

Overview

The infrastructural role of digital platforms and services in children's lives presents a major global societal challenge. Their lives are increasingly datafied: data are collected and processed, in one form or another, both from children's activities and from the services that provide for them (health, education, welfare, law enforcement). Consequently, their lives are also increasingly profiled, monetised and subject to automated processing via artificial intelligence in ways that largely lack transparency and accountability.

A pathbreaking objective at the United Nations' (UN) [Summit of the Future](#) on 22–23 September 2024 in New York is to adopt 'A Pact for the Future.' To accelerate progress toward the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, this broad multi-stakeholder document has been drafted by national governments, regional and international organisations, civil society, non-governmental organisations, youth and children's groups, trade unions, and the private sector including big tech. It contains two crucial and linked annexes concerning children and young people: the [Global Digital Compact](#) and [Declaration on Future Generations](#).

The Global Digital Compact aims 'to outline principles, objectives and actions for advancing an open, free, secure and human-centered digital future for all, one that is anchored in universal human rights and that enables the attainment of all the Sustainable Development Goals'. Here we highlight the evidence and some of the challenges in ensuring that the Global Digital Compact recognises and contributes effectively to realising the full range of children's rights.

Key evidence

The world is undergoing profound transformation, making this a crucial moment to ensure that knowledge is generated and used to build a better digital future for children. The [fast-expanding evidence base](#) shows that:

- Children are critical agents of change, yet need vital investment to participate, mitigate vulnerabilities, and realise their full potential. Most children and young people live in the global South, where resources – [including digital resources](#) – are both [limited and unequally distributed](#). Rigorous comparative evidence collected by the [Global Kids Online](#) project, now extended in lower income countries by the [Disrupting Harm](#) project, shows that growing online opportunities go hand in hand with growing exposure to risks online. Digital literacy is also growing unequally, sometimes mitigating but sometimes [exacerbating pathways to harm](#).
- When children were [consulted globally in 27 countries](#) during 2019 to [inform the drafting](#) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child's [General comment No. 25](#) on their rights in relation to the digital environment, children and young people urged that the internet be made much safer, more rights-respecting and more inclusive. Children want a say in product design and deployment, calling on teachers to promote digital literacy and on states to ensure effective regulation of the digital environment as a matter of urgency. They want adults to cease considering digital access an optional extra for children or, worse, a privilege that could be withdrawn at will. They are concerned about abusive, hateful, deceitful and manipulative actions online, and about the exploitative data-driven activities of businesses, and call for child-friendly provision and remedy.

Policy context

- Children and young people are clearly central to the Summit, to a degree not always evident in UN decision-making. To secure the realisation of children's rights in a digital world, [advocates have sought](#) to bring together focuses on future generations and on digital innovation, building

on the fact that children are [one in three](#) of the world's internet users. The Global Digital Compact and its subsequent implementation aim to keep the child rights' agenda top of mind when debates are held, evidence collated, decisions made and resources allocated. While the internet is a necessity for everyday life, significant discrepancies remain between countries and groups in terms of policies on access, affordability and the protection of human rights in relation to the digital world.

- Some [civil society organisations](#) have voiced concerns that children's rights have been weakened throughout the drafting process of the Global Digital Compact, reducing demands on both states and businesses. [Others worry](#) that the outcome will be to centralise control over an essentially heterarchical and self-governing internet. [Child rights organisations](#) have urged that the 'promotion, protection and implementation of children's rights in the digital environment must be a core principle of the UN Global Digital Compact and across all its thematic areas.'
- As the Global Digital Compact recognises, international law and the Charter of the United Nations provide a vital framework for the Sustainable Development Goals which, in turn, require urgent commitment and investment at national level. In its [General comment No. 25](#), the globally authoritative statement on how the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) should be implemented by State Parties and other duty bearers, including commercial providers of digital products and services, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child sets out clearly what should be done.
- Importantly, the efforts of advocates have ensured the Global Digital Compact makes explicit reference to children's rights. Comparing the zero draft with subsequent revisions, explicit reference to the UNCRC was added, and an initially protectionist approach to children was broadened to place greater emphasis on protecting the full range of children's rights, including their provision and participation rights. Underpinning children's civil rights and freedoms is vital, as is the protection of their privacy. Realising this agenda raises challenges about internet governance such as how to address child internet users' [age, capacity and circumstances](#), and how to ensure [their best interests](#) given the competing interests at stake.

Recommendations

The increasing datafication and digitisation of children's lives presents a major global societal challenge for researchers and policymakers. In recent years, strides have been taken to ensure internet governance recognises the rights and needs of children, yet more action is needed. A holistic approach to embedding all children's rights in digital policy and design, including and going beyond attention to safety, privacy and security, is best assured through [Child Rights by Design](#).

Child Rights by Design identifies 11 principles encompassing all the UNCRC articles as well as the provisions of General comment No. 25 in a set of practical evidence-based [guidelines and tools](#), building on child participation. Following these guidelines, policymakers must now take responsibility for bold, inclusive and effective actions to ensure the wellbeing, rights and freedoms of present and future generations. **The available evidence, should now be harnessed through cooperation, legislation and practice to achieve three policy priorities:**

- Inequalities in children's digital access, use, skills and opportunities within and between countries highlight the importance of accelerating efforts to overcome digital divides.
- Relatively low levels of children's digital participation in civic, creative and critical activities underline the need to mitigate missed opportunities by providing enhanced pathways for children to thrive and prosper in a digital world.
- Relatively high levels of exposure to a wide range of risks of harm underpin the need to pay greater attention to legislation, regulation and policy designed to promote safe, privacy-respecting and age-appropriate digital services for children, along with effective help, remedy and rehabilitation.