**UNICEF’s submission for the Committee on the Rights of the Child’s Day of General Discussion on “Digital media and children’s rights”**

**September 2014**

This contribution draws on UNICEF’s research, programme, communication, policy and advocacy initiatives in the field which is rapidly gaining importance and relevance in UNICEF’s work across different geographic locations and different sectors.

1. **Children’s use of digital media is growing**

A growing body of evidence reveals that, whatever their cultural and geographic context, many children now use information and communication technologies[[1]](#footnote-1) (ICT) as part of their everyday lives. ICT – especially internet and mobile technologies – are no longer an optional add-on to children’s lives but are increasingly becoming integral part of it. Already in many high and middle income countries and increasingly also in low income countries, children’s activities and opportunities are underpinned by ICT and digital media in one way or another. More and more children are relying on them to learn, engage, participate, play, work or socialise. Internet use has steadily increased, particularly in developing countries, and particularly for children and young people.

Two thirds of the world’s almost three billion internet users are from the low and middle income countries, the numbers are growing rapidly, and many users are children and young people (ITU, 2014). Drawing the line between offline and online is becoming close to impossible; almost any experience has an online dimension, whether through a direct engagement by the child or through provision of services designed to improve children’s lives.

1. **Children’s equal and safe access to digital media and the ICT**

**Access:** The UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child[[2]](#footnote-2)* (UNCRC, 1989) provides an appropriate starting point for advancing children’s protection, provision and participation in relation to ICTs within the framework of children’s rights. Access to internet is closely linked to the ability to exercise one’s freedom of expression and receive information and it can be regarded as a one of the first conditions that can enable fulfilment of other rights.

ICTs can transform children’s learning opportunities and experiences, their access to knowledge and resources and help them connect to children with similar life experiences. The ability to access relevant information can therefore have a significant positive impact on equity for children. [[3]](#footnote-3) Access and affordability are connected and children in remote, poor or rural areas are less likely to benefit from the opportunities that internet offers. This is particularly pronounced in low income countries, where the uptake is growing rapidly, but still lags behind middle and high income countries.

However problems of access are not only linked to geography or resources but also to cultural factors that promote or inhibit access to technology by groups that are marginalised in some societies (e.g. girls, children with disability, children from ethic and minority groups). Gendered social norms regarding the use of time by girls in the household (taking care of other children and performing household chores) often prevent them from benefiting from ICT usage, or even attending ICT classes in their schools and communities. Examples of positive initiatives that encourage ICT use by girls are Girls’ Club initiatives that create separate spaces available just for girls and the GraceOne project, which, for example, created a computer lab for girls only. [[4]](#footnote-4)

*Recommendation:*

* *Promote and support initiatives that encourage education for all children in information and communication technologies, and remove barriers to access by addressing social norms that place less value on girls’ education in general and in usage of technology in particular.*
* *Remove physical, geographical and cultural barriers that limit access of children with disabilities or children living in remote communities*

**Mediators:** However, having access is not enough. Children, while exploring and engaging in activities on the internet need guidance, protection or even foreknowledge from their parents, teachers and communities. Children are often pioneers in relation to digital innovations in everyday life, which means that the digital divide between parents/caregivers, teachers and children is in many countries still very significant and more so in low income countries. While in industrialized countries young users (15-24 years) are only marginally more online than adults, in low income countries there are twice as many young people online than the population overall (ITU 2013). Not only are children and young people the early adopters of the internet but they often go online without adult support. UNICEF research in Kenya in 2013) showed that few parents understand or encourage children’s e use of digital media to supplement education, while in schools, children often do not adequately combine offline and online learning for coursework.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is partly due to lack of resources or technical know-how by the teachers and instructors, and partly due to the fact that available content is often not of sufficient quality or relevance to children in different contexts. The study from Kenya and studies conducted in Zambia and South Africa also show that parents tend to restrict children’s usage due to lack of understanding of the digital world and fear of its negative impact.

In the absence of a reliable or knowledgeable parent figure, peer mentoring may be useful in promoting children’s safe access and use of ICTs, online resources, innovation and participation. For instance, in Iraq provision of online resources allowed adolescent girls to access information, also linking them to peer-to-peer support networks where they could discuss issues usually considered private or taboo in their society[[6]](#footnote-6).

