: it was framed by experts' opinions and existing literature, before iteratively engaging the views of young people, then children themselves, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Project phase	Detail
1 Literature review and expert consultations	First, the Innocenti team conducted an internal literature review and facilitated two expert consultations to understand major trends related to AI and skills needs in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). The expert consultations engaged 20 professionals who work on digital and AI skills, from academia, multilateral agencies, private foundations and school networks.
2 Youth scenario development	Based on insights from the literature and expert consultations, UNICEF Youth Foresight Fellows at the Leading Minds Conference in Nairobi, Kenya (November 2025), developed scenarios on what the future may look like in 2040. The conference theme was The Future of Education in Africa, and the scenarios imagined possible futures based on the potential impact of technology and skills on children's lives.
3 Child consultations	The scenarios in turn were used as discussion points for the child consultations, conducted in January and February 2026.
4 Thematic analysis and final expert consultation, writeup and recommendation development	After the consultations with children, Innocenti conducted thematic analysis of the data using an inductive and deductive approach to produce the key findings. A third expert consultation was held in 2026 to gain feedback on findings and to generate actionable recommendations.

Limitations

All readers should consider the following limitations when reading the report:

- Children's actual use of AI and skill levels: The study reveals how children report using AI and their opinions on what skills are important, but the consultations did not investigate how children actually use these tools, nor did they test children's skill levels.
- Cross-age comparisons: While the study aimed for consultations to engage children in precise age groups (9–12, 13–15 and 16–17-year-olds), practical considerations such as the availability of facilitators meant that was not always possible. This has limited the extent to which cross-age comparisons can be made.
- Gender-related insights: Findings have not been disaggregated by gender due to transcription constraints. Gendered implications of AI may be explored in future projects.
- Data gaps: Due to time constraints during consultations, not all questions were covered by all groups. Where this was the case, this is indicated.

Appendix 2: Data across countries

The below heat maps show the number of times certain skills were mentioned across countries. While a higher number of mentions does not signify greater importance, it is nevertheless a useful indicator for where children's skills interests were concentrated.

Table 5

Skills, attitudes and knowledge	Totals		Mentions across countries				
	# Mentions	# Countries	Egypt	Rwanda	DRC	Mozambique	Senegal
Self-regulating AI use	19	5	8	2	1	4	4
Prompting	15	4	10	2	2	1	0
Pre-existing knowledge	12	5	3	1	2	3	3
Knowing what (not) to share	12	4	7	2	0	1	2
An attitude of moderation	10	2	8	2	0	0	0
Verifying information	9	3	3	2	0	4	0
Understanding AI is not sentient	9	3	5	1	0	0	3
Foundational literacy and numeracy	8	4	0	1	1	5	1
Investing in human relationships	7	3	2	0	0	2	3
Learning skills yourself	7	4	3	1	0	1	2
Evaluating information	6	3	1	3	0	2	0
Advanced digital skills	5	2	4	0	1	0	0
Using AI safely	4	3	1	2	0	0	1
Basic digital skills	3	2	0	0	2	0	1
Emotional intelligence	3	1	3	0	0	0	0
Research skills	2	1	2	0	0	0	0
Being emotionally well	1	1	0	0	1	0	0
Other requirements for thriving							
Access to finance	6	4	0	1	1	2	2
Digital infrastructure	2	1	0	0	0	0	2

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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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