



Policy Brief

Protecting Children in the Digital Environment

June 2023

Context

The Internet age has progressively transformed socioeconomic growth for nations and businesses across the globe¹. More so, access to the internet creates opportunities for Zambian children to participate in crucial decision-making processes locally, nationally, regionally and globally using an online digital environment that has opened up virtual, less expensive, yet meaningful, practical discussions among parties in distant places. Children also use the internet for learning, streaming videos, playing games, and following and watching trending activities online². Furthermore, realizing the rights to access information and freedom of expression is more prominent now in the digital environment where most people access internet services. In their study of 24 countries, the International Telecommunication Union found that 94% of young people and children in developed countries and 65% of children in developing countries of the same age group were accessing the internet online for various activities³. In Zambia, the use of digital platforms has grown over the years. While it was 12.7% in 2015, it increased to 17.7% in 2018⁴ and reached 28.5% at the beginning of 2022⁵. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and its lockdown mechanisms enhanced internet usage among children that needed to continue accessing learning resources when schools were closed and disrupted traditional education methods for more than 4.4 million children and young people, and Zambia had to adopt distance learning mechanisms for school continuity during school closures⁶. Moreover, in the current education system, learning through online platforms also aligns

with Zambia's Ministry of Education's programming, which aims to increase access to the use of technology within the classroom.

While progressive in promoting social growth and creating opportunities for enhanced knowledge, promoting freedom of expression, and contributing to crucial decision-making processes on issues that affect children, adolescents, and young people globally, challenges still exist. Rights to life continue to be threatened as the internet has exposed children to unprecedented risks of cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content such as obscene, pornographic material, and children preyed upon by adult sexual predators soliciting sexual activities, grooming, particularly inciting children to do bodily harm on themselves or kill themselves, trafficking, recruiting children in criminal activities, emotional abuse and harassment, among others⁷. In 30 countries surveyed worldwide, UNICEF reported that over a third of children and young people are bullied online⁸. In addition, around 80% in 25 countries reported feeling in danger of sexual abuse or exploitation online⁹. In Zambia, over 700 cases were reported in December 2021 involving online child abuse, including cyberbullying, harassment, and exposure to pornographic material¹⁰.

Further, a Zambia Kids Online study conducted for Save the Children in Zambia revealed that children were exposed to harmful information, harassment, and violation online. The impact on girls was more common

compared to boys. The report showed that 23.2% of girls, compared to 10.9% of boys, had been asked for sexual information about themselves online. In addition, the study revealed that 18.6% of girls reported having been asked for a video or picture of their private parts when they did not want to send it, compared to 6.3% of the boys¹¹.

Progressive as the digital environment has been, it has increased gaps in access to information among children from well-to-do families and those from low-income families. Compared to urban areas, children living in rural areas also have limited access to information in digital spaces, limiting the realization of their rights to information. Rural areas, just as poor households, are prone to digital exclusion because of limited to no access to technology such as smartphones, computers, etc., that gives them access to information in the digital environment, including educational materials. Further, limited access to digital technologies jeopardizes children's rights to meaningful participation in key decision-making processes. The need for non-discrimination and inclusion calls for the government to invest in measures that open up opportunities for all children, irrespective of their location, to promote equal opportunities to participate in decision-making processes on issues affecting children's lives. This is emphasized by the objective of general comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment. The Committee on the Rights of the Child provides guidance on relevant legislative, policy and other measures to ensure full compliance with their obligations under the Convention and the Optional Protocols thereto in the light of the opportunities, risks, and challenges in promoting, respecting, protecting and fulfilling all children's rights in the digital environment. This is basically to ensure that the general principles of child rights (Non-discrimination, Best Interest of the Child, Right to life, survival and development, and Respect for the views of the child) are still considered an obligation for states.

Nonetheless, the Joining Forces Alliance commends the government and cooperating partners on the efforts to protect children during online sessions and to curtail the risk of children's exposure to obscene material, abuse, and harassment. The government and cooperating partners have also opened up opportunities for children to realize their rights to participation, survival, access to information, and non-discrimination.

Among the critical interventions implemented, the Zambian government, with its stakeholders, developed

the Child Online Protection Strategy in 2020 to enhance policy, legal and institutional frameworks targeted at addressing child online risks in Zambia and ensuring a safe and secure cyberspace for children and other users of information and communications technologies¹². Progressively, the Child Online Protection Strategy has outlined measures for all stakeholders to ensure effective implementation and support for children accessing information through online services and participating in critical national interests through online platforms.