**Risks, vulnerability and harm.** Information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a tool may be open to misuse that poses risks for children’s safety, personal development and well-being. This can happen through exposure to new forms of harm such as violent images and inappropriate content, emergence of more invasive forms of bullying, greater opportunities for sexual solicitation/online grooming, an increase in the number and circulation of child abuse images and live stream abuse.[[7]](#footnote-7) There are also a number of other issues which tend to be less discussed in global fora. These include exposure to inappropriate material; online communities and sites that encourage negative behaviours such as anorexia, self-harm and suicide, or hate crimes; the ways that the Internet enables children to access sometimes age-inappropriate goods and services (movies, videos, images, games, etc.);  exposure of children to scams, identity theft, fraud and similar threats linked to data protection and issues of privacy; as well as excessive use of the internet and online gaming.

At the same time it must be acknowledged that not all children are harmed by encountering risks online. As stated in the UNICEF study *Child Safety Online: Global Challenges and Strategies* “There are major differences between risk and harm, and policymakers and parents need to keep these distinctions clear. Certain types of activity may involve risks that do not necessarily result in harm to children and young people. As regards the Internet, there is no easy line that can be drawn between activities leading to benefits and those leading to risks.” It is therefore important to better understand what makes some children particularly vulnerable to risk of harm, so that protective strategies can be effectively targeted.

It is also important to recognize and further explore the relationship between online and offline influences – for example, cyberbullying is a manifestation of often deeper problems that are sometimes rooted in social values and sometimes in peer pressure.

*Recommendation on safe access to ICT: integrating aspect of safety into general policy provisions that deal with prevention and protection of children from violence, exploitation, abuse and other forms of harm, engaging different stakeholders in this process such as governments, the private sector, civil society, communities, families and children themselves, and developing specific measures that deal with building better protection infrastructure.*

1. ***Children’s empowerment and engagement through digital media and ICT***

**Civic engagement.** Internet and social media also provides opportunities for civic engagement and self-expression among children and adolescents. Social media as a platform for participation in social and civic life can transcends traditional barriers linked to gender or ability/disability. In societies where certain groups such as adolescent girls, are excluded from the collective decision-making processes of their communities and societies, ICTs can offer an opportunity to connect with peers, engage in political processes, and increase their sense of agency which will allow them to make informed decisions and choices.[[8]](#footnote-8) There are many ways through which children engage in issues concerning them – through tweeting, digital storytelling, blogging, citizen journalism and online clubs such or through social media sites. There are several examples of promising practice of engaging young people directly in governance through the use of ICT.

*Recommendation: States and other actors need to adopt measures that guarantee that, when exercising their right to freedom of expression, children’s safety is ensured and their privacy and right to be heard protected.*

**Social inclusion.** Being connected through internet or mobile phones has become an important predictor of social inclusion or exclusion, as children and young people feel that being able to interact through social media networks and exchange online content helps them feel included and accepted.[[9]](#footnote-9) Social networks also bring with them the idea of “community”, which is different from community defined by geography and goes beyond participation. They can for example be particularly useful and empowering for children of minority groups such as LGBT children (one type of community) or other vulnerable children such as children with disabilities.

1. **Key stakeholders: governments, parents, educators, media, academia, private sector, children**

While it is important to recognise that online opportunities and risks tend to go hand in hand - for as children tend to encounter more opportunities, they also experience more risk of harm - [[10]](#footnote-10) it is important to strike the balance between opportunities and risks especially in the context of rapidly developing policy fora. While governments and policy makers tend to emphasise one or the other, the heightened anxiety about children’s and young people’s ICT use often results in overly restrictive policies that undermine ways in which the internet could empower children with unprecedented opportunities to learn and participate, including in relation to their identity, privacy, sexuality or health.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The online environment and ICTs present a challenge in terms of responsibility and authority related to the realisation of children’s rights in the digital world. When a child experiences harm as a result of ICTs and online activities, especially on transnationally-owned sites or services, it remains unclear whose responsibility it is to address the problem as it is not always clear where the risks for children lie – whether with the website, service, or platform, the infrastructure or the user. This makes it difficult to identifying feasible points of intervention, legal, judicial but also support services for the child.

Equally complex are issues related to online opportunities and participation: who has a responsibility to develop age-appropriate content, whose responsibility is it to help children develop digital skills and to “shape their world in a safe, creative way, to build communities, and to be active in a participatory society”, as the European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children emphasises?[[12]](#footnote-12)

Understanding roles that different stakeholders need to play to ensure children’s safe access to online resources is important for shaping recommendations on this topic. Given the Committee’s General Comment 16 on State obligations regarding the impact of the business sector on children’s rights and the recently released ITU-UNICEF Guidelines for Industry on Child Online Protection[[13]](#footnote-13), it is critical to ensure engagement of the private sector in addition to governments, civil society, parents and international organizations.

