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November 3rd, 2025

Left out and misrepresented: where are the children in digital policies?

Are children's rights sufficiently taken into account in the digital environment? LSE's Professor Ellen Helsper, Marisa Lyons Longworth and Shivani Rao explain the results of recent research by the Digital Futures for Children centre into how children are represented in digital policies of countries and organisation around the world.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that children have a variety of rights that must be upheld, including their right to education, their right to be protected, their right to play and their right to be consulted in matters that impact them. As children (from birth to 18) make up **one in three internet users** around the world, the UNCRC's **General comment No. 25** translates these rights to the digital environment.

But to what extent are children and their rights considered by governments and institutions around the world? To investigate this, analysing digital policies is a good starting point; they represent *what and who matters in the digital present and future* to those in power. Ideally children's rights are explicitly taken into consideration, as in the **African Union's Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy**:

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The Policy will provide a strong framework for the implementation of children's existing rights in the digital environment, including by the private sector and other

stakeholders making products or offering services likely to be used by children.

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However, this is often not the case. Recent research by the **Digital Futures for Children** centre (DFC) examined over 300 digital transformation and digital inclusion policies from 35 countries and organisations, with a focus on under-researched contexts. Findings show that even though children are mentioned in digital policies, they are not often engaged with in meaningful ways.

From mentions to meaningful engagement

In every country and organisation studied, there is at least one mention of children. This is a positive development since **previous research conducted in collaboration with UNICEF**, which found that children were often missing from policies or mentioned in a cursory, non-meaningful way. This suggests that there is a global shift towards increased consideration of children in digital environments.

However, children are still **almost never consulted** for these policies which regard matters that impact them directly (a fundamental child right) and are **often not meaningfully engaged with**.

In many policies, they are only included as part of lists of vulnerable groups such as women, the disabled, and poor.

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The objective [is to use mobile technologies], to promote financial inclusion with a particular emphasis on women and youth, and thus contribute to improving the well-being of the rural population and economic development.

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(Niger's Smart Villages Project)

Thus, while policies, such as Niger's Smart Villages Project, do recognise that children require additional resources, they speak little to the **differing needs of children**, their identities, their ideas

and wishes, and do not identify child specific outcomes (KPIs).

Representations of children

The research uncovered three ways in which children are represented, as detailed below.

1. Children as resources for competitive advantage

It is common for children to be represented as a vehicle to increase the economic competitiveness of the country, with individual children benefitting in a (future) digital labour market. This is particularly evident in policies related to digital transformation, which frame children as diamonds in the rough: resources that will propel the country forward economically after polishing through targeted interventions.

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The Kingdom's children's skills and competencies are one of the most important and cherished resources [...] The Kingdom also will reinforce the ability of the economy to generate diverse job opportunities and attract global talents and qualified people.

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(*Saudi Vision 2030*)

Providing access to equipment, Wi-Fi and broadband dominate as solutions in this narrative, but policies, such as the Saudi Vision 2030, also reference digital skills. Notably, most policies see schools as principal sites for engagement and inclusion of children. This institutional framing leaves out children who cannot or do not participate fully in formal (public) education.

2. Children as victims in need of protection

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What is meant by “protection of children’s rights” includes protection of personal data, privacy, and personal security of children both physically, mentally, and psychologically from misuse of Electronic Information and/or Electronic Documents that violate children’s rights.

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(Indonesia’s Electronic Information and Transactions Law)

Another significant set of policies frames children as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection. Whilst this does speak to children’s rights (rights to safety and protection and to privacy), this does not recognise children as agents and comes at the expense of other rights (e.g. their right to participation, right to information, right to play).

Online safety policies are logically the prime site for these representations and platform regulation is increasingly proposed as a solution, though building critical digital literacy also features especially in countries with fewer resources. This presents children as responsible for their own safety, while keeping platform accountability on the agenda. However, rarely are these based on consulting children about their everyday experiences of harm.

3. Children as rights holders in the digital present and co-creators of a digital future

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The right to freedom of expression of children and adolescents in the digital environment includes the freedom to seek, receive and share secure, accurate and appropriate information using any tool or service connected to the internet.

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(Brazil's **National Council for Infant and Adolescent Rights (CONANDA)**)

A handful of policies, such as those in Brazil, present children as citizens with rights to expression, as having participatory rights, to be consulted with to co-create a digital future.

In a child-rights context this would be the gold standard, but this framework is missing from almost all policies analysed. Those that did, were more likely to be Intergovernmental Organisations, and explicitly referred to General Comment No. 25. Outside of these policies, children's rights are primarily addressed with regards to access in general and access to education in particular, with little regard to child specific rights such as play and family life.

The homogenous 'child'

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Not all children face equal circumstances and therefore not all can benefit equally from AI systems.

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(UNICEF, **Policy Guidance on AI for Children (2021)**)

A further important point is that most policies treat children as a homogenous group, implicitly assuming interventions benefit all equally, not recognising diversity. While policies refer to 'rural' children and 'girls', and the need for them to get access or digitally upskill, the vast majority does not recognise the importance of intersecting inequalities such as those where gender, class or caste, religion, citizenship, or disability come together to exacerbate the difficulties of participating equally in digital societies.

This is problematic because these historical, structural inequalities have significant implications for the benefits and harms that children experience with increased digitisation (see **DiSTO**).

Conclusions and recommendations

Even though there is an increase in mentions of children from previous policy reviews, there is still some way to go until children, their agency, perspectives and rights are considered in digital policies around the world.

To achieve this, digital policies must:

- **Embed** child rights at the core, incorporating children's **indivisible full range of rights**, including family life, play and children's right to participate, and not just online education and safety.
- **Consider** children's varied lived experiences, seeing them as **rights holders**, agents with evolving capacities and citizens with distinct needs.
- **Consult** children meaningfully in policy design, implementation and evaluation, including **children from different backgrounds**.

To close we present this quote from the African Union's *African Digital Compact*. "We desire to bequeath two things to our children; the first one is roots, and the other one is wings". This exemplifies what digital policies ought to do for children: ensure they can flourish, feel at home in current digital environments and give them wings to explore new paths and opportunities in the future.

This post is from the [Digital Futures for Children centre](#), a joint research centre between [5Rights](#) and the [London School of Economics' Department of Media and Communications](#). The centre advances understanding of children and digital technologies, framed by the [UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General comment No. 25](#) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment.

This post gives the views of the authors and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

About the author

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Ellen Helsper is Professor of Digital Inequalities in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE, where she also serves as Programme Director for the MSc Media and Communications (Research). Her current research interests include the links between social and digital inequalities; mediated interpersonal communication; participatory immersive digital spaces (VR, ER); and quantitative and qualitative methodological developments in media and communications research.

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Posted In: Children and the Media | Internet Governance



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