Other commendable progressive instruments include the Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act, No 2021, which provides for online child protection¹³. Under the Act, a person commits a crime if they produce child pornography or compels a child to view pornographic material through online systems or any other means. The Zambian government has also developed the Electronic Communications and Transactions Act No. 4 of 2021 to offer a safe environment for electronic transactions and the Data Protection Act No. 3 of 2021 to secure, protect and regulate the use of personal data.

All the outlined measures and instruments align with Zambia's commitment as a signatory to various international child rights instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of a Child, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection.

Broadly, all these are commendable efforts that provide a platform for children to realize their digital rights wholly. The efforts also recommend frameworks to minimize child violations online and provide a guide for adults working with children to monitor and curtail online risks targeted at violating children. Nevertheless, more must be done to promote children's rights and eradicate online child violence, harassment, sexual exploitation, and other violations that threaten children's rights in Zambia. Moreover, reporting mechanisms for online violation of child rights are inadequate and, in some cases, non-existent. Furthermore, there is little to no enforcement of online crimes against perpetrators, undermining child rights and safety. Again, where online access presents a solution for children's meaningful engagement, disadvantaged and most vulnerable children continue to be marginalized, thereby limiting the realization of their human right.

Joining Forces Alliance's Response to Promoting Children's Rights in the Digital Environment in Zambia

The Joining Forces Alliance (JFA) in Zambia comprises the six largest child-focused agencies: ChildFund International, Plan International, Save the Children International, SOS Children's Village Zambia, Terre des Hommes International Federation, and World Vision Zambia Limited. JFA is committed to realizing a Zambia where all children realize their human rights in totality.

In 2022, JFA working with the government of the Republic of Zambia and other child-focused organizations, such as the National Child Rights Forum in Zambia, UNICEF Zambia, and Break Free Alliance, supported children from across the continent to participate in the African Children's Parliament to give children an opportunity to participate in continental, regional and national level planning, legislative and policy processes¹⁴. The African Children's Parliament drew the participation of over 100 children from across 14 countries, including Sierra Leone, Ghana, Niger, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Eswatini, South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, South Sudan, Somalia, and Mozambique. While the majority of children (about 70) participated physically in Zambia, more than a third of the children that could not participate physically were accorded an opportunity to participate in this key process virtually through digital platforms to influence the decisions of the African Union, Regional Economic Communities, and Governments to prioritize children's rights. Virtual participation allowed equal participation of children to contribute to developing resolutions on how governments can live up to the commitments they have signed up to under various national, regional, continental, and global instruments such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Furthermore, JFA partner agencies working together as well as individually promote children's rights to participation and non-discrimination. For example, World Vision Zambia creates virtual platforms for young advocates to engage critical decision-makers in high-level forums to advocate and address issues that affect children. During the Southern Africa launch of the Regional Children's Consultation Report and European Weak of Action for Girls (EWAG), World Vision supported children to engage delegates virtually from agencies such as United Nations Organizations, including the World Food Programme, UNICEF, and the African Union, to secure commitments to protect children against all forms of violence¹⁵. Similarly, ChildFund in Zambia uses various strategies to build an accessible, safe, and inclusive digital world for all children and young people

based on a framework that requires governments, community members, and families to take action. In 2022, ChildFund launched the WEB Safe and Wise campaign, which focuses on addressing the risks emerging in the digital environment while empowering children and young people to become influential digital citizens. At the field level, Child Fund International has created platforms allowing young people to advocate for their safety and well-being through the digital space.

Save the Children International in Zambia implements the Keeping Zambian Boys and Girls Safe Online Project. The primary goal of this initiative is to reduce children's vulnerability to online violence and abuse while improving their access to support in case they experience harm in the online sphere. The project produced and published the Zambia Kids Online Study and is currently working with and supporting YWCA (Young Women Christian Association); in close collaboration with the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, the Ministry of Education, Zambia Police, Zambia Information Communication and Technology Authority (ZCTA), Zambia Agency for Persons with Disabilities (ZAPID) to promote the safety of children both online and offline.

Additionally, Plan International in Zambia implements the Information Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D), ensuring that children acquire skills and understand their rights to a safe online environment. In this effort, Plan International distributed 15 desktops to three selected schools in Luapula Province, each receiving five desktops. Plan International Zambia further constructed an ICT lab in Vubwi District of Eastern Province. To achieve a safe environment for children online, Plan International identified and trained focal point persons in the schools on internet risks, child protection online, and safety measures for children.

Furthermore, SOS Children's Village in Zambia recognizes the importance of digital literacy and equips children with the necessary skills to participate effectively in digital spaces. This includes providing access to computers, internet connectivity, and educational programs teaching digital skills, online safety, and responsible internet use. SOS Children's Village also offers online platforms for communities specifically designed for children to engage with one another and express their views. These platforms often have secure environments that ensure the safety and privacy of children while fostering social interaction and learning. Furthermore, through Digital Storytelling and Creative

Expression, SOS Children's Villages encourages children to share their stories, experiences, and ideas through digital mediums like blogs, vlogs, or creative projects. This helps amplify their voices, promote self-expression, and engage with a broader audience. Ensuring the safety and protection of children online is a paramount concern for SOS Children's Villages, and the organization educates children about online risks, cyberbullying, and privacy issues while guiding responsible internet use. They also work with parents, caregivers, and communities to create safe digital environments for children.

In addition, JFA is also committed to realizing a Zambia where children are protected from inappropriate content online, cyberbullying, and children preyed upon by sexual predators, groomers, and emotional abuse and harassment. Within JFA, members have safeguarding guidelines that guide how to protect children online. Further, safeguarding guidelines mandate all staff working with children, including volunteers, temporal staff, and interns, to engage with children online safely to ensure that all children are protected from abuse and harassment during online interactions. For example, accessing online platforms should protect a child's privacy and ensure that such access does not lead to the exploitation of the child in any way.

Joining Forces Alliance's Recommendations

Ongoing interventions to promote children's rights on digital platforms by the government of the Republic of Zambia and all partners are commendable and contribute to creating an environment to promote children's participation and non-discrimination while protecting children's access to digital platforms. We need to prevent further violence targeted at children. However, more needs to be done to achieve children's rights in the digital space in Zambia. As JFA, we continue to note limited access to technology among segments of children that would promote equal participation in decision-making processes. We are also concerned with the disparity in levels of participation among children in urban areas compared to their counterparts in rural areas. The most vulnerable are the most impacted due to limited access to digital technology. Furthermore, we also note with concern the level of cybercrimes targeted at children in this digital era. As promoting and protecting the rights of children remain a primary concern for JFA, we call upon the government, NGOs, UN agencies and cooperating partners, parents, guardians, and caregivers to take the following measures:

Government

- The government of the Republic of Zambia should develop policies, plans, strategies, and regulations that support children's development in digital spaces. Online platforms create unique opportunities for children to realize their rights to information and freedom of expression. Unfortunately, the current trends show that access to digital spaces is more skewed toward urban children than children living in rural areas. Most rural children and those with disabilities are excluded from learning online because of limited access to digital technologies in schools, communities, and homes and the unavailability of electricity to promote computer and internet usage. Therefore, the government should encourage non-discrimination and non-digital exclusion for all children in Zambia by investing in policies and programs that support children's access to information in digital spaces, not just in urban areas but also in rural areas.
- The best interest of the child in the digital space should be primarily considered when promoting the development of policies and plans to ensure children's development, survival, non-discrimination, protection, and participation. Therefore, the government should invest and partner with digital providers to ensure the usage of digital environments minimize the risk of infringing on children's rights with consideration for the principle of the best interest of the child, which protects children against violence in the digital environment. In addition, online access should consider child safeguarding and data protection requirements for children to avoid online violations.
- The digital environment has opened up opportunities for children to contribute and participate meaningfully in critical local, national, and global decision-making processes. Therefore, the government should create and promote platforms that open up opportunities for children to express their views with an emphasis on respecting children's views on issues that affect them.
- The government should integrate online protection of children into formal child protection systems, case management, and mandatory reporting systems.

- Government should integrate technology into schools and the school curriculum. There should be mandatory teaching and support for teachers to incorporate technology into training colleges and integrate it into school safety mechanisms.

NGOs, UN Agencies, and other Cooperating Partners:

- Consistent participation in decision-making is a welcome milestone in children's development. All stakeholders and partners that work with children should amplify children's voices: Agencies should support children to actively engage with General Comment No.25 on children's rights concerning the digital environment and all rights encompassed in the General Comment.
- Stakeholders should intensify awareness campaigns about using digital space for children's involvement in decision-making processes where physical meetings are not feasible. Partners should also create a suitable environment for children to access digital spaces to realize their rights to participation and for their voices to be heard.
- Platforms created for children should be all-inclusive so that children are not discriminated against. Partners should ensure they implement measures that overcome digital exclusion and accord children their rights to non-discrimination. Inclusiveness should ensure that equal opportunities are created for both girls and boys, children living with disabilities, and children living in rural areas. Age-appropriate considerations must be factored in to ensure children participate online effectively and equally in ways that are meaningful to them according to their age groups.
- Agencies should support children to develop child-centred messages, drawing on children's own experiences. Further, they should engage children on data privacy and protection and

what this means to and for them.