*Recommendations:*

* *Policy makers need to consider social and educational benefits of the use of internet and social networks by children and young people and promote policies that facilitate access and encourage development of relevant online content, but also promote educational programmes that develop children’s capabilities and competencies on the internet.*
* *Governments need to adopt policies that* ***both*** *promote digital citizenship of children and ensure their protection from violence, exploitation, abuse and other forms of harm in relation to ICTs. It is paramount that in this process different stakeholders are engaged such as various government industries, civil society, the private sector, communities, teachers and parents.*
* T*he participation of industry should be ensured in the development of national policies and strategies to promote children’s digital citizenship at the same time as protecting children from any forms of harm, violence or exploitation experienced in relation to ICTs.*

**Resources:**

Online resources available: UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti. Child Safety Online: Global Challenges and Strategies. 2011: <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/ict_eng.pdf> (and a longer version at: <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/652>)

S. Livngstone and M.Bulger for UNICEF Office of Research. A Global Agenda for Children’s Rights in the Digital Age, 2013. <http://www.unicef-irc.org/article/993>

International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Guidelines for Industry on Child Online Protection, 2014: <http://www.itu.int/en/cop/Pages/guidelines.aspx>

See also:

[http://www.voicesofyouth.org/en/posts/uncovering-digital-habits-among-teens-in--africa-s-silicon-valley-](https://mail.gva.unicef.org/owa/redir.aspx?C=krOxdwAWsk-pjRelfd9DZSoIvnPwjNAIidbfNXvsmCls26MuH2P9X74zUbE5Ktx7ySc5LypZkH4.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.voicesofyouth.org%2fen%2fposts%2funcovering-digital-habits-among-teens-in--africa-s-silicon-valley-)

[http://www.voicesofyouth.org/en/citizens/tools-and-resources](https://mail.gva.unicef.org/owa/redir.aspx?C=krOxdwAWsk-pjRelfd9DZSoIvnPwjNAIidbfNXvsmCls26MuH2P9X74zUbE5Ktx7ySc5LypZkH4.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.voicesofyouth.org%2fen%2fcitizens%2ftools-and-resources)

<http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/A_Private_Public_Voices_of_Youth_Kenya_study.pdf>

1. Information and communication technologies are defined as any communication device or application, encompassing radio, television, cellular phones, satellite systems, and computer and network hardware and software, as well as associated services and applications such as videoconferencing and distance learning (UNICEF, 2011). Within this broad definition of ICT, this paper focuses on children’s experiences of the internet and mobile technology. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See http://www.unicef.org/crc/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Children, ICT and Development: Capturing the potential, meeting the challenges. UNICEF Office of Research 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/A\_Private\_Public\_Voices\_of\_Youth\_Kenya\_study.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. UNICEF (2013c*). Integrating Information and Communication Technologies into Communication for Development Strategies to Support and Empower Marginalized Adolescent Girls*. New York: UNICEF. <http://www.unicef.org/cbsc/files/ICTPaper_Web.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more details on online child safety see UNICEF Office of Research report on Child Safety Online: Global Challenges and Strategies <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/650> which examines children's usage, risks they face, policy responses and services available to them. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. UNICEF, 2013. Integrating Information and Communication Technologies into Communication for Development Strategies to Support and Empower Marginalized Adolescent Girls [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention and UNICEF South Africa. Connected Dot Com: young people’s navigation of online risks. November 2013. of Online Risks [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Livingstone, et al. (2011a). *EU Kids Online Final Report*. Retrieved from <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/39351/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. UNICEF. (2011) *Child safety online: Global challenges and strategies.* Retrieved from <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/ict_techreport3_eng.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. European Commission, European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children. Brussels, 2.5.2012

COM(2012) 196 final. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. As the Forward to the Guidelines explains, “[t]he technology industry has a critical role to play in establishing the foundations for safer and more secure use of Internet-based services and other technologies – for today’s children and future generations. Businesses must put protecting children at the heart of their work, paying special attention to protecting the privacy of young users’ personal data, preserving their right to freedom of expression, and putting systems in place to address violations of children’s rights when they occur. Where domestic laws have not yet caught up with international law, business has an opportunity – and the responsibility – to bring their business practices in line with those standards.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)