- NGOs, UN agencies, and other cooperating partners should support the government in educating and sensitizing communities and families about safe ways for children to access the internet. In addition, there should be deliberate capacity and skills development for parents, caregivers, and guardians on technological understanding to support children in the digital environment. Platforms should be created where parents, guardians, and caregivers have opportunities to gain digital literacy and know how best they can support children to use the internet well and also recognize child victims of online abuse and support and respond accordingly.

Parents, Guardians, and Caregivers:

- Accessing and using digital spaces can potentially open up ways to perpetuate violence against children by facilitating platforms in which children may feel harassed, bullied, sexually violated by adult sexual predators soliciting sexual activities, grooming, trafficking, and abduction of children, and experience emotional abuse and the recruitment of children in criminal activities. Parents should be keenly interested in what kind of information children are exposed to online. They should also monitor internet usage among their children and guide children on the correct use of internet facilities to avoid encountering violations that threaten their rights to life. Parents should be vigilant in ensuring children access age-appropriate sites that promote content intended for children. Sites that contain obscene material should be blocked from being accessed by young children.
- Parents should also encourage open conversations with children on issues that children do not understand in the digital space to allow children to open up and freely express their fears and concerns they encounter online. Parents should also allow children to identify trusted adults they can talk to about what happens online.

¹National Child Online Protection Strategy

<https://www.zicta.zm/storage/posts/attachments/Eu63HezeLZR0P6Zedq70CUOAlwQPL9jfYaNXQdIB.pdf>

²<http://globalkidsonline.net/zambia-findings/>

³The 2022 safer internet day – we must act together to put children and young people at the center of our digital policies

⁴<https://pmrczambia.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Implementation-Status-and-Challenges-of-ICTs-In-Zambian-Schools-Research-Report.pdf>

⁵[https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-](https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-zambia#:~:text=There%20were%205.47%20million%20internet,at%20the%20start%20of%202022.)

[zambia#:~:text=There%20were%205.47%20million%20internet,at%20the%20start%20of%202022.](https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-zambia#:~:text=There%20were%205.47%20million%20internet,at%20the%20start%20of%202022.)

⁶World Vision (2020) COVID-19 & its impacts on Children's Education in Zambia, Policy Brief, July 2020,

⁷<https://www.survivorlawyer.com/blog/children-increased-risk-online-sexual-abuse>

⁸<https://www.unicef.org/turkiye/en/press-releases/unicef-poll-more-third-young-people-30-countries-report-being-victim-online-bullying>

⁹<https://www.unicef.org/protection/violence-against-children-online>

¹⁰[https://www.zambiamonitor.com/students-bemoan-poor-access-to-internet-as-zambia-records-over-700-cases-of-online-](https://www.zambiamonitor.com/students-bemoan-poor-access-to-internet-as-zambia-records-over-700-cases-of-online-abuses/#:~:text=ChildFund%20(Zambia)%20has%20indicated%20that,Internet%20safe%20for%20every%20child.)

[abuses/#:~:text=ChildFund%20\(Zambia\)%20has%20indicated%20that,Internet%20safe%20for%20every%20child.](https://www.zambiamonitor.com/students-bemoan-poor-access-to-internet-as-zambia-records-over-700-cases-of-online-abuses/#:~:text=ChildFund%20(Zambia)%20has%20indicated%20that,Internet%20safe%20for%20every%20child.)

¹¹<http://globalkidsonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/FINAL-ZKO-Study-Report-APRIL-2022.pdf>

¹²<https://www.zicta.zm/storage/posts/attachments/Eu63HezeLZR0P6Zedq70CUOAlwQPL9jfYaNXQdIB.pdf>

¹³The Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act, 2021

<https://www.parliament.gov.zm/sites/default/files/documents/acts/Act%20No.%202%20of%202021The%20Cyber%20Security%20and%20Cyber%20Crimes.pdf>

¹⁴The African Children Parliament's report: Creating an Africa fit for children

¹⁵Children's Rights to be heard: We are talking, are you listening? <https://joining-forces.org/publications/childrens-right-to-be-heard/>

In 2017, the six largest child-focused agencies: ChildFund International, Plan International, Save the Children International, SOS Children's Village Zambia, Terre des Hommes International Federation, and World Vision International joined forces. We aim to use our collective power to accelerate change to secure children, their rights and end violence against them. We will pilot and scale innovative and effective approaches and be driven by the voices and needs of children.

For further information, please contact the Joining Forces Alliance Secretariat:

John Hasse
World Vision Zambia National Director & Chairperson
of the Joining Forces Alliance
Hasse_Hasse@wvi.org

Carol Mweemba
Associate Director for Advocacy at World Vision Zambia
& Secretary of the Joining Forces Alliance
Carol_Mweemba@wvi